

# SponGES

## deep-sea sponge ground ecosystems of the North Atlantic



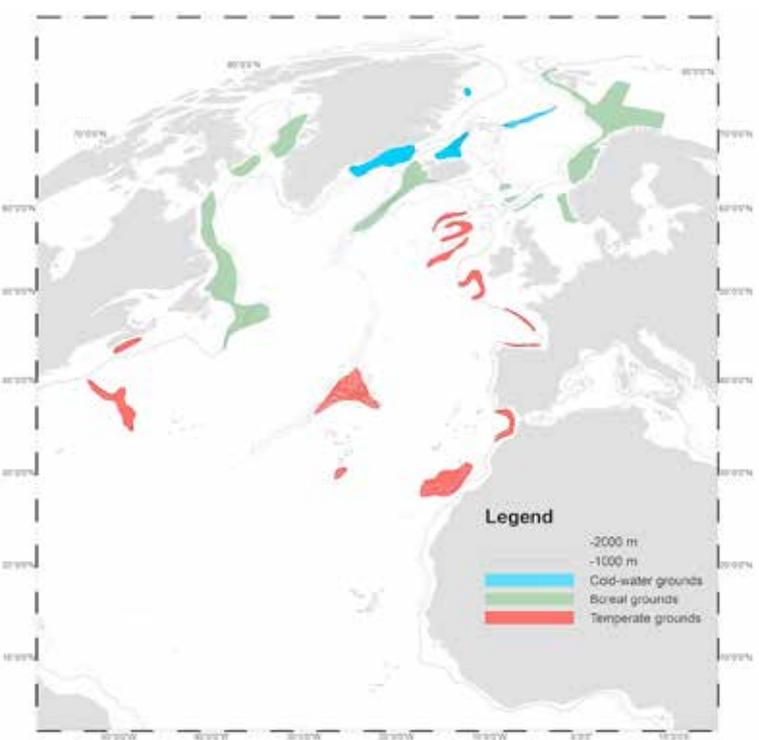
**What is a sponge?** Known to exist for over 600 million years, sponges (Phylum Porifera) are the **oldest living animal group on our planet**. With over 8500 species described and more than 25000 species estimated to exist, they present a remarkable diversity in the world's oceans with a vast potential for blue technological innovations.

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**Why are deep-sea sponges important?** Although a ubiquitous and abundant component of deep-sea benthic communities, sponges have been largely overlooked in deep-sea research. In many areas sponges are the **dominant organism** in terms of abundance (up to 16 individuals/m<sup>2</sup>) and biomass (over 90% of total invertebrate biomass) and form complex ecosystems known as **sponge grounds, gardens, aggregations and reefs**. Their biodiversity, ecological importance and biotechnological potential is assumed to be similar to or even higher than other deep-sea ecosystems such as cold-water coral reefs or vents/seeps systems.

**Why study deep-sea sponges?** Deep-sea sponge-dominated communities form a variety of **vulnerable marine ecosystems** widespread throughout the North Atlantic in areas such as shelves, slopes, seamounts, mid-ocean ridges, canyons and fjords which often coincide with **fishing and other human activities**. In spite of their importance, they have so far received relatively little scientific or conservation attention.

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**What is SponGES?** SponGES is a research and innovation project funded under the H2020 Blue Growth BG1 call aimed at **“Improving the preservation and sustainable exploitation of Atlantic marine ecosystems”**. Its overarching goal is to develop an integrated ecosystem-based approach to preserve and sustainably use deep-sea sponge ecosystems of the North Atlantic.

- What will SponGES do?** Over 4 years of research and interaction with stakeholders, SponGES will:
- ✓ Strengthen the knowledge-base on North Atlantic sponge ground ecosystems.
  - ✓ Improve innovation and biotechnological application.
  - ✓ Model and predict threats and impacts to these ecosystems.
  - ✓ Advance the science-policy interface.
  - ✓ Develop tools for improved resource management and good governance.

SponGES has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 679848.



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