

Friday, August 7, 2020

Not for Sale. The Sanctity of Seamount Treasures (Mount Vema-H.S.)



Greenpeace Germany oceans campaigner Thilo Maack encounters a Tristan Rock Lobster (*Jasus tristani*) on one of Mount Vema's summits. Credit © Richard Barnden / Greenpeace

The Mount Vema seamount is 1000km out to sea in the southeast Atlantic Ocean. It is out of reach except by industrial fishing fleets or passing ships. But finding a lobster cage there has alarmed Greenpeace which has reiterated that seamounts must be protected from being exploited.

This week Greenpeace reported that its ship, *Arctic Sunrise*, visited the area as part of the "Protect the Oceans" tour, a year-long pole-to-pole expedition.

On board are a group of activists, divers and scientists who took the opportunity to explore the secrets of the Vema seamount which rises from the seabed at 4600m to just 26m below the surface of the ocean.

Indian ocean seamounts

Seamounts are not exactly a secret to the commercial fishing fleets of South Africa and Namibia. Some 25 years have passed since the first seamounts were discovered in the south west Indian ocean. Then in 2010, a South African-led exploration of eight seamounts including Atlantis, "Middle of What" and Coral was successfully concluded.

This was made possible by the United Nations, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the Global Environmental Facility. There was also support from the Norwegians who provided the research ship.

Fish finds

On board the *Fridtjof Nansen*, amongst the group of scientists, was a phytoplankton specialist, researchers, marine biologists and seamount specialist Dr Alex Rogers from the Zoological Society of London.

At the time it was said that the Nansen expedition would be followed up with a 2011 expedition using the British remote-controlled submarine Isis. Thereafter a report about the south-west Indian Ocean seamounts would be presented to the IUCN from which a sustainable seamount fishing strategy for the fleets involved and neighbouring eastern and southern African countries would hopefully be devised and implemented.

They noted some interesting fish species including the alfonsino, spiky oreo, scabbard fish, snake mackerel, deal fish (a 2m-long eel-like creature) and a 60cm pelagic armourhead. The number, species and behaviour patterns of seabirds were also documented.

Mount Vema exploration

The latest Greenpeace exploration coincided with the conclusion of the South African leg of the pole-to-pole ship expedition which continues in the southwest Atlantic before ending in the Antarctic. The purpose of the trip is to highlight threats facing the oceans and to campaign for a Global Ocean Treaty covering all seas outside of national waters.

Tristan lobster population

On the upper slopes and plateaus of Mount Vema are soft corals, seaweed, kelp forests, and all are teeming with life. Divers documented a kaleidoscope of underwater flora and fauna, including yellow-tailed mackerel, striped bream, various calcareous algae, soft coral, and crustacean species that thrive in these oceanic ecosystems, ideal for their similarity to coastal regions.

Of interest was the population of Tristan lobster. This specie is showing signs of recovery even though in the past it was fished to the brink of extinction. This is based on the dozens of spiny lobsters seen on Mount Vema.

Global Oceans Treaty Greenpeace would like to see the Global Oceans Treaty protect at least 30% of the world's oceans by 2030.

Since 2007, the Convention on the Conservation and Management of Fisheries Resources has protected Mount Vema. Despite this divers recovered a lobster cage at a depth of 35 metres. This has spurred Greenpeace on to call for more decisive action against ghost gear, i.e. abandoned fishing gear.

Protecting the oceans

Behind Greenpeace's push to have multilateral protocols such as a Global Oceans Treaty, is its motivation to safeguard the resilience of the ocean.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) special report on the Ocean and Cryosphere has also highlighted this. This report, launched in September, urges governments to urgently scale up and accelerate efforts to address the climate emergency and protect the world's oceans.

"We don't need to look far to find the beauty we must protect. The bountiful marine life we have found is a sure sign that seamounts are unique wildlife hotspots, critical to the resilience and health of our oceans.

"It is this resilience that gives them a living chance in the face of the climate crisis which they are directly impacted by," says Bukelwa Nzimande, Climate and Energy Campaigner for Greenpeace Africa.

Critical need for real action

"Marine life in these unique areas are able to flourish and entire species recover, provided that the right measures are established and implemented.

"This is why the creation of ocean sanctuaries through an instrument like the Global Oceans Treaty is not only necessary, but critical.

"Current protections are insufficient and poorly implemented. We need real action to protect life in our oceans and further build resilience on a planet in crisis," concludes Nzimande.

