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Coastal Ship Helps Scientists In Marine Biosecurity Study

Exotic organisms hitchhiking on the hulls of overseas ships pose a serious threat to New Zealand's marine biosecurity and to the economy.

In an effort to understand how they survive, scientists from Nelson's Cawthron Institute are sending colonies of hull-fouling creatures around the coast on a Pacifica Shipping vessel.

Using magnetic plates, scientists attach miniature communities of marine life to the underwater hull of Pacifica's 100-metre long container vessel The Spirit of Resolution.

The organisms are exposed to different sea conditions, temperatures and salinities on weekly sailings between Auckland, Lyttelton and Nelson, says Richard Piola of the Cawthron Institute.

"Hull fouling of ships is a major introduction and dispersal mechanism for unwanted marine species to our coastlines and harbours," Richard said.

"It is vital we learn how to deal effectively with this threat, and our magnetic plate project is a good way to find out."

He said it was not feasible to check overseas ships routinely or continuously, which limited knowledge about how hull-fouling organisms survived and spread.

"In the past 18 months we have examined survival rates of a wide range of bio-fouling organisms placed on the hull of Pacifica's coastal ship.

"By comparing them at the start and end of each voyage we are finding out which organisms survive or not, and the reasons for this.

"Without Pacifica's assistance with these procedures, we would not have the ability to undertake such vital research."

Pacifica's chief executive, Rod Grout, said he was pleased the trials had shown encouraging results, with potential to help protect the country's economic interests.

"If this initial research is extended to other ships in our waters, as it should be, it will prove even more valuable," he said.

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