Ocean images live streamed

Aquarium guests view sea floor

By Diane Knich
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A robot with a bright light and the ability to transmit images can reveal huge orange coral sea fans, bright green sponges and an occasional deep-sea fish — from the ocean floor 1,300 feet down.

Even an experienced diver couldn't go to that depth, where temperatures hover around 40 degrees, said Peter Etnoyer, a marine biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

But the crew aboard NOAA's research vessel, the Okeanos Explorer, can use its robot to live stream images from such canyons and other places along the ocean floor. And it did that Friday for a gathering of marine biologists, staff and visitors at the S.C. Aquarium.

It marked the first time the Okeanos crew transmitted images from a mission to a public audience, said Paula Keener, a marine biologist and director of education programs for NOAA.

NOAA and the aquarium worked to set up a room with plasma screens, and groups could come in and watch what was going on. The scientists also were able to communicate online with the crew from the Okeanos, which was about 100 miles off the coast of Massachusetts.

A group of children from Bluffton stared at the screen as the robot moved along the ocean floor sending its images of various sea creatures.

Brian Thill, the aquarium's assistant director of education programs, called the experience "fantastic and amazing."

Children learn about explorers like Lewis and Clark in school, he said. This technology gave the children and everybody else who was watching the opportunity to be explorers. "Today, they are just like Lewis and Clark," he said.

Keener said the ocean is unexplored territory, and now, with the help of researchers, people can explore it in real time. The ocean covers 74 percent of the planet, she said, but only about 5 percent of it has been explored.