Observations on the Gorgonian Coral *Primnoa pacifica* at the Knight Inlet sill, British Columbia 2008 to 2013



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Background

The fjords of British Columbia are glacially-carved troughs that snake their way through the coastal mountains, attaining depths as great as 760 m. Knight Inlet is especially long, extending 120 km northeast from an entrance located 240 km northwest of Vancouver, near the north end of Vancouver Island. Despite a maximum depth of 540 m it has a relatively shallow sill lying between Hoeya Head and Prominent Point with a maximum depth of only 65 m. Due to the shallow nature of the sill, tidal currents frequently exceed 0.5 m/second.

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The site has been of particular interest to oceanographers as the classical shape of this sill results in the presence of internal gravity waves and other interesting hydraulic phenomena (Thompson, 1981). As a result, university and federal government scientists have undertaken a number of oceanographic surveys of these features.

In the early 1980s researchers surveying the depths of Knight Inlet with the submersible *Pisces IV* encountered large fans of gorgonian coral on the flanks of the sill at depths of 65 to 200 m (Tunnicliffe and Syvitski, 1983). Boulders of various sizes were found scattered over the sill, many colonized by impressive fans of *Primnoa*, the largest 3 m across. The fact that this gorgonian coral was present was noteworthy, but the scientists observed something else extremely curious. Behind some of the boulders were long drag marks, evidence that when the coral fan on a particular boulder became big enough it acted like a sail in the tidal currents. This was theorized to cause the boulder to be gradually transported until it was removed from the influence of the current or until the fan caused the boulder to tip over, thus spilling the "wind" from the sail created by the fan.

In April 1982, after speaking with the *Pisces* pilots, Ralph Delisle and Dave Wardell dived the sill and found some coral fans at 30 m. Delisle took some underwater pictures, but at the time did not realize the significance of their remarkable find; i.e. the shallowest sighting of this gorgonian ever in BC waters.

Neil McDaniel and a group of divers aboard the M.V. *Oceaner* explored the sill in June 1982 but did not locate the coral. However they encountered two bigmouth sculpins, *Hemitripterus bolini*,

a species rarely seen in shallow water. The sighting represented a new southernmost record for this species in BC (previously Hakai Pass) and a new shallow record (previously - 122 m) of -10 m.

In June 2008, Doug Deproy, Phil Edgell, Jackie Hildering, Andy Lamb, and Neil McDaniel explored the area armed with a specific location provided by Ralph Delisle. They were successful in finding *Primnoa* at depths as shallow as -15 m (photo at right) and

collected samples for identification. The specimens were sent to Dr. Stephen Cairns at the Smithsonian Institution. He confirmed their identity as *Primnoa pacifica* Kinoshita, 1907.

An unusual specimen of demosponge was identified as *Amphilectus infundibulus* by Dr. Bill Austin, an expert in NE Pacific sponge taxonomy. This sighting proved to be a much shallower record for this sponge in BC waters (photo at right).

In November 2009, Joe Doiron, Mike Kalina, Neil McDaniel,





Tom Sheldon and Paul Sim visited the sill to further survey the area and acquire more photographs. This expedition was cut short by bad weather, permitting only one day of diving at the sill. Tidal currents were strong and prevented extensive exploration. However, Kalina was able to photograph some large (20 cm diameter) specimens of *Amphilectus infundibulus*.

In March 2010, Joe Doiron, Gord Brow, Neil McDaniel, Tom Sheldon and Doug Swanston visited the sill aboard the M.V. *Mamro*. Sea conditions were calm and dives were scheduled according to predicted slack currents. Visibility was relatively good, enabling the team to locate and photograph one of the richest areas found so far. *Primnoa* fans were found as shallow as -12 m, attached to variously sized boulders. Many damaged coral fans were observed lying on the bottom.

In March 2011, Joe Doiron, Gord Brow, Mike Kalina, Neil McDaniel, Tom Sheldon and Doug Swanston made another trip to the sill aboard the M.V. *Mamro*. The objectives of the trip were to obtain more photographic and video documentation of the *Primnoa* and other marine life, assess the amount and extent of damaged corals, map the distribution of the coral within diving depths and prepare a preliminary species list of conspicuous algae, invertebrates and fishes found at the sill (Table 1).

In March 2012, Joe Doiron, Lou Lehmann, Neil McDaniel, Mike Perdue, Tom Sheldon and Doug Swanston visited the area again aboard the M.V. Mamro. Moderate to strong SE winds made diving on the exposed sill difficult, so more time was spent exploring the north and south slopes of the inlet. At two sites just west of Lull Bay on the north side of the inlet, intact and seemingly healthy fans of Primnoa (right) were found in deeper water (-30 m and below). Some of these fans reached more than 1.5 m in height. Additional sponges were collected for examination by Dr. Bill Austin, including one (Hymetrochota sp.) which may represent a new record for the NE Pacific. Several specimens of an undescribed sea star, Solaster sp. were collected for Dr. Roger Clark. Specimens of the soft coral *Thrombophyton trachydermum* were collected for the Royal BC Museum (via Jim Boutillier, Pacific Biological Station).



In April 2013 exploratory dives were made by Lou Lehmann, Neil McDaniel and Tom Sheldon on the south side of the fjord adjacent to the sill. Phenomenal numbers of feather stars (*Florometra serratissima*) carpet the bottom here, and even the dead skeletons of many large *Primnoa* fans in deeper water (below 30 m) were covered with them. Live *Primnoa* fans were found, but even they were densely covered with crinoids. Several sea stars were found at usually shallow depths (-5 m), including *Ceramaster patagonicus* and *Hippasteria phrygiana*. A large population of the pink hydrocoral *Stylaster norvigicus verrillii* was found in shallow water (-10 m).

Distribution of Primnoa pacifica

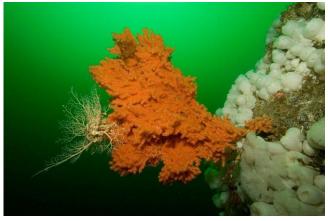
Primnoa pacifica ranges from the Sea of Japan westward across the Aleutian archipelago and south to La Jolla, California, generally at depths of 64 to 800 m. Off the BC coast, it appears to be widespread and attains considerable size, with the biggest fans reaching more than three metres tall. In very large specimens the main stem can reportedly be more than six cm in diameter and cross-sections reveal growth rings much like a tree. The 2009 Finding Coral Expedition by the Living Oceans Society found Primnoa utilizing Nuytco DeepWorker submersibles. They discovered extensive deep-water coral beds near Dundas Island, in Portland Canal and in Juan Perez Sound.

The shallowest that we have found *Primnoa* at the Knight Inlet sill is 12 m below datum, however it has been found in even shallower water in Glacier Bay and Tracy Arm fjord, Alaska (Stone et al, 2005). These gorgonians were observed during scuba surveys as shallow as 9 m deep. Alaskan researchers suggest that low temperature, stable salinity and low ambient light levels encourage *Primnoa* to colonize the rocky drop-offs. Because there is an accurate record of the deglaciation of Glacier Bay, they were also able to estimate the growth rates for these corals at 2.4 cm per year, an important figure when trying to determine the time it might take for damaged corals to recover.

Despite their strong holdfasts and wiry, moderately flexible branches, *Primnoa* fans are often destroyed by bottom trawling and other fishing methods such as long-lining and trapping. *Primnoa* is easily the largest coral found off the Pacific coast—in the Gulf of Alaska a gigantic specimen seven metres tall was reportedly observed during a submersible dive.

Preliminary Biophysical Description of the Knight Inlet Sill

The substrate on the crest of the sill within diving depths of 30 m is predominantly cobble trapped in coarse sands and gravel. However, in certain areas there are numerous boulders, some reaching very large dimensions (greater than 5 m in diameter). These boulder fields are located in the appropriate conditions to provide stable attachment for a diversity of invertebrates in the significant tidal currents that upwell over the ridge.



The largest *Primnoa* fans are nearly 1.5 m in diameter, attached to the sides and upper surfaces of variously-sized boulders. There are many detached and damaged fans, some with few living polyps, others seemingly recently broken, lying on the bottom.

Other conspicuous invertebrates include sponges such as the cloud sponge *Aphrocallistes vastus* (at the unusually shallow depth of 15 m), the soft goblet sponge *Amphilectus infundibulus*, the green sponge *Halichondria* (*Eumastia*) sitiens and many other encrusting demosponges; the zoanthid *Epizoanthus scotinus*; hydrocorals, especially *Stylaster norvigicus verrillii*; hydroids (many species, including *Aglaophenia* spp., *Thuiaria* spp., *Thuiaria thuja*); anemones, including the plumose anemone *Metridium farcimen*, the crimson



anemone *Cribrinopsis fernaldi* and the spotted swimming anemone *Stomphia coccinea*; echinoderms, including the basket star *Gorgonocephalus eucnemis* (photo above), spiny red star *Hippasteria phrygiana*, gunpowder star *Gephyreaster swifti*, white urchin *Strongylocentrotus pallidus*, an undescribed species of sun star *Solaster* sp. and feather star *Florometra serratissima* (photo below).

In addition to the population of *Primnoa* gorgonian coral, of particular interest was the finding of several rarely-seen soft goblet sponges, *Amphilectus infundibulus*, several more than 20 cm in diameter. An alcyoniid soft coral collected that was presumed to be *Thrombophyton trachydermum* has been determined by Dr. Catherine McFadden to possibly be another, unidentified species.



Rationale for Protecting the Sill

Scuba explorations to date show that the Knight Inlet sill represents a remarkable and unique habitat on the British Columbia coast. Several deepwater and/or rare species (the gorgonian coral *Primnoa pacifica*, the soft goblet sponge *Amphilectus infundibulus*, the cloud sponge *Aphrocallistes vastus*, the shrimp *Eualus townsendi* and the bigmouth sculpin *Hemitripterus bolini*) are found at shallower than normal depths. There may be other rare deep-water species living on the sill. Well beyond scuba depths (at -150 m and deeper) there are colonies of the rare branching white coral *Lophelia pertusa* (pers. comm., Jim Boutillier, PBS).

In March 2011, we located the part of the sill with the greatest number of *Primnoa* fans within diving depths. This was an area on the crest of the sill comprised of boulders lying on a cobble/coarse sand substrate. The boulders vary widely in size, but some are as much as 5 m in diameter. These very large boulders sometimes supported half a dozen large fans or more.

Scattered around the bottom near the bases of these boulders we found many broken and damaged coral fans. Some were entangled with monofilament fishing line (photo right) and had been damaged by sport fishing tackle. Various flashers and downrigger weights were also found.

Some broken fans were wrapped or tangled with downrigger wire (below, right). Heavier rope, possibly part of commercial trap-lines, was also found.

We also found some large, nearly intact fans that were not fouled with fishing gear and which may have broken free of their attachment naturally due to their large size and the force of the strong tidal currents.

We attempted to "right" some of these fans by inserting their bases into tight crevices between boulders so that they would stand upright in the currents. We observed that fans lying on the substrate appeared unhealthy, with many dead and dying polyps (photo right). They were also more likely to be preyed upon by the orange-peel nudibranch *Tritonia gigantea*.







Protecting the Knight Inlet Sill

We believe it is imperative to protect this unique marine site without further delay. This remarkable habitat features:

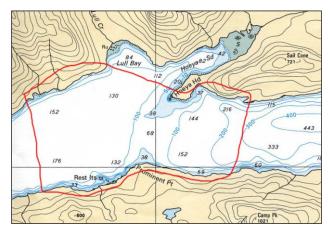
1/ The **shallowest known population of the gorgonian coral** *Primnoa pacifica* **on the coast of British Columbia** and the only one accessible to study using scuba. The site offers the rare opportunity to study growth rates, distribution, predators and other aspects of its biology.

2/ Several deep-water and/or rarely seen species such as the sponge Amphilectus infundibulus, the shrimp Eualus townsendi, the bigmouth sculpin Hemitripterus bolini and other species yet to be observed.

In order to prevent unnecessary and further damage to this site we recommend the following steps be taken immediately with regard to the area of the sill and adjacent sea floor approximately within the red outlined area shown in Figure 1:

1/ Closure to recreational fishing. Most of the observed damage to the coral fans appears to have been caused by recreational fishing tackle such as monofilament lines, downrigger wires and downrigger weights.

2/ Closure to commercial fishing. Ground tackle of crab or prawn sets can cause extensive damage to the coral fans and other bottom life. Bottom trawling could destroy the corals and other marine life on the inlet floor.



- 3/ Closure to log dumping and storage activities. Sinking wood debris can cause physical damage to delicate corals and sponges and accumulations of organic debris can smother bottom sediments for decades.
- **4/ Ban on the harvesting of corals** or collection of any marine life from the area without a scientific collecting permit. Note that *Primnoa* has been harvested in Alaska for the production of jewellery.
- **5/ Ban on anchoring** within the designated area. Anchors and ground tackle can cause significant damage to delicate corals and sponges.

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Table 1: List of Conspicuous Invertebrates, Fishes and Marine Mammals from Knight Inlet Sill (as of May 1, 2013 with additions by Andy Lamb, sponges identified by Dr. Bill Austin)

TAXON	COMMON NAME	COMMENTS
ALGAE	SEAWEEDS	
Ulva sp.	sea lettuce	
Codium setchellii	spongy cushion	
Fucus distichus subsp. evanescens	rockweed	
Alaria marginata	broad winged-kelp	
Saccharina latissima	sugar wrack kelp	
Laminaria sinclairi	dense-clumped kelp	
Desmarestia sp.	thin acid kelp	
Nereocystis luetkeana	bull kelp	
Agarum fimbriatum	fringed sea colander klep	
Various spp.	filamentous red algae	
Clathromorphum spp.	crustose corallines	
Callophyllis sp.	beautiful leaf seaweed	
Opuntiella californica	prickly pear seaweed	
PORIFERA	SPONGES	
Sycandra cf. utriculus	leather bag sponge	
Rhabdocalyptus dawsoni	sharp-lipped boot sponge	
Aphrocallistes vastus	cloud sponge	
Amphilectus rigidus	orange finger sponge	
Amphilectus infundibulus	flabby bowl sponge	Shallow record for BC at -20 m
Asbestopluma occidentalis	pipecleaner sponge	
Iophon lamella	white reticulated sponge	
Halichondria (Eumastia) sitiens	green-tinged sponge	
Semisuberites cribrosa	funnel sponge	
Halsarca/Oscarella sp.	sponge	
Mycale adhaerens	sponge	
Suberites latus	hermit crab sponge	
Raspailiidae	sponge	
Hymetrochota sp.	sponge	New record for NE Pacific? (W. Austin)
Weberella sp.	sponge	
Lissodendoryx sp.	sponge	
Plakina atka	brain sponge	Southern record?
CNIDARIA	ANEMONES, CORALS	
Metridium farcimen	giant plumose anemone	
Cribrinopsis fernaldi	crimson anemone	
Urticina crassicornis	painted anemone	
Stomphia didemon	swimming anemone	

Stomphia coccinea	spotted swimming anemone	
Epizoanthus scotinus	orange zoanthid	
Balanophyllia elegans	orange cup coral	
Thrombophyton trachydermum	pale soft coral	
Alcyonium sp. indeterminate	red soft coral	See Williams, 2013
Ptilosarcus gurneyi	orange sea pen	200 (1,111,111,11)
Virgularia cf. tuberculata	white sea pen	
Halipteris willemoesi	sea whip	
Primnoa pacifica	red tree gorgonian coral	Shallow record for BC at -12 m
<u>. v</u>	branching pink hydrocoral	Shahow record for Be at 12 in
Stylaster norvigicus verrillii	ostrich plume hydroids	
Aglaophenia spp.	* · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·	
Thuiaria spp.	embedded sea fir hydroids	
Plumularia sp.	delicate plume hydroid	
Clava sp.	white hydroid	
Thuiaria thuja	bottlebrush hydroid	
Ectopleura marina	solitary pink-mouth hydroid	
Grammaria sp.	spindly embedded hydroid	
Lafoea dumosa	muff hydroid	
ANNELIDA	SEGMENTED WORMS	
Serpula columbiana	red trumpet calcareous tubeworm	
Eudistylia catharinae	roll-top feather duster worm	
Diopatra ornata	ornate tubeworm	
Halosydna brevisetosa	eighteen-scaled worm	
Protula pacifica	white-crowned calcareous tubeworm	
Chone aurantiacea	orange feather-duster	
Demonax medius	parasol feather-duster	
Bispira sp.	twin-eyed feather-duster	
Myxicola infundibulum	slime-tube feather-duster	
BRYOZOA	MOSS ANIMALS	
Schizoporella japonica	orange encrusting bryozoan	
Microporina borealis	stick bryozoan	
BRACHIOPODA	LAMPSHELLS	
Laqueus californicus	California lamp shell	
Terebratalia transversa	transverse lamp shell	
Terebratulina unguicula	snake's head lamp shell	
Hemithrys psittacea	black lamp shell	
MOLLUSCA	CHITONS, BIVALVES,	
WOLLOSCA	SNAILS	
Tonicella undocaerulea	blue-lined chiton	
Tonicella lineata	lined chiton	
Mopalia muscosa	mossy chiton	
Lepidozona mertensii	Merten's chiton	

Cryptochiton stelleri	giant Pacific chiton	
Placiphorella rufa	red veiled chiton	
Modiolus rectus	straight horsemussel	
Clinocardium nuttallii	Nuttall's cockle	
Saxidomus gigantea	Washington butter clam	
Hiatella arctica	arctic nestler	
Mya truncata	truncated softshell clam	
Diadora aspera	rough keyhole limpet	
Bathybembix bairdi	Baird's margarite	
Ocinebrina interfossa	sculptured rocksnail	
Chlamys hastata	spiny pink scallop	
Ceratostoma foliatum	leafy hornmouth	
Nucella lamellosa	wrinkled dogwinkle	
Amphissa columbiana	wrinkled amphissa	
Boreotrophon stuarti	winged trophon	
Calliostoma variegatum	variable topsnail	
Fusitriton oregonensis	Oregon triton	
Trichotropis cancellata	checkered hairysnail	
Tritonia festiva	diamondback nudibranch	
Onchidoris bilamellata	barnacle-eating nudibranch	
Triopha catalinae	clown nudibranch	
Tritonia tetraquetra	pink tritonia	
Tritonia gigantea	orange-peel nudibranch	
Enteroctopus dofleini	giant Pacific octopus	
ARTHROPODA	SHRIMPS, CRABS,	
	BARNACLES	
Erichthonius rubricornis	tube-dwelling sea flea	
Heptacarpus decorus	elegant coastal shrimp	
Eualus townsendi	Townsend's eualid	Shallow record for BC at -20 m
Heptacarpus kincaidi	Kincaid's shrimp	
Lebbeus grandimanus	candy stripe shrimp	
Pandalus eous	spiny pink shrimp	
Pandalus danae	coonstripe shrimp	
Cancer productus	red rock crab	
Metacarcinus magister	dungeness crab	
Pugettia gracilis	graceful decorator crab	
Hyas lyratus	Pacific lyre crab	
Chorilia longipes	longhorn decorator crab	
Acantholithodes hispidus	hairy-spined crab	
Cryptolithodes typicus	butterfly crab	
Rhinolithodes wosnessenskii	rhinoceros crab	
Phyllolithodes papillosus	heart crab	

Lopholithodes mandtii	Puget Sound king crab	
Lopholithodes foraminatus	brown box crab	
Placetron wosnessenskii	scaled crab	
Munida quadrispina	galatheid crab	
Pagurus beringanus	Bering hermit	
Pagurus armatus	backeyed hermit	
Elassochirus tenuimanus	widehand hermit	
Elassochirus gilli	orange hermit crab	
Balanus glandula	common acorn barnacle	
Balanus rostratus	rostrate barnacle	
Balanus nubilus	giant acorn barnacle	
ECHINODERMATA	SEA STARS, URCHINS, CUCUMBERS	
Evasterias troschelii	mottled star	
Mediaster aequalis	vermilion star	
Gephyreaster swifti	gunpowder star	
Ceramaster patagonicus	cookie star	
Hippasteria phrygiana	spiny red star	
Pteraster militaris	wrinkled star	
Pteraster tesselatus	slime star	
Henricia leviuscula	blood star	
Henricia sanguinolenta	fat blood star	
Pycnopodia helianthoides	sunflower star	
Crossaster papposus	rose star	
Solaster dawsoni	morning sun star	
Solaster endeca	northern sun star	
Solaster "paxillatus"	orange sun star	Undescribed (R. Clark, Pers. comm.)
Ophiopholis aculeata	daisy brittle star	
Gorgonocephalus eucnemis	basket star	
Florometra serratissima	feather star	
Strongylocentrotus droebachiensis	green sea urchin	
Strongylocentrotus pallidus	white sea urchin	
Parastichopus californicus	giant sea cucumber	
Cucumaria miniata	red sea cucumber	
Psolus chitonoides	creeping pedal sea cucumber	
CHORDATA	TUNICATES	
Corella willmeriana	transparent tunicate	
Ascidia paratropa	glassy tunicate	
Didemnum sp.	compound tunicate	
Cnemidocarpa finmarkiensis	broadbase tunicate	
Pyura haustor	warty tunicate	
Didemnum carnulentum	Pacific white crust	

Cystodytes sp.	compound tunicate	
	FISHES	
Aulorhynchus flavidus	tubesnout	
Microgadus proximus	Pacific tomcod	
Ronquilus jordani	norther ronquil	
Hexagrammus stelleri	whitespotted greenling	
Artedius harringtoni	scalyhead sculpin	
Triglops pingelii	ribbed sculpin	
Podothecus accipenserinus	sturgeon poacher	
Lepidopsetta bilineata	rock sole	
Parophrys vetulus	English sole	
Platichthys stellatus	starry flounder	
Chirolophis decoratus	decorated warbonnet	
Lumenus sagitta	snake prickleback	
Sebastes caurinus	copper rockfish	
Sebastes maliger	quillback rockfish	
Sebastes melanops	black rockfish	
Sebastes ciliatus	dark rockfish	
Sebastes emphaeus	Puget Sound rockfish	
Hexagrammos decagrammus	kelp greenling	
Ophiodon elongatus	lingcod	
Jordania zonope	longfin sculpin	
Hemilepidotus hemilepidotus	red Irish lord	
Enophrys bison	buffalo sculpin	
Enophrys lucasi	leister sculpin	Southern record for BC?
Myoxocephalus polyacanthocephalus	great sculpin	
Hemitripterus bolini	bigmouth sculpin	Southern & shallow record at -10 m
Rhamphocottus richardsonii	grunt sculpin	
Nautichthys oculofasciatus	sailfin sculpin	
Liparis dennyi	marbled snailfish	
Agonopsis vulsa	northern spearnose poacher	
Pleuronichthys coenosus	C-O sole	
Ptilichthys goodei	quillfish	
	MAMMALS	
Eumetopias jubatus	Steller sea lion	
Lagenorhynchus obliquidens	Pacific white-sided dolphin	
Megaptera novaeangliae	Humpback whale	