

Ballard to Explore NOAA's Flower Garden



Dr. Robert Ballard and an interdisciplinary team of scientists will explore the fascinating undersea landscape of NOAA's Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (FGBNMS). One of the 13 U.S. national marine sanctuaries, the FGBNMS is located approximately 115 miles off the Texas/Louisiana coast. Named for its colorful corals and sponges, the sanctuary was targeted for exploration because of its unique geology and biology.

Its geological history also makes it a viable location to search for evidence of early human habitation that could predate current evidence of North America's first inhabitants. This expedition represents a collaboration between the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Institute for Exploration (IFE), Immersion Presents, the

University of Rhode Island and the U.S. Navy. During the week-long expedition, a team of geologists, biologists and marine archaeologists will use two ships, a nuclear-powered research submarine, a remotely operated vehicle (ROV) and scuba divers to explore coral reefs, brine seeps, mud volcanoes and ancient shorelines.

Researchers will also explore the physical connections that provide protective cover for animals traveling between individual geologic features. Deepwater exploration of the FGBNMS will be made possible by the U.S. Navy's NR-1-the nation's only nuclear-powered submarine dedicated to underwater research. Supported by the 238-foot SSV Carolyn Chouest, the NR-1 carries video cameras, sample-collection equipment and tools to map the sea floor. A high-definition camera and sensors on IFE's remotely operated vehicle (ROV) Argus-a sled-like device that will be towed behind the Carolyn Chouest-will provide researchers with additional images and information about the sanctuary's habitats.

Ballard will host a series of live broadcasts produced by Immersion Presents and distributed via satellite, Internet2 and the commodity Internet. The broadcasts will take place daily from 4th to 9th March 2007 at 11 am, 12 pm, 2 pm, 3 pm and 4 pm EST at <http://www.immersionpresents.org/>.

(Photo Courtesy: Emma Hickerson, NOAA)