



Cold water corals - Converting short term scientific excitement into long term public interest

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The Vesteraalen area off the Northern Norwegian coast is of ecological importance as a spawning ground for several fish stocks and as a corridor for migrating mature fish and drifting fish larvae for other stocks. The area is also of great interest to oil exploration companies for its hitherto untapped energy supplies. In the midst of it all, there are a number of cold-water coral reefs.

Researchers at the Institute of Marine Research in Norway have constructed a sophisticated system for monitoring habitats around the cold-water corals and their environment over time. Two so-called landers will be placed next to coral reefs, will be equipped with echo sounders, camera, hydrophone, acoustic current profiler, CTD-sensor and sediment traps in March 09. This will provide high quality data regarding both physical conditions and biological activity. The sensors will make it possible to observe how different species interact with each other, with particular focus on the activity of fish and how they use the reef habitat. The system will have the capacity to transmit data live from the ocean floor.

Creating attention in national media regarding such a ground-breaking project is not all that difficult. Already, the Norwegian national TV channel NRK has confirmed participation on the cruise that will deploy the landers. However, this project also presents communication challenges. One of which is to find a way of making echogram images of the reef understandable ("readable") to people not familiar with interpreting echo sounder signals. This will be especially important if it is decided to make the data from the coral reef available live on the internet. Furthermore, the aim will be to create interest amongst specific audiences in following the life in and around the coral reef over time.