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Today's Edition

Long Island

Search for sea squirts has fishy results

BY JENNIFER SMITH

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September 26, 2006, 10:56 PM EDT

ABOARD THE R/V CONNECTICUT -- Setting out for a day's research on Long Island Sound, the team of scientists expected to find colonies of sea squirts blanketing the sea floor.

But an underwater survey Tuesday revealed only patchy evidence of the fast-spreading non-native invertebrates. The results only deepen the mystery surrounding the spongy squirts that in recent years have been fouling lobster traps and taking over mussel beds from Prince Edward Island to New York.

The results came as something of a surprise to University of Connecticut researchers who only four months before mapped out nearly seven square miles of sea squirts in eastern Long Island Sound, using a sophisticated robot equipped with underwater cameras.

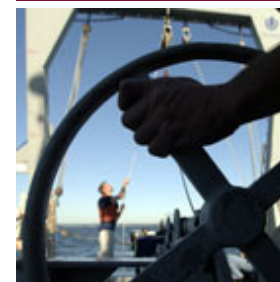
"The plot thickens," said Bob Whitlatch, a professor of marine sciences at the

university, as the 76-foot research vessel Connecticut moved back toward the university's Avery

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Photo



Crew members and scientists (Photo by Viorel Florescu)

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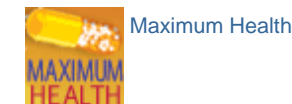
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Point dock in Groton, Conn.

Since no previous data existed for the spots visited Tuesday, it was difficult to tell just how established the patches were. What they saw could be the first stages of a growing colony, Whitlatch said, but it could also be a mature colony cutting back growth before winter or even fragments of larger groups that had been broken up by churning water from a recent storm.

Still, information recorded on the eight-hour trip will help scientists advance their understanding of where this type of sea squirt occurs, and what allows it to flourish. That's key, because researchers worry that the thick, rubbery mats of sea squirts they have seen on the sea floor east of Fisher's Island could crowd out lobsters and other species that live and develop there, such as flounder and scallops.

What makes these particular sea squirts different from the native species present here is the aggressive way they take over new habitats. Unchecked by predators, they cluster in colonies that can grow to the size of manholes; when the colonies meet they overlap and grow together, like pieces of an afghan.

Peering at shipboard monitors streaming live video from the sea floor Tuesday, scientist Rick Osman pointed at a sea squirt colony poised to envelop blue mussels on a boulder. "Once the slit of the shell gets overgrown, it will smother the mussel," said Osman, a senior scientist at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center in Edgewater, Md.

These tiny invaders are thought to have come from Europe or Asia, perhaps on boats' bottoms. Anecdotal accounts have them sighted in Maine as early as the 1970s; scientists first identified them off the New England coast in 1993. Since then they've cropped up in Maine, Massachusetts, Long Island Sound, Shinnecock Bay and as far south as Delaware.

The sea squirts found in Long Island Sound are believed to be the same kind seen up and down the East Coast, didemnum, although that identification can't be confirmed until researchers finish mapping out their genetic code so that they can compare the different outbreaks.

to the test.



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