



Australian Government

Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

MEDIA RELEASE

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SURVEYING AN AUSTRALIAN MARINE FRONTIER

A unique voyage of discovery into open waters off northern Australia starts today, when an Australian Government research vessel with 11 marine scientists aboard leaves Broome.

The 21-day survey of marine life is being undertaken under the auspices of the Australian Government's National Environmental Research Program (NERP) Marine Biodiversity Hub, in recognition of the global marine biodiversity significance of northern Australia and the increasing pressures facing this region.

Hub Director, Professor Nic Bax, says the voyage by the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) vessel RV *Solander* will produce immediate insights and collect enough data to keep some of the nation's top marine scientists busy for years.

Lead scientist on the *Solander*, Dr Andrew Heyward, from AIMS, says "this is the first time we've used baited remote underwater video cameras to search for free-swimming species close to the surface in northern Australia.

"The technology will enable us to find out the type of species, abundance and size of pelagic fish like sharks and tuna that use the open waters in this region."

The cameras are suspended 10 to 40 metres from the surface and were trialled in April this year off Shark Bay by scientists from the University of Western Australia (UWA) and the Zoological Society of London: the video showed numerous species swimming at this depth, including sharks, sea snakes, turtles, wahoo and jacks.

Professor Bax said the unique feature of the RV *Solander's* voyage was that so many different ways of seeing the marine environment will be combined.

“We will see the shape and form of the seabed by bouncing soundwaves off it. We’ll attract what is swimming down there using tasty bait attached to the remote underwater video cameras, and use a towed sled to sample what doesn’t move.”

Dr Heyward says while it may take some time to process all the data and specimens collected during the voyage, insights into biodiversity will be gained almost immediately.

The varied specialities of scientists aboard — from AIMS, Geoscience Australia, Northern Territory Museum and UWA — will broaden the knowledge obtained from this voyage.

The information gathered will be used to fill gaps in biodiversity knowledge and understand patterns of community assembly, associated physical drivers of marine biodiversity and provide a regional context to these patterns and processes.

The NERP Marine Biodiversity Hub is a national marine research collaboration supporting evidence-based management of Australia’s marine environment. It is funded by the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities. Hub partners are the AIMS, Charles Darwin University, CSIRO, Geoscience Australia, Museum Victoria, University of Tasmania, and UWA.

Video from the Shark Bay trial is available at <http://youtu.be/kT3g4p5nHxo>

Media contacts:

DSEWPaC: media@environment.gov.au, (02) 6275 9880

AIMS: Wendy Ellery – w.ellery@aims.gov.au, (07)4753 4409, 0418 729 265