The Bellingshausen Sea epibenthos: A desert in the High Antarctic?

Francisco Ramil¹, José M. Castro², Mª Cristina Gambi³, Carlos M. López-Fé⁴, Francina Moya⁵, Erika Mutschke⁶, Ignacio Olaso², Mª Eugenia Manjón⁵, Julio Parapar⁷, Alvaro Peña⁸, Alfonso Ramos⁹, Pilar Ríos¹⁰, Mercedes Varela³ and Ana Ramos²

¹ Univ. Vigo (Spain) framil@uvigo.es; ²Instituto Español de Oceanografía; ³Stazione Zoologica Antón Dohrn (Italy); ⁴Univ. Sevilla; ⁵Univ. Málaga; ⁶Magallanes (Chile); ⁷Univ. Coruña; ⁸Univ. Valencia; ⁹Univ. Alicante; ¹⁰Univ. Santiago

Environmental conditions in West Antarctic sea, are characterized by soft bottoms with sedimentation rates and low primary production (excepting in coastal zones ≤100 m, Salinas et al., 1997; Arnaud et al., 1998). This benthic situation is different to those reported from the Weddell and Ross seas, where dense multidimensional communities of long-lived filter-feeders have been described.

In contrast to the Weddell and Ross seas, where a lot of surveys have been carried out, the marine benthic fauna of the third large Antarctic sea, the Bellingshausen Sea, have remained virtually unknown until nowadays. Thanks to two Spanish research programmes named BENTART-2003 and BENTART-2006, it has been finally observed that the epibenthos along the Bellingshausen sea is scarce and its composition different to those of other High Antarctic marine areas.

Only 64 kg wet weight and 14,500 individuals of benthic invertebrates were collected on the Bellingshausen sea and also on the seafloor around Peter I Island by using 34 Agassiz trawls at depths between 86 and 3,310 m. The results showed low biomasses around 5–6 kg by station.

**FAUNISTIC COMPOSITION**

Vagile megabenthos, mainly demersal fishes (35.1%), asteroids (27.2%) and holothuroids (10.3%), dominate the biomass, while the sea urchin Sterechinus spp. (21%) and other incrustant bryozoans, Aspericreta crassatina and Exochella hymanae (40%) (López-Fé, 2005), are numerically dominant.

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