**VME indicator species collected during exploratory fishing in Macaronesian seamounts**

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## Abstract

During the second half of 2012, the longline vessel MARANSA completed 13 fishing trips in international waters of CECAF Area (Division FAO 34), in nine Seamounts from northeast off Madeira (Lion, Ampere, Unicorn, Seine, "Camaguay", "Cabezos", Dacia and "Fantasma") to south off the Canary Islands (Eco/Endeavour), between latitudes 19°N and 35°N, using bottom longlines.

The main target species were demersal species such as Wreckfish (*Polyprion americanus*) or Splendid-alfonsino (*Beryx splendens*).

An observer on board recorded the bycatch of Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VME) indicator species in order to evaluate the potential adverse impact of bottom fishing activities on VME and samples of the specimens for later identification in the laboratory were stored. The main indicator species found were cold-water corals (black corals, scleractinians and gorgonians) and sponges, species broadly associated with seamounts.

The shallower banks, Ampere and Dacia in the north and centre of the area, show the greater biodiversity and the higher percentage of presence of VME indicator species (52% and 53% of the sets respectively), followed by Endeavour (South of the Canary Islands), 36.4%. In these three banks the species distribution is strongly related to depth, finding Antipatharia (mainly *Stichopathes sp*) and Scleractinia (*Dendrophyllia cornigera* and *D. ramea*) in shallower depths and Porifera (*Neophryssospongia nolitangere*, *Leiodermatium lynceus* and *Asconema setubalense*) in deeper bottoms. Species of the Porifera group are present in all banks except of so-called "Cabezos".