



MEDIA RELEASE

Worms Dance at New Moon

An explosion of breeding worms is expected in Darwin Harbour the night before the September 22 new moon.

Museum and Art Gallery of the NT marine curator Dr Chris Glasby said once a year, breeding polychaete worms of the family Nereididae swim from the murky depths of their muddy burrows to the water surface to breed.

“During this event we often see swarms of several square metres,” he said.

The species, identified as *Perinereis aibuhitensis*, are 10-15 cm long and from a distance look like a swarm of miniature eels.

“But close up they have a well-defined head with four eyes and an impressive pair of jaws. “

Dr Glasby said the spawning occurs in coastal waters around the world.

“On the Great Barrier Reef some species of nereid spawn in November/December each year, which corresponds to the major annual coral spawning event,” he said.

Dr Glasby said the actual spawning event is rarely witnessed and the Darwin Harbour spawning will be a good opportunity to capture some mature individuals.

“They are attracted to the surface by light, so it should be a simple matter of catching them with a lamp and dip net.”

“I’d like to see if it is possible to rear the young, so the trick will be to capture them before they release their gametes into the sea,” he said.

“By rearing the young in the laboratory we can observe and document larval development, its duration, and whether it occurs in the water or in the sediment.

“This sort of information is important for aquaculturalists as certain worm species are bred to provide a ready supply of a ‘natural’ food to cultured marine fishes and prawns.

Polychaete worms play an important ecological role in the marine environment as predators and scavengers and are also a very significant food source for many commercially important fishes and prawns.

Dr Glasby said he could not be completely certain the event would occur on September 21, the night before the new moon, as it depended on several factors such as the sexual maturity of local populations, the intensity of the moon light and water temperature.

“The gradual decline in illumination from full moon to last quarter moon is probably the cue that synchronizes swarming,” Dr Glasby said.

“Going by previous years and looking at the tide/moon chart for this year, the nights of September 20-22 look most promising to observe the worm swarms.”

Dr Glasby said that another of the swarming polychaetes, the Pacific palolo worm (*Eunice viridis*), also occurs in northern Australia and adjacent seas.

“Annual swarming by this species in Sumba and Lombok and other Indonesian Islands is celebrated by the locals as it marks the beginning of the Nyale festival which is linked to fertility rites by the people inhabiting these islands,” he said.

“In Samoa it is regarded as a delicacy by Samoans who harvest the egg-laden females when they spawn over a few days each year.”

Note: If specimens are captured, there will be a good photo opportunity, either at MAGNT or at the Channel Island Aquaculture centre.

Ends

Media Note – For more information contact Dr Chris Glasby on 8999 8108

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