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FirstScience News

Provided by EurekAlert!

International team to honor 30th anniversary of deep-sea vent discovery in Galápagos

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By Census of Marine Life

An international team of scientists will mark the 30th anniversary of the landmark discovery of the first volcanic hot vent at a special meeting and public event in the Galápagos Islands, located just south of the discovery site, on June 27-29. Attendees will include many of the original explorers who first discovered these bubbling hot areas surrounded by bizarre animals thriving in total darkness-without energy from the sun-at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean in 1977.

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"The discovery of hydrothermal vents-ecosystems driven by chemical energy from the seafloor rather than energy from the sun-led to a fundamental change in our understanding of life on Earth," said Paul Tyler, co-chair of ChEss, the group holding the meeting. ChEss is one of the 14 field programs of the Census of Marine Life, a global collaboration to document the ocean's life by 2010.

The discovery spawned a global quest to further explore one of Earth's most extreme environments in search of answers to questions about crust formation, the origin of life, ocean chemistry and more. "It remains one of the most exciting discoveries in the past century," Tyler said.

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The Galápagos Islands provide a fitting venue to hold this celebration, said Maria Baker, ChEss program coordinator. "The islands are very close to the actual discovery site.

We are thrilled with the opportunity to showcase how far the research on these incredible ecosystems has come in this natural treasure of the world where Charles Darwin first formed his theory of evolution," she said.

Roughly 50 scientists will attend the meeting, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which will include discussions about new-and controversial-issues facing vent science such as the onset of deep-sea mining and plans for conservation and management, said Eva Ramirez-Llodra, ChEss's other program coordinator.

An entire day will also be devoted to public outreach to foster a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, these remote environments, she said. Public talks by leading scientists and the photographer who has been on the deep-sea vent scene since the initial discovery, will be presented in both Spanish and English.

"Vents in the deep sea-only accessible by submersibles-are generally out of sight and therefore out of the public mind," Ramirez-Llodra said. "We [ChEss] believe that holding a public event is essential to increase the public's awareness of the existence, functioning and beauty of these ecosystems that some scientists believe may be the site for the origin of life".

Based at the National Oceanography Centre, Southampton in the United Kingdom, ChEss focuses on the diversity, abundance and distribution of the animals living in hydrothermal systems and other chemosynthetic-or chemically driven-environments and aims to produce a catalogue of these deep-sea species by 2010.

30 Years of Vent Research: Milestones and Challenges

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