Creep into the Deep:
Discovering Deep-Sea Coral

SEAMAIL™

TO: Virtual Deep-Sea Science Team
FROM: Virginia Biede
SUBJECT: Understanding Life in Deep-Sea Coral Reefs

Hello Virtual Science Team,

My name is Virginia Biede. I am an ecologist and a student at Florida State University. An ecologist studies how communities of living (like plants and animals) and nonliving things interact with each other.

When I study a coral reef, I look at it in many different ways. I look at what kinds of coral are living there. I look at the other animals living there. I also look at things like water chemistry and currents and the shape of the sea mount—all these things affect life on the reef.

On this project, I am hoping to learn more about how these coral reefs are different in different places. I'd like to learn why there are different species at different places. Is it because of the water chemistry, or the currents, or the food available? We don't know any of these things.

I also look at how humans are affecting these reefs. Some are being harmed by certain ways that people fish. Climate change might be affecting these reefs too. I want to try to understand exactly what is happening so we can try to protect the reefs and all the life there as best we can.

When I'm working on a research cruise, one of my favorite parts is watching the images from the ROV. I could watch all day! I love that every time we send the ROV down, something different happens. Even when the ROV is traveling to the reef, we see interesting

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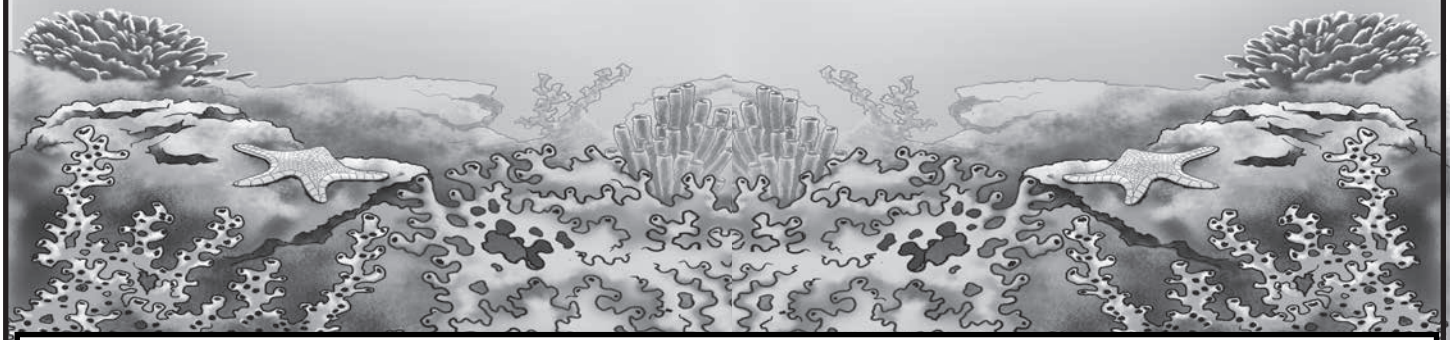
Illustration by Paul Lopez



things like squid and fish swimming around. We've seen sharks and rays on this cruise! Deep-water coral reefs look really different than shallow-water reefs. For one, they live in the dark. The sun doesn't travel to the depths where they live. We can only see the places that the light from the ROV shines on. They also don't seem to have as many brightly-colored fish swimming around. But we don't know for sure because there's a lot going on in the reef that we can't see.

But there are still lots of living things on the reef. Crabs and fish hide in the nooks and crannies. There are worms and brittle stars that slither and skitter over the coral. And there are soft corals and sponges that attach themselves to the coral skeleton.

Another thing I love to do when I'm at sea is watch the sunset or the sunrise. There is nothing around you except for birds and clouds. The whole sky lights up—it's something you can't see anywhere else.

I hope you find a career that makes you as happy!

Virginia

Virginia Biede
Deep-Sea Explorer
WhaleTimes.org

What is a sight in nature that you love to see?