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CONNECTICUT NEWS

# The Sinister Sea Squirt

## ■ Invasive Animal May Become Scourge Of The Sound

July 1, 2006

By DAVID FUNKHOUSER, Courant Staff Writer

GROTON -- The R/V Connecticut bobs in a light chop, floating midway between Mystic and Fishers Island. From the bridge, the dark blue waters of Long Island Sound sparkle on a sunny May morning. A fresh breeze blows, the air is clear, and everything looks just fine.

About 70 feet down, the state of the Sound is a lot murkier.

Capt. Dan Nelson shifts his glance from the view outside to the monitor of a computer that controls the 76-foot research vessel's position and taps the keys to make an adjustment. With a throbbing hum, thrusters in the bow and stern fight a stiff current to hold us at a spot a mile west of Latimer Reef.

This is where we will hunt for Didemnum sp. A dozen students, teachers and crew have joined marine researchers Robert B. Whitlatch and Ivar G. Babb on this voyage to track down one of the most recent foreign invaders in Long Island Sound. The "sp." stands for the generic "species," because we are not sure exactly what beast this is, only that it is a sea squirt, of the genus Didemnum, and that its presence might be really bad news.

Didemnum sp. may have been brought here by ships that ply international waters, possibly from Asia. Whatever its origin, the creature is just the latest in a long list of problems confronting Long Island Sound, from mercury pollution to oxygen depletion to global warming. If it thrives here as well as it has elsewhere, it could pose a significant threat to shellfish and other important species.

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Just over an hour after embarking from the dock at the University of Connecticut's Avery Point campus, the Connecticut settles at the first target zone. Babb, director

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The R/V Connecticut (BOB MACDONNELL)

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of the National Undersea Research Center at Avery Point, supervises the crew's use of a large winch that lowers an ROV - remotely operated vehicle - off the stern and into the water.

Babb, a tall man with graying brown hair and a mustache, is enthusiastic about the project. This is a shakedown cruise for the ROV, which will travel to Florida, North Carolina and Maine this summer to conduct research, then return to Groton to resume the search for didemnum in September.

Within minutes, the ROV reaches the bottom. In a cramped room under the bridge, Whitlatch, Babb and a half-dozen others lean in over the shoulder of Craig Bussell, who sits at a table full of computer and video monitors. Bussell holds in his lap a box the size of a large dictionary with two joysticks, which he manipulates to direct the ROV.

The monitors and computers are wired into a framework of electronics the size of a small refrigerator. Out of this tangle of circuitry, a 2-inch-thick orange cable filled with fiber-optic lines snakes up and across the ceiling, out across the stern and down into the water to the ROV.

The ROV, a propeller-driven, 600-pound metal sled mounted with lights, instruments and cameras, scoots along the bottom, looking for Didemnum sp.

"They're popping up everywhere," says Whitlatch, a professor of marine science at UConn whose work on didemnum is funded by the National Sea Grant Program, which sponsors research at universities nationwide. Whitlatch attended the first international conference on invasive sea squirts in April in Woods Hole, Mass. To his great surprise, 70 people from 14 countries showed up.

Dressed in a gray UConn sweat shirt and jeans, his wavy, graying hair tucked under a green ball cap, Whitlatch stares into a video monitor that displays the sea floor 68 feet down. The mostly sandy bottom is populated by scattered boulders, many surmounted by bright yellow sponges and orange corals. Cunnners and other small fish amble into the frame and zip away.

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At 11:15, Bussell maneuvers the ROV close to a boulder colored with a variety of sponges. Just above a tiny cave in the sand carved out by a lobster, we finally see it: an 8-inch patch of milky white didemnum.

Didemnum sp. is one of five "invasive," or non-native, species of sea squirts that have appeared in the Sound over the past two decades. Sea squirts, known as tunicates for the tunic-like sheath that covers them, are small, rubbery animals that cling to whatever they can grab onto underwater - rocks, pilings, ropes and boats.

Most species live as individuals; they may grow several inches wide and long. Some, like didemnum, whose individual members are just one-fourteenth of an inch tall, form colonies. Didemnum grows in large mats that blanket the sea floor, and in long, dreadlock-like tendrils hanging from trap lines and piers.

Sea squirts eat by pulling in sea water through a tube, sifting it through a mucous filter for food, and ejecting the water out another tube - hence their nickname. They eat whatever organic matter, from tiny phytoplankton to bacteria to detritus, they can suck in. They thrive in nutrient- rich waters such as the Sound, and many other highly populated areas along the U.S. coasts.



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They do not travel far on their own but have become world travelers on boats, perhaps in ballast water or anchor compartments. Some believe this species arrived here attached to oysters imported from Japan as seed stock.

Once established, they tend to spread quickly. Taxonomist Gretchen Lambert of the University of Washington says didemnum reproduces both sexually, ejecting larvae into the water, and by budding tiny clones at the edge of the colony. Waves can cause clumps of it to break off and spread elsewhere.

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