T. FITZHARRIS/MINDEN PICTURES/FLPA

US HABITAT RULE THREATENS SPECIES
Call for change to definition of 'endangered'.
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SNAPSHOT

Glider eavesdrops on whales

Quietly slipping to a depth of 1,000 metres, an undersea glider is recording whale song off the coast of Hawaii in unprecedented detail.

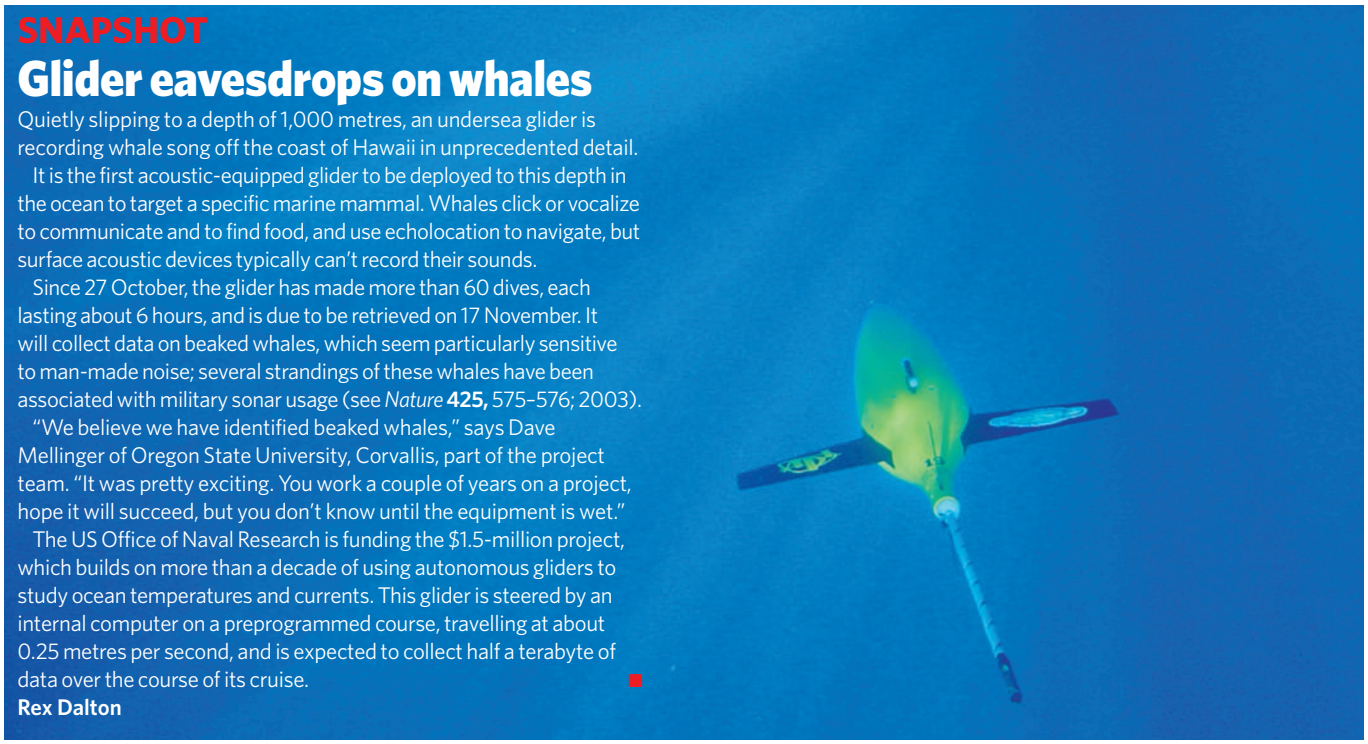
It is the first acoustic-equipped glider to be deployed to this depth in the ocean to target a specific marine mammal. Whales click or vocalize to communicate and to find food, and use echolocation to navigate, but surface acoustic devices typically can't record their sounds.

Since 27 October, the glider has made more than 60 dives, each lasting about 6 hours, and is due to be retrieved on 17 November. It will collect data on beaked whales, which seem particularly sensitive to man-made noise; several strandings of these whales have been associated with military sonar usage (see *Nature* **425,** 575–576; 2003).

"We believe we have identified beaked whales," says Dave Mellinger of Oregon State University, Corvallis, part of the project team. "It was pretty exciting. You work a couple of years on a project, hope it will succeed, but you don't know until the equipment is wet."

The US Office of Naval Research is funding the $1.5-million project, which builds on more than a decade of using autonomous gliders to study ocean temperatures and currents. This glider is steered by an internal computer on a preprogrammed course, travelling at about 0.25 metres per second, and is expected to collect half a terabyte of data over the course of its cruise.

Rex Dalton



APPLIED PHYSICS LABORATORY, UNIV. WASHINGTON

Britain sets up defence advisory group

The British government has recruited a group of academics to tackle tricky scientific problems related to defence, *Nature* has learned.

The programme is similar to a group known as the JASONs, which the US government has consulted on technical issues since the 1960s. "You hear a lot about the JASONs and how much credibility they have in the United States," says Mark Welland, the UK Ministry of Defence's chief scientific adviser. Britain needs a similarly "fast-moving, free-floating entity", he says.

Scientific advice is frequently sought in Britain, but on security-related issues the advice usually comes from inside the government. Scientists at government labs such as the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Aldermaston are consulted on sensitive topics, in part because academic researchers lack the necessary security clearances.

The situation contrasts with that in the United States, where academic scientists routinely travel in and out of classified government laboratories, often maintaining their clearances after they have left a lab. The JASONs, a semi-secretive group of roughly 30 academics, typically meet over the summer to look at technical problems faced by the Pentagon. During the cold war, the group was considered indispensable for its work on problems such as submarine detection.

It was a model that Britain lacked but needed, Welland says. So in April, Welland and John Beddington, the government's chief scientific adviser, assembled 11 academics in an attempt to duplicate the success of the JASONs. The group was tasked with looking at ways to improve radiation detection at the nation's ports to prevent terrorism and smuggling of nuclear material.

S. ZHUMATOV/REUTERS

Can 'Newton's Apples' help tackle roadside bombs?

John Hassard, a physicist at Imperial College London, is one the researchers chosen to participate in the project's wide-ranging discussions. "At some points we were talking about some pretty far-out ideas, such as extrasensory perception and gravity waves," he says. But the group settled on less-radical solutions involving plasma physics that Beddington says are now being considered for funding.

Beddington and Welland say that they are now planning to hand-pick a second group to look at improvised explosive devices. Such home-made bombs are commonly used by insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Welland says that the government wants to get fresh ideas about how to deal with the devices at every stage, from their production to their detection and deactivation. "It's a high priority for the Ministry of Defence so it is an obvious area for a group such as this to really get to grips with," Welland says. "What we don't have yet is a name for this group," he adds. "I suggested that they be called Newton's Apples."

Geoff Brumfiel