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Archived Edition:
Tuesday, July 17, 2007



Not Too Many Fish in the Sea to Count

By KATE BRANNEN

The Vineyard Conservation Society met Thursday for its annual meeting and to hear about the Marine Life Census, an ambitious and inspiring global project that is attempting to catalogue and identify every life form in the planet's oceans.

The census puts Vineyard conservation efforts into a global context where scientists around the world are racing to protect marine life.

At Thursday's meeting, the nonprofit reported a growth in contributions and announced plans to increase membership.

Brendan O'Neill, the executive director, gave a brief report on the society's busy year of ambitious fundraising and efforts to meet programmatic goals.

Mr. O'Neill said the society wants to emphasize public outreach and civic involvement. He was optimistic about its efforts to bring recycling to the Steamship Authority terminals.





VINEYARD GAZETTE

Island of Martha's Vineyard,
seven miles off southeast coast
of Massachusetts.

Winter population: 15,882
in summer, 73,035.

Twenty miles from city
of New Bedford, 80 miles
from Boston and 150 miles
from New York.

Devoted to the interest
of the six towns on the Island
of Martha's Vineyard, viz:

Edgartown, Oak Bluffs,
Tisbury, West Tisbury,
Chilmark, and Aquinnah.

These, with Gosnold,
constitute Dukes County.

**Martha's Vineyard's
newspaper of record
since 1846**

Other successful projects continuing throughout the year included a campaign to promote organic lawns, the annual beach cleanup in April and the society's conservation almanac, which is in its seventh year in its current version. The number of people subscribing to the society's free weekly e-mail has quadrupled.

After society members settled business, they adjourned for some good food and wine. An Indonesian meal was prepared by Rob Kendall. The dinner of beef noodle salad, curried chicken and rice with all of the fixings was spread out under a tent. Being a conservation group, society members used biodegradable forks made of compressed wheat starch that could be thrown into the compost afterwards.

After dinner, everyone settled back into their chairs for a talk from Dr. Jesse H. Ausubel, a lifelong seasonal resident of the Vineyard, who serves as director of the program for the human environment at Rockefeller University and program manager for the Census of Marine Life.

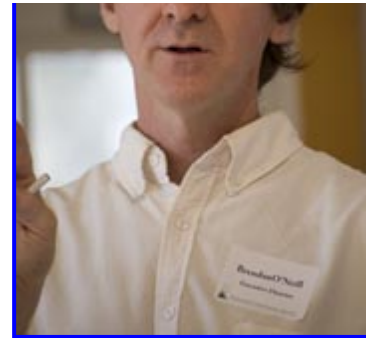
He credited his upbringing on the Island as one of the inspirations for getting into his work.

The census, to which scientists from around the world are contributing, attempts to improve management of marine resources by gaining a better understanding of exactly what's in the planet's oceans.

First, he said, a number of feasibility studies had to be done to find out if it was possible to survey the planet's oceans and catalogue its millions of species.

To give an example of just how abundant life is in the waters, Mr. Ausubel said that when you take a gulp of seawater at South Beach, it's possible you're swallowing more than 1,000 forms of life, but he reassured the audience that they are very small.

The studies revealed that the census could, and even more importantly, should be done. By Oct. 1, 2010 the world is scheduled to see the completion of its first comprehensive census of marine life.



"It will open your eyes to the extraordinary immense beauty of what's in the ocean," Mr. Ausubel said.



To give the audience an idea of the ocean's vitality, he showed clips from the coming film by French filmmaker Jacques Perrin, who made *Winged Migration* and *Microcosmos*.

On Thursday night, members of the conservation society watched gannets flying off the coast of South Africa feeding on a giant bait ball of sardines.

"The birds are like ballistic missiles," Mr. Ausubel said.

The sounds of the ocean filled the room while Mr. Ausubel narrated and identified the animals on the screen.

At \$65 million, he said it was the most expensive film about nature ever made. The work was culled from 300 hours worth of film shot around the world.

"Make sure you all go see it at the Strand or the Island theatres," he said. The film, which comes out in May 2009, will be used to promote the Census for Marine Life.

Meeting participants were excited by some of the images, and the movie created an inspiring context to Mr. Ausubel's talk.

By gaining a better sense of what's in the ocean, he said, conservation efforts can be more efficient.

"Most of the ocean is unexplored," said Mr. Ausubel, adding that the average depth is 12,000 feet.

He said marine life is under intense pressure.

"It simply tastes too good," he said, referring to the problem as the "democratization of sushi."

The census includes 14 field projects, with multiple technologies in use, covering diverse geographies and animals.



He walked the audience through the different technologies being used, including acoustics, tagging, optics, genetics and contemporary databases.

He talked about a revolution in technology that allows for cylindrical acoustics. He said the new system was like a lighthouse and said the census has the only one in the world. With it, they have tracked gigantic schools of herring, numbering more than 10 billion.

"The good news is there's still a lot of herring and we have the only system," he said. But he cautioned that such a powerful system could be used for both good and bad purposes.

Tagging technology, which works like a highway's electronic easy pass system, allows scientists to track migrations. In order to fully protect a species, Mr. Ausubel said, it's necessary to know their true habitats.

"Fish don't believe in passports," he said. He called tuna "jet-set businessmen," regularly traveling from San Francisco to Tokyo.

The sooty shearwater, a seabird, was recorded with the longest animal migration at 60,000 miles per year, going from New Zealand to Japan to California to Chile and back to New Zealand.

The census studies correct the preconceived notion that the ocean is a "vast, undefined body of water," said Mr. Ausubel, pointing to a map of intricate migration patterns. "Underneath the surface all of the animals have specific patterns and preferences for action," he said.

The census also helps scientists and conservationists pinpoint hotspots of biodiversity for future protection.

Optic technology records entirely different information, including species not previously seen found on the sea floor.

Some of the deepest parts of the Arctic Ocean have never been explored, largely due to the Cold War, when it was more important for hostile nations to hide things rather than have them discovered. But as part of the census, scientists now are penetrating these depths and finding new forms of life.

"We saw some really splendid things," said Mr. Ausubel, adding that what used to be considered an ocean desert is more like Tiffany's, an environment full of spectacular, delicate animals. "You hardly believe what you're seeing."

He said genetics works like barcodes and they enable scientists to identify larvae, fragments, fins and marine microbes.

Mr. Ausubel reported that fish sold in restaurants are often falsely identified and guessed that a quarter of restaurants on the Island mislabel fish on their menus, either on purpose or not.

"Don't believe what you're being told in general," he added.

Finally, he talked about new online databases that will bring all of this information to the public, allowing them to explore the oceans in a way they've never been able to before. These include the Encyclopedia of Life and Google Oceans. The census also has its own site at coml.org

"The beauty of what remains is just beyond belief," said Mr. Ausubel, closing his talk.

He then let the ocean speak for itself, showing more clips from the upcoming film. The audience sat and listened to the echoes of whales calling while different shades of blue filled the screen.

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**A Journal
of Island Life
for 164 Years**