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Sea squirts found in Georges Bank

By Karen Dandurant
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WOODS HOLE, Mass. - Quite by accident, researchers have found what's believed to be an invasive species of sea squirts on the northern edge of Georges Bank, colonizing a 6½-mile area about 150 feet underwater and about 160 miles off outer Cape Cod.

Scientists say they are concerned about the potential impacts the voracious sea squirts will have on the ocean's ecological patterns. At this point, they say it has no natural enemies and spreads quickly.

University of New Hampshire professor Larry Harris said the species has existed in area waters for many years. He said it's growing at a fast pace and he's not sure what steps can be taken to control the population.

Teri Frady, spokesperson for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said, "We just happened to visit this area for a sea-mapping project and when cameras went down, we found something unexpected.

"The concern is that it grew so quickly. We were at the site a year ago and it was not there. It's known in-shore, but this was off-shore and a good crop. Given how quickly it grew and how fragmented it was, we can only assume it's likely to be elsewhere."

According to NOAA scientists, this is just one example of how an invasive species can come into the nation's waters and affect a fragile ecosystem.

Georges Bank is a well-known and highly productive fishing ground for both fish and sea scallops.

Frady said this tunicate - sea life with a primitive spinal cord and a firm, flexible outer covering called a "tunic," from which the name derives - could move with fishing equipment like dragging gear or be moved by storms.

"Our concern is that because of their profusion, they could prevent light, water and food from completing the usual cycle, potentially impacting plant and fish life," Frady said. "We have not yet been able to find a sample doing specific harm, but

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we know it could change the way bed life works."

According to NOAA, an invasive species is one that is not native to an ecosystem and may harm that ecosystem if introduced.

Harris, who teaches courses in marine science and a class on the ecology of invasive species, said sea squirts are easily found locally.

"... Go down to the New Castle Coast Guard station, by the Coastal Marine Lab," Harris said. "Look down on the float the lab uses, and over the edge you'll see all these white globs. They're doing very well there. They are also under the Coast Guard pier, in the channel and in Little Harbor.

"The first time we saw them in Portsmouth Harbor was the winter of 2001, right after they had first been seen in 2000, by a group that did a survey for invasive species in Rhode Island. I was on that survey, so I knew what it looked like."

Harris said the tunicates are constantly expanding their range.

"This fall it was discovered around Duck Island and just inside the harbor at the Isles of Shoals," Harris said. "By next summer, I expect it will be all over the place because it expands quickly and grows into large, conspicuous colonies. It looks like thick pancake batter or something out of a horror movie. I fondly call it the tunicate from hell."

According to Harris, the biggest colonies can reach 3 feet in diameter.

"That's a lot of white leathery encrustation," he said. "As to effect, I see two potential problems. In some places, it may so cover the bottom that it excludes organisms that are food for fish, crabs and lobsters. Second, so far it has no predator - nothing has decided it's good to eat."

Harris said once a species is as established as this one seems to be, it's hard to figure out what can be done about it because even the tiniest piece can regenerate and form a colony.

"See, like a horror movie; the lobes that hang down regenerate," Harris said. "If you take a piece, put it in a dish, the next morning it has rearranged itself, attached and started growing. It's like a super-animal. It's in California now, and in New Zealand they are having all sorts of fun trying to deal with it because of the danger to their mussel farms. There, it's suspected it came in on a barge that had a whopping 26 tons of the tunicates growing on it."

Harris said there's no simple answer to where it comes from.

"You can't say it was overfishing, or the waters are getting warmer. ... We just don't know."

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