Oceana discovers deep-sea white coral in the Gulf of Biscay

The cliff walls and overhangs of the Aviles Canyon, north of Spain, harbour rich deep-sea coral and sponge ecosystems.

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Madrid -- Almost 50% of these long-living ecosystems have disappeared from European waters. Some coral formations date back more than 8,000 years.

The *Oceana Ranger* research vessel has discovered deep-sea white coral in the Aviles Canyon. The deep-sea coral was identified using an underwater robot, which can work down to 600 meters.

The first colonies of white coral appeared at 200 meters depth, covering the walls of the canyon, and being especially numerous on the overhangs. Along with these colonies, the area also harbours gorgonians, black coral, glass sponges and a wide variety of fauna.

Deep-sea, cold-water white coral can form one of the most important ecosystems in Europe. It is distributed between 200 and 3,000 meters depth, although it can also be found in shallower waters in northern areas. More than 800 species have been identified and this coral can take centuries, or even millennia, to form. Some European coral formations are more than 8,000 years old.

The Aviles Canyon, located approximately 18 miles off the coast of Asturias, begins at 180 meters depth and drops to almost 2,000 meters. WWF/Adena proposed that the canyon be considered an area of special interest due to the existence of the giant squid. Recent discoveries made by Oceana highlight the importance of this area and its need for protection.

These coral reef ecosystems are very long-lived, making them especially vulnerable. Recent studies estimate that almost half of the deep-sea coral reefs in Europe have disappeared, particularly due to destructive fishing methods such as bottom trawling.

"One of the most fragile and important ecosystems in Europe is found here, in Asturias. Some coral reefs have already been damaged by fishing gear, but highly valuable colonies still exist. These areas are in need of urgent protection in order to ensure the survival of hundreds of species," declared Ricardo Aguilar, Director of Research for Oceana in Europe.

Just one week ago, Oceana also filmed important tree coral forests in Galicia. During the next few days, the *Oceana Ranger* research catamaran will sail east of Asturias and Cantabria to continue investigating the seabeds to detect new and valuable underwater areas whose conservation should be proposed.

"In spite of the richness of its seabeds, the Cantabrian is one of the least protected marine areas in Europe. The overexploitation of its resources and the lack of protected areas give cause for concern. The Spanish government and all the autonomous regions of this sea must make an effort to comply with international commitments and accelerate the creation of new reserves in which vulnerable ecosystems and endangered species can recover," declared Xavier Pastor, Executive Director of Oceana in Europa.

Before 2010, all European countries must present a list of marine protected areas according to the OSPAR Convention for the protection of the North-East Atlantic. And at least 10% of the world's marine environment must be protected by 2012 in order to comply with the objectives of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity.

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