

( RESEARCH )

## SEARCHING FOR SIGNS OF LIFE

In the 10-year, worldwide Census of Marine Life, every little creature counts.

It is the most massive marine survey ever undertaken. Already, it holds information on more than 15,300 species of marine fish, and the final count may include 210,000 forms of marine life—or more. The purpose of the Census of Marine Life (CoML, [www.coml.org](http://www.coml.org)) is multifaceted: to identify threatened species and important breeding areas; to develop new pharmaceutical and industrial compounds; and to locate and protect oceanic areas where vast numbers of marine life coexist. CoML is collecting this detailed information to create a “road map” of the world’s oceans.

For example, scientist Dann Blackwood contributed information pertaining to the abundance of daisy brittle stars in fished and unfished areas on Georges Bank near Woods Hole, Mass., to the CoML. In 1994, Blackwood and fellow researchers aboard the vessel *Delaware II* used a net attached to a metal frame to dredge the ocean floor, and found that brittle stars were thriving in areas not frequently fished. Blackwood’s efforts might have been lost to the scrap heap of interesting but arcane scientific records, inaccessible to other scientists working in the field, if not for the CoML.

Surveying the contents of the world’s oceans is not a task for the weak at heart, and the CoML, a joint project of international governments, private foundations and corporations, allotted 10 years and \$1 billion to complete the task. More than 300 scientists from 53 countries currently work for the CoML, and the formal census will be made available in 2010. —GINA MARSHALL



Blackwood's daisy brittle star.