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**Report for the International Seabed Authority, by Eleonora Puccinelli**

The Deep-sea Biology Symposium and the Deep Ocean Stewardship Initiative (DOSI) workshop were very interesting meetings that I had the possibility to attend in Monterey (CA) between the 9 and 14th of September. I have been working on deep-sea ecology in South Africa since 2015, however this was the first time that I have had the opportunity to attend similar meetings.

Even if intense, the symposium was well organized, and all different aspects related to the deep-sea were discussed. Of particular interest to me the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Functioning and the Trophic Ecology sessions. The plenary talks were very inspiring. It was fascinating to hear from Julie Packard how the Monterey Bay Aquarium and MBARI started, and to have such a compressive lecture on trophic ecology from an upcoming young female scientist Dr Anela Choy. Most of the keynote speakers were female, and many established female researchers attended the conference. As an early-career female researcher, it was extremely inspiring and important to see female researchers in these marine fields cover such roles.

The highlight of the conference was definitely having the opportunity to present my work in front of an international audience. I felt very privileged to be able to show the results of a project that I have been working on for the last couple of years. I am working on trophic ecology of deep-sea benthos at the Southern Ocean Prince Edward Islands (PEI), looking at how variability in oceanographic conditions around the islands can influence the pattern of food distribution and the trophic ecology of deep-sea benthos. The PEI currently represent the sole South African offshore marine protected area (established in 2013). Understanding patterns of variability is thus fundamentally important for an effective protection of this MPA. It was extremely stimulating to present my results in front of an audience who work on similar topics. I have presented similar results at other meetings, however I had difficulty finding people that fully understood what I am working on, the problems that I usually encounter and most of all to have a constructive discussion and share ideas. Additionally, in my current lab I am the only one working on such topics and it was very useful to talk and listen to researchers knowledgeable in this field.

 During the conference I had the chance to meet with a collaborator from SCRIPPS with whom I am working since 2016. The project is looking at the isotopic composition of benthic specimens collected on the South Africa south coast in collaboration with other South African researchers. I strongly believe that a fundamental way forward in research is to collaborate, and conferences are the place where most of the collaborative projects start.

At the conference I learnt from the top-experts in the field about new technology used to sample the deep-sea. Although South Africa has probably the best facility to study the deep-sea in Africa, we are still behind compared to other countries. I have learned about different strategies that researchers have developed to study for instance larvae of benthos in the abyss, or economical camera systems to investigate the sea floor, some of which could be used in the near future in South Africa.

Before the meeting I had been asked to give an early career lighting talk for the students attending the conference, together with four other early career researchers. It was really stimulating to share my experience of working in an African country, the difficulties that I encountered but most of all, the beauty to work in such environment. At the conference I had the chance to chat with students and young researchers from other universities, to discuss future career plans, job opportunities, day to day difficulties etc. We have reciprocally started to follow each other on major social media such as Twitter and Research Gate. Likewise, I had the chance to have scientific conversations with some of the top-experts in the field, with whom I hope to start collaborative projects. Conferences and international meetings are the starting point to meet other scientists, but it is fundamental to connect and engage with them once the meeting is over. Definitely several talks made me think about possible future projects which I am hoping to develop.

On this line, I have decided to join the DOSI community and to actively be involved in a working group. This will not only keep me informed of new developments in the field, but I am aiming to share the knowledge acquired during the DOSI meeting across the South African marine science community. With another colleague from South Africa who attended the conference, we are planning to host a talk through the network SANCOR, which regularly hosts talks in Marine Science, to inform the community about DOSI and its initiatives.

I was one of the three people from the entire African continent attending the conference in Monterey, and I am really grateful for the financial support provided by ISA and by the Deep-Sea Biology Society. It has been a great experience and I am hoping that this will lead to future collaborations and further interesting and meaningful projects in the deep-sea, making South Africa an internationally recognized country for top-class deep-sea research.

