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Harte Research Institute Cruise Gives Students Close-Up Look at Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary
Scientists aboard ship include leading ocean explorer Dr. Sylvia Earle

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas – Graduate students in the Marine Science program at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi received a close-up look at the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary this week during a cruise with scientists from the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies.

The sanctuary, which lies approximately 100 miles off the Texas coast, is a series of coral topped submerged banks that are the northern most coral reefs in North America. They are also some of the healthiest, with a higher percentage of living coral coverage than any other reefs in the Gulf of Mexico or the Caribbean Sea.

“The purpose of the three-day cruise was to give our graduate students the opportunity to see a healthy bank first-hand and to provide interaction with leading marine researchers and experts,” stated Dr. Larry McKinney, HRI executive director and chief scientist for the cruise. “It makes a more lasting experience when everyone is wet from seeing the reef from a few feet away.”

Experts from the National Marine Sanctuary Program, the Gulf of Mexico Foundation and several nongovernmental conservation organizations were aboard to share their knowledge during the three-day cruise. The students were also accompanied by several marine scientists, including Dr. Sylvia Earle, one of the world's leading ocean explorers and ocean advocates.

“There is nothing more exciting for me than to be in the ocean with students like those at HRI,” said Earle, who is a National Geographic Explorer in Residence. “They will be the leaders and scientists in whose hands we will be entrusting the oceans’ future.”

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While most of the cruise had an educational purpose, according to Dr. McKinney, research was also conducted that focused on the lion fish, an invasive species that was accidentally introduced into waters off the Florida coast and has no natural predators to control their numbers. Lion fish have slowly been expanding toward the central Gulf and, because they are voracious predators, pose a threat to fish living among the coral reefs.

-A&M-Corpus Christi-