





Recent evidence that the Deep Sea around Malta is a Biodiversity Hotspot

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Introduction

Malta's deep sea biodiversity is poorly known and, apart from the South Malta cold-water coral province, information is only available for muddy bottoms studied by trawl surveys.

Methods

In June–July 2015 remotely operated vehicle surveys within Malta's 25 nautical mile Fisheries Management Zone were made as part of the 'LIFE BaĦAR for N2K' project.

New areas with extensive coral and alcyonacean assemblages formed by *Madrepora* oculata, *Leiopathes glaberrima*, and *Callogorgia verticillata*, at depths of 300–1000 m

Result



Fossil lithistid sponge reef at a depth of 300 m



Deep-water caves at depths of 270–450 m





Soft muddy bottoms with *Pennatula* spp., *Isidella elongata* and *Funiculina quadrangularis*



High species diversity, with at least 75 fishes, 55 cnidarians, 35 crustaceans, 32 molluscs, 21 echinoderms, 15 sponges, and also tunicates, bryozoans, brachiopods and annelids, identified from a preliminary analysis of video footage



Acknowledgments

Conclusions

- Malta's deep sea is an important biodiversity hotspot
- Variety of assemblages dominated by suspension feeders (mainly cnidarians and sponges) as habitat-forming taxa, plus diverse associated fauna
- Recorded habitats are of conservation interest





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