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Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Scientists Contribute To ‘Ocean in Google Earth’

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas – Scientists at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi played a vital role in the creation of “Ocean in Google Earth,” a feature of the newest version of Google Earth, that allows users to soar over the ocean bottom and sight-see along the way.

The idea for this innovative research tool was inspired by Dr. Sylvia Earle, National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence and chair of the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico (HRI) at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Earle is chair of the Google Ocean advisory committee, a group of leading U.S. marine scientists and oceanographers that includes Dr. Wes Tunnell, associate director of the HRI.

Tunnell and fellow HRI scientist Dr. Tom Shirley attended several meetings at the Google offices in Mountain View, CA, and hosted one Google meeting at HRI for the development of the new ocean feature. In addition, Tunnell contributed a link to “Seven and One-Half Fathom Reef,” a bank off the Texas coast that he first investigated more than 40 years ago, but which was, until recently, little known.

“This new tool will allow innumerable individuals to enjoy countless hours learning and exploring the ocean from their computers in this new and exciting format,” said Tunnell. “The new Google tool links pictures, video, and short explanations. For the first time, the detailed geography of the ocean floor is also shown, revealing intricate canyons and plateaus that lie beneath the surface.”

Using the unique tool, ocean explorers can share their experiences and knowledge with the world. The Google debut features more than 100 links in the Gulf of Mexico

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and Caribbean, including whales, sharks, sea turtles, and deep-sea coral reefs. This makes the Gulf region one of the more prominent virtual destinations in the digital ocean.

Dr. Ian MacDonald, professor of oceanography at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, contributed unique photographs from “Bush Hill,” a natural oil seep off the Louisiana coast that was the first deep-sea oil seep to be explored with submarines. Although its strange biology has been described in dozens of scientific articles, most people don’t have any idea where it is. Google literally puts “Bush Hill” on the map.

“This is an amazing tool,” said MacDonald. “When you open the new Google Earth, you’ll see clickable icons across the ocean—including many in the Gulf of Mexico. Now we can share the exact location of our discoveries and put video and photographs in context. It gives everyone a way to explore the world’s ocean.

“More than 70 percent of Earth’s surface covered by water, but we have better maps of the Moon and Mars than we do of most of the sea floor,” MacDonald added. “By putting the ocean into the Earth, Google has opened the door to a new era of communication. As with all new technology, it is hard to predict how it will develop, but it certainly provides a great opportunity for learning and sharing.”

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