

### **Proposed Hecate Strait Marine Protected Area regulations too weak: CPAWS**

Vancouver, 26<sup>th</sup> June 2015 – The Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) welcomes progress on a new marine protected area for rare glass sponge reefs in northern B.C.'s Hecate Strait but has concerns that draft regulations posted this week will not do enough to save them.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada posted draft Hecate Strait MPA regulations on June 27<sup>th</sup> to the Canada Gazette. They allow for some fishing activities including bottom trawling to continue around the reefs, and other types of fishing to continue above them. Fisheries and Oceans Canada is proposing to allow these activities to continue while they conduct monitoring and research. Cable laying within the MPA is also being allowed under the regulations.

“The permitted activities under the draft regulations present an unacceptable risk. The proposed MPA covers a small area and the sponge reefs are globally unique, very fragile and extremely important. A huge proportion of the ocean will still remain open for fishing if this MPA is completely closed,” says Sabine Jessen, CPAWS’ ocean program director.

The Hecate Strait glass sponge reefs provide habitat for a number of deep-sea species including octopuses and sharks and are nursery for many commercially important species including rockfish, prawns and crabs. They have been growing on the seafloor for over 9,000 years, since the end of the last ice age. The reefs can grow to the height of an eight-storey building and cover a combined area of about 1,000 km<sup>2</sup> at depths between 140 to 240 metres.

The public has 30 days to comment on the proposed regulations. “This is the last chance for Canadians to influence the protection of these rare treasures of the ocean. I encourage people to let Fisheries and Oceans Canada know that not only do the reefs need to be protected quickly, they also need to be fully protected, before we destroy them for good,” adds Jessen.

CPAWS has been working for over 15 years to get the reefs protected and is recommending that bottom trawling or other types of fishing should not be allowed within 200 metres of the reef because both risk raising sediment that could choke the sponges to death. “If we want a healthy fishing industry in our province, we need to take precautionary measures to protect important sea nurseries such as the glass sponge reefs,” adds Jessen.

The Hecate Strait glass sponge reefs were first discovered in 1987 by Canadian scientists during seafloor mapping. Prior to this discovery glass sponge reefs were thought to have gone extinct some 40 million years ago. “Finding living glass sponge reefs in British Columbia was like finding a herd of dinosaurs on land, it was a very important discovery!” said Dr. Manfred Krautter a scientist at the University of Stuttgart and world-expert on the fossilized glass sponge reefs.

The silica skeletons of the sponges are the consistency of meringue, making them fragile and vulnerable to damage from fishing gear. Scientists estimate that 50% of the reefs were destroyed by harmful bottom fishing methods before the reefs were discovered.

“Groundfish trawl closures were put in place in 2002 to protect the reefs but Fisheries and Oceans Canada didn’t start working on a marine protected area (MPA) until 2010, so it has taken five years to get to this point” adds Jessen.

Aside from physical damage the glass sponge reefs are very vulnerable to sedimentation, which can smother them. “As the sponges filter bacteria and microscopic food from water, sediment plumes kicked up by bottom fishing gear can choke the sponges and stop them from feeding, eventually they starve.” explains Dr. Sally Leys a professor at the University of Alberta and glass sponge expert. “Every time we go to survey the reefs we are finding new physical damage; fishing over the reefs still seems to cause harm,” adds Leys.

CPAWS is encouraging Canadians to share their comments on the protection of these globally unique glass sponge reefs by visiting [www.cpawsbc.org/actions](http://www.cpawsbc.org/actions)

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