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Expedition Sets Sail to Explore the Deep Sea of the Marshall Islands

Team aboard Ocean Exploration Trust's E/V Nautilus *will use advanced technology to explore never-before-seen Central Pacific depths*

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(Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands – August 2, 2025) — The Ocean Exploration Trust (OET)'s exploration vessel (E/V) *Nautilus* has begun an expedition to explore deep-sea habitats throughout the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) in collaboration with the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority (MIMRA) and other partners. Funded by NOAA Ocean Exploration via the Ocean Exploration Cooperative Institute, this expedition will map and explore poorly known deep-sea habitats to support science and management priority needs in RMI and engage students and the public in telepresence-based exploration.

This 21-day telepresence-enabled expedition will utilize the mapping, remotely operated vehicles (ROVs), and telepresence systems of E/V *Nautilus* to collect critical baseline information to support the Marshall Islands Marine Spatial Planning process, as well as long-standing collaborations between the U.S. and the Marshall Islands on surveying critical fishery habitats.

"The Marshall Islands host an incredible wealth of marine biodiversity, yet much of its ocean lies in deep waters that remain unexplored," **says Expedition Leader and OET Science Coordinator Noelle Helder.** "These waters are both culturally and biologically rich, and we'll be exploring many of their deep-sea habitats for the first time. Alongside our partners at MIMRA, we've been planning this expedition for over a year, and it's an honor to bring our ROV and mapping systems here to share the deep sea with the public."

The Republic of the Marshall Islands is an atoll-based country of over 1,200 islands surrounded by 2.13 million square kilometers of ocean, the vast majority of which has never been mapped or surveyed. Despite data gaps, it's known that the deep sea of Aolepān Aorōkin Ṃajeḷ hosts rich and diverse marine resources, including over 300 unexplored seamounts and extensive deep-sea ridges.

This expedition is being led by four talented lead scientists. Dr. Steve Auscavitch from the National Museum of Natural History will lead community ecology research with Dr. Fanny Girard from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa focusing on deep-sea corals. Dr. Val Finlayson from the University of Maryland will oversee the expedition's geology and geochemistry efforts. OECI partner Dr. Annette Govindarajan from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution will use the Aquatic Labs' Multipuffer environmental DNA (eDNA) sampler, as well as Niskin bottles mounted on ROV *Hercules*, to collect samples that will be used to study biodiversity and carbon transport in the deep ocean.

"It's a rare and exciting opportunity to bring together such a diverse and interdisciplinary group of scientists, explorers, and resource managers to study the unexplored and unmapped deep ocean in the central Pacific," **says Dr. Steve Auscavitch, Co-Lead Scientist and marine genomics specialist at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.** "The combined expertise on *Nautilus* and ashore will definitely yield novel insights to the Pacific deep-sea environment and its living biological resources in the Marshall Islands and the region for years to come."

Joining the Corps of Exploration for this expedition are three local scientists and resource managers from the Marshall Islands. OET is committed to building connections with local communities in expedition regions through co-developing expedition plans, making data publicly accessible, and coordinating outreach with schools and community groups. In April, OET, in collaboration with MIMRA, hosted a workshop to discuss deep-sea science and ocean outreach needs of the community. The workshop was attended by over 25 people, including stakeholders from these various government agencies and community organizations.

This expedition will be streamed live on NautilusLive.org, a 24-hour platform that brings ocean exploration directly to viewers on shore. Telepresence technology allows viewers to engage with the team at sea, asking questions and receiving real-time behind-the-scenes updates via social media. Classrooms worldwide are invited to connect with the at-sea team of STEAM professionals via free educational Q&A interactions.

This E/V *Nautilus* expedition is part of an exciting 2025 field season where six expeditions will build ocean knowledge supporting international scientific and U.S. governmental priorities, particularly understanding the deep sea, sharing that knowledge with others, and contributing new discoveries and data to inform future resource management decisions. Through the open sharing of data collected during these expeditions, we will build upon decades of study, stewardship, and discoveries. Mapping and ROV operations will directly contribute to the US National Strategy for Ocean Mapping, Exploration, and Characterization, the Beyond the Blue: Illuminating the Pacific campaign, and other coordinated initiatives.

As E/V *Nautilus* operates in the Central Pacific, OET recognizes and respects the deep cultural connections many have to this region. OET's expeditions are planned in consultation with local communities to ensure mutual respect and collaboration. We welcome partnership inquiries at info@oet.org.

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About the Ocean Exploration Trust

The Ocean Exploration Trust was founded in 2007 by Dr. Robert Ballard to explore the ocean, seeking out multi-disciplinary discoveries while pushing the boundaries of STEAM education and technological innovation. Our international program is launched from aboard the Exploration Vessel (E/V) *Nautilus*, offering live exploration to participants on shore and the public via live video, audio, and data feeds. Learn more about Ocean Exploration Trust.

The 2025 E/V *Nautilus* expeditions are sponsored by NOAA Ocean Exploration via the Ocean Exploration Cooperative Institute, including additional support from the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, in collaboration with the US Geological Survey. OET program sponsors and partners for 2025 also include the Office of Naval Research, QPS, and the Phillip Stephenson Foundation. Learn more about our partners and sponsors.