

First cruise of the VME project completed

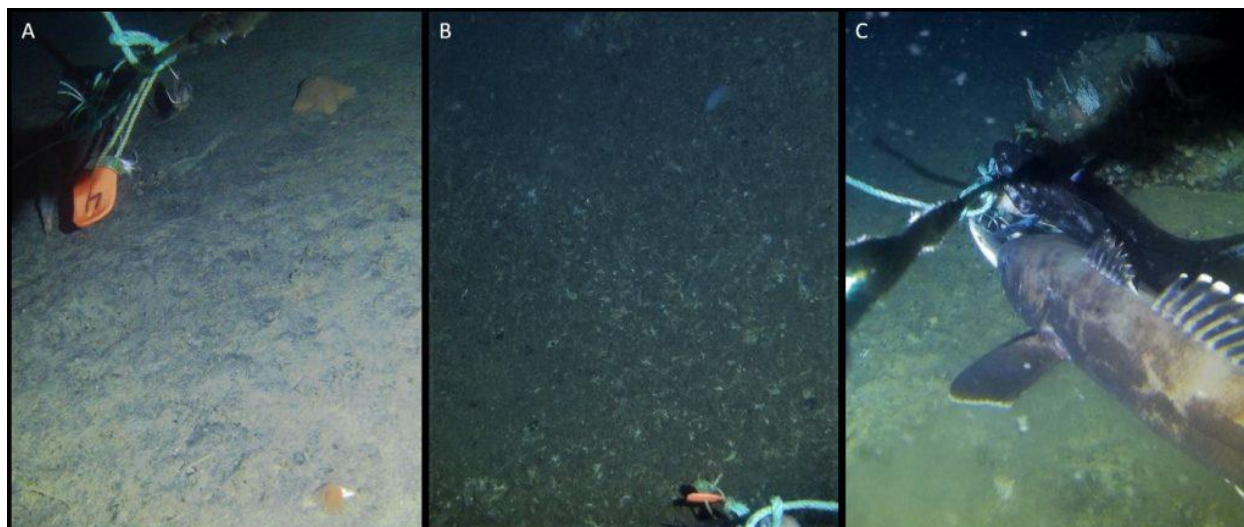
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The first cruise of the Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VME) project, funded by Consolidated Fisheries Limited (CFL) was successfully undertaken in January 8th-19th 2021 aboard the CFL Hunter.

Dr Tabitha Pearman from SAERI, together with Dr Frane Skeljo from The Falkland Islands Fisheries Department, joined the crew of the CFL Hunter on a joint venture to tag toothfish and collect data on vulnerable marine ecosystems.

With the assistance of the fishermen, a specially adapted deep-sea camera was attached to the longline fishing gear in order to record footage of the deep-sea habitats. The camera was deployed at a series of locations where preliminary broad-scale habitat maps predicted different VMEs to occur.



Images recorded by the deep-sea camera attached to the long-line: A) Starfish (Asteroidea) and a solitary cup coral (Caryophylliidae) are observed on muddy sediment, B) Cold-water coral rubble, C) The deep-sea camera captures the moment that an antimora and toothfish become hooked on the line.

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The camera reached depths of > 1000 m and recorded footage of cold-water corals, sponges and seapens. These species all represent VME indicator species, which are commonly used to support the designation of habitats as VMEs. In addition to the camera data, bycatch sample specimens of VME indicator species were also taken. The specimens will be used to help identify the species observed from the camera footage. The species data extracted from the camera footage will then be combined with fisheries bycatch data to further establish the distribution of VME indicator species from which VME distribution throughout the Falkland Islands Conservation Zone can be inferred.

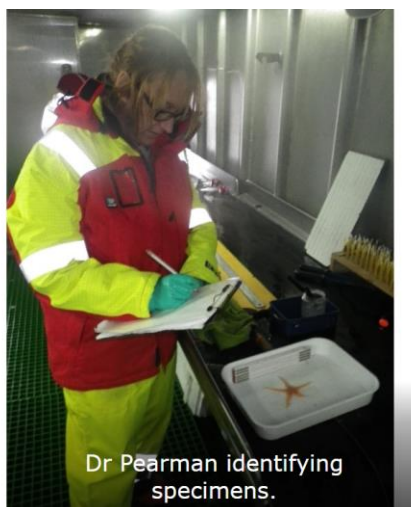


Specimens collected on the cruise.

The success of the cruise was made possible by the collaboration of the fisherman who assisted throughout the collection of field data. As part of the collaboration the VME project produced information packs for the crew in both Spanish and Indonesian. This represents the first stage in the final outputs the VME project which will include the production of VME observer guides for the Falkland Islands Conservation Zone. Working with fisherman the VME projects hopes to increase the baseline data on VMEs occurring within the Falkland Islands Conservation Zone.



Fisherman Hauling the long-line.



Dr Pearman identifying specimens.



The CFL Hunter in port at Stanley.



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