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INCO project helps coastal communities to cope with El Niño

[Date: 2005-05-17]

El Niño, the name given to the periodic warming of the Pacific Ocean off the western coast of South America, and its associated cold phase (La Niña), both have a significant impact on the marine biodiversity of coastal areas in Chile, Peru and Argentina, as well as the communities that exploit these resources.

Given the importance of local fisheries to the domestic economies of these countries, a large number of studies have already been carried out to try to identify the effects of El Niño on in-shore ecology. However, much of this data can only be found scattered among the so-called 'grey literature', and analysis of the mechanisms that cause the studied effects is also lacking.

That is why, having identified a high degree of overlap in a number of smaller projects being carried out in this area, and following decreases in national funding for such initiatives, the EU has chosen to fund a four year project aimed at integrating the available knowledge on the effects of El Niño and La Niña on coastal marine environments and resources.

The CENSOR project (Climate variability and El Niño Southern Oscillation: implications for natural coastal resources and management) is funded under the international cooperation priority of the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6). It brings together 13 institutes from six countries - Chile, Peru, Argentina, Spain, France and Germany.

As project partner Sven Thatje, from the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research in Bremerhaven, Germany, explained to CORDIS News: 'CENSOR was driven by scientists and postdocs keen to integrate the various scattered bilateral cooperations into a larger, multidisciplinary approach to coastal management. The project has a high standard of scientific excellence and is also linked to the needs of South American coastal communities.'

According to Dr Thatje, the most important part of the consortium's work relates to the compilation and analysis of existing data, whether they take the form of national scientific papers, local reports, or news articles. He estimates that the grey literature contains data that would take decades to compile from scratch. 'Once it has been analysed and compiled, we aim to make that information available in a single online location so that people can consult and even contribute to the data themselves,' Dr Thatje added.

A thorough analysis of existing knowledge will also alert the team to where the gaps in our understanding of El Niño impacts on marine ecology are. They intend to compare species fluctuation data with information on El Niño/La Niña events in order to understand the underlying mechanisms (temperature changes etc.) that cause such fluctuations. 'If we can do this, we will be able to provide practical advice to local fisheries on the basis of El Niño predictions, for example suggesting that they remove stocks of a particular species while they still can,' said Dr Thatje.

The CENSOR project represents a new approach to understanding the impacts of climate changes such as El Niño, as rather than using oceanographic indicators to make their predictions, the team will use biological indicators such as the presence of invasive warm water species, the death of local indigenous marine species, and reproductive changes. Dr Thatje fully understands, however, that this will not be an easy task: 'We are talking about a complex ecological system subject to natural fluctuations, climate changes and impacts from fisheries, and it is very hard to distinguish the effects of one from the other.' To do so for all species in the four year lifetime of the project will certainly be impossible, so the team intends to concentrate on species with the greatest socio-economic value to local communities such as scallops.

As well as filling such knowledge gaps and making their findings available to the general public, the team is also working with national policy makers and local fisheries associations to provide practical advice on specific issues, and to suggest mitigation strategies to offset the effects of El Niño/La Niña events. 'These groups are very open-minded and keen for more advice, so CENSOR will certainly fill a need in that regard,' argues Dr Thatje.

CORDIS News asked Dr Thatje why he feels that the EU was keen to fund the CENSOR project, and what positive outcomes it might have from a European perspective. 'The project represents an exchange of capacities between EU and South American scientists. EU fisheries fleets travel worldwide, so any impacts on fisheries in South America will also have an impact on Europe,' he replied.

On a more scientific level, Dr Thatje added, CENSOR aims at improving our understanding of one particular element of climate change, albeit primarily from a South American perspective. Given that climate change is dictated by complex global systems, however, any improvement in our understanding of one element of the process helps to create a clearer picture of the problem as a whole. 'The knowledge we gain in CENSOR will certainly go towards building intellectual capacity in the EU,' Dr Thatje believes.

Ultimately, however, it is the project group itself that Dr Thatje believes is the most significant element of CENSOR. 'Especially with the junior members of the team, we are helping to develop future academics in South America. Being involved in CENSOR, they see that there is a clear connection between their own scientific excellence and the needs of their countries and local communities. These postdocs are the scientific leaders of the future, so it's also good to get them used to national and international cooperation, and it is a very rewarding experience for all involved,' Dr Thatje concluded.

Contact person:

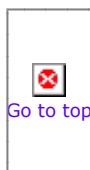
For further information, please consult the following web address:
<http://www.censor.name/>

Remarks:

- Category:** Programme implementation
- Data Source Provider:** CORDIS News interview with Dr Sven Thatje
- Document of reference:** Na podstawie wywiadu CORDIS Wiadomości z dr. Svenem Thatje
- Subject index:** Meteorology, Earth Sciences, Environmental Protection, Resources of the Sea, Fisheries, Coordination, Cooperation, Scientific Research
- Programme Acronym:** MS-FR C, FP6-INCO, MS-D C, MS-E C

Record control number (RCN): 23826
 Quality validation date: 2005-05-17

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