



NEWS RELEASE

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MMS Receives Awards for Study of Shipwrecks as Artificial Reefs

Study Confirms Potential of Deep Water Oil and Gas Structures to Increase Marine Life Habitats

NEW ORLEANS – Deep sea wrecks act as artificial reefs, attracting far more species of plants and animals than expected, marine scientists report in a new award-winning study just released by Minerals Management Service (MMS). The finding indicates that oil and gas production platforms in deep water are likely to serve as hard surface, supporting hundreds of life forms.

The MMS and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Office of Ocean Exploration funded this study. This project represents the first time that these two agencies have partnered through the National Oceanographic Partnership Program (NOPP). This resourceful partnership earned the study two awards: the Department of the Interior's Cooperative Conservation Award received in 2006 and more recently, NOPP's Excellence in Partnering Award.

The scientists at C&C Technologies of Lafayette, Louisiana, the contractor for the study, investigated seven shipwrecks, including a German U-2 submarine and some of its targets. The ships lie in water ranging from 400 to 6,500 feet deep.

“The biological analyses conducted during this investigation concluded that as petroleum exploration and production expands into deeper Gulf waters, platforms potentially could provide a habitat for marine life,” said Lars Herbst, acting Regional Director of the MMS Gulf of Mexico OCS Region. “By studying the artificial reef effect of World War II shipwrecks, this research may help us determine the potential effects of deep-sea drilling structures on biological communities,” he added.

Wrecks in moderate depths gave researchers clear evidence of many rare and uncommon invertebrate species in close proximity to the wrecks and on the wrecks themselves. The number of species and individuals declined rapidly in proportion to distance away from the wrecks, showing that these wrecks form an attractive habitat for many kinds of marine life. Wrecks at these intermediate depths had 50 percent more species than those in shallower water or deeper

water. Shallower water wrecks, likely because of turbidity, and deeper water wrecks because of the extreme conditions of cold, darkness, and pressure, hosted a smaller number of species.

The scientists reported, among other findings, that the diversity of fish species generally decreases with depth. At the shallower water wrecks, where corals were growing, reef fishes were present. At the deepest water wrecks, no corals were found, nor were community structure and fish density significantly different over the wrecks as opposed to away from them. Therefore, scientists conclude that, in the deepest water, the upper levels of offshore platforms will attract considerable marine life, but the platforms are not likely to attract fish at their deepest levels.

The marine archaeology part of the study positively confirmed the identity of three wrecks, and found a relationship among water depth, ship size, and the size of the debris field. The state of preservation of the wrecks was correlated with water depth. No wreck was found to be contaminating or adversely affecting the area around them.

The report, *Archaeological and Biological Analysis of World War II Shipwrecks in the Gulf of Mexico: Artificial Reef Effect in Deep Water* (MMS 2007-015), is available from the MMS Gulf of Mexico OCS Region, 1-800-200-GULF on compact disc only.

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NOTE TO BROADCAST MEDIA: DVDs with highlight footage of each wreck site are available. To receive one, please contact Caryl Fagot at (504) 736-2590 or Eileen Angelico at (504) 736-2595.