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Antarctica Has More Species Than Galapagos, First Comprehensive Inventory Of Antarctic Life Shows

ScienceDaily (Dec. 1, 2008) — The first comprehensive “inventory” of sea and land animals around a group of Antarctic islands reveals a region that is rich in biodiversity and has more species than the Galapagos. The study provides an important benchmark to monitor how they will respond to future environmental change.

Reporting this week in the *Journal of Biogeography*, the team from British Antarctic Survey and University of Hamburg, describe how they combed the land, sea and shores of the South Orkney Islands, near the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula, using scuba divers and trawled nets to catch creatures as deep as 1500 metres.

Animals recorded were then checked with a century of literature and modern databases and the team concludes there are over 1200 known marine and land species. These include sea urchins, free-swimming worms, crustaceans and molluscs, mites and birds. Five were new to science.

Lead author Dr David Barnes from British Antarctic Survey (BAS) says: “This is the first time anybody has done an inventory like this in the polar regions. It’s part of the Census of Marine Life (COML) – an international effort to assess and explain the diversity and distribution of marine life in the world’s oceans. If we are to understand how these animals will respond to future change, a starting point like this is really important.”

Author Stefanie Kaiser from University of Hamburg says: “We never knew there were so many different species on and around these islands. This abundance of life was completely unexpected for a location in the polar regions, previously perceived to be poor in biodiversity.”

The research team, consisting of 23 scientists from five research institutes, spent seven weeks on the BAS Royal Research Ship James Clark Ross in 2006.

Adapted from materials provided by British Antarctic Survey (BAS).