Expanding "Fishnet" Helps Oil Spill Studies

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The National Science Foundation has awarded Tulane University a grant of nearly $200,000 to enhance an important online resource marine scientists use to study the impact of the BP oil spill.

The Fishnet2 database is managed by the Tulane University Museum of Natural History. Hank Bart is the museum's director and curator of fishes. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

The federal funding will expand access to the Fishnet2 database, which is managed by the Tulane University Museum of Natural History and provides a means for scientists to access a wealth of fish data online, says Hank Bart, the museum's director and curator of fishes.

Over many years, Bart says, scientists have collected data on marine life in the Gulf of Mexico. The sampling has been conducted mostly by national marine natural resource agencies, including the National Marine Fisheries Service of the National

Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration and the Minerals Management Service.

During these surveys, scientists collected numerous specimens of fish and other marine life that are now in various museums, where they have been identified, studied and archived, he says. Fishnet2 will assist researchers as they study this information.

"The ability of ecologists and other scientists to assess the impacts of the spill on the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem depends critically on the availability of baseline data on the composition and structure of biotic communities in the region under natural conditions," says Bart, who also is a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology.

Researchers generally search the Fishnet2 portal using scientific or common names of fishes, but there are many other ways they would like to search the portal, particularly for research related to the oil spill, including depth or some aspect of surface geography.

"We aim to use this current grant to enhance the Fishnet2 search interface so that researchers can search by these parameters," says Bart. "Once researchers have data on which species occur where in the Gulf, they can ask all kinds of other questions about the potential effects of the oil spill."