

Oceana captures the first images of the Sahara seamounts in the Atlantic

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Oceana has images of the Sahara seamounts, the southernmost seamounts in Spain, for the first time. These seamounts have never previously been filmed and information about them is still scarce. The filming was carried out using an underwater robot (ROV), at depths of up to 600 metres, during the *Oceana Ranger* expedition around the Canary Islands.

The Sahara seamounts are located between 140 and 190 miles southwest of the island of El Hierro (Canary Islands). Many of them rise up from seabeds almost 4,000 metres deep, and some have summits just 200 metres from the ocean's surface. This is the case of Echo, a seamount that is also known as Endeavour Bank, whose summit is formed of a large plateau measuring 350 square kilometres, located between 230 and 350 metres depth, with its sides dropping up to 3,800 metres into the deep seas.

The first images Oceana obtained of these seamounts show rocky and sandy seabeds, volcanic in origin, including an abundance of caves, overhangs and cracks harbouring a variety of fauna. Deep-sea sharks, rays, wreckfish, congers, gadellas, escolars, roughies and other fish live in extensive fields of sponges, gorgonians and corals.

The area is especially rich in sixgill sharks, a deep-sea shark that can reach almost 5 metres in length and weigh more than 500 kg.

"We were especially surprised by some sponges that created reef-like structures, harbouring a variety of fish, crustaceans, molluscs and echinoderms," stated Ricardo Aguilar, director of research at Oceana.

After filming these hidden ecosystems, the *Ocean Ranger* research catamaran returned to the Canary Islands to continue the sampling work being carried out of the archipelago's seabeds in collaboration with the Spanish Biodiversity Foundation.

"The importance of the seamounts is being acknowledged internationally thanks to their high levels of endemism and their importance for marine biodiversity. Protecting them is not only a great opportunity for the countries that harbour these treasures in their waters, it is also a moral obligation," stated Xavier Pastor, Executive Director of Oceana Europe.

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