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Controversial US Ship Runs Aground on Mexican Reef

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press Writer

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MEXICO CITY Feb 18, 2005 - In a significant embarrassment for American scientists, a U.S. research vessel conducting controversial sound-wave research off Mexico's Gulf coast faces heavy fines for running aground on a coral reef.

Mexican authorities announced on Thursday that the U.S. National Science Foundation ship Maurice Ewing hit a reef about 30 miles off the Yucatan peninsula on Monday, even though the reef was clearly marked on maps.

Mexico's Attorney General for Environmental Protection, Jose Luis Luege, said the ship could be seized temporarily to ensure the fine is paid.

The ship is using sound waves to search for traces of an asteroid that may have wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.

"The fines will be based on the amount of damage done," said Mexico's Attorney General for Environmental Protection, Jose Luis Luege. "I can't say offhand what the fine will be, but it will be sizable."

The research project had already raised the hackles of environmental activists, who say the technology could harm sea life, including whales, which use sound waves to communicate.

The Monday accident, which authorities did not confirm until Thursday, fueled activists' opposition to the Maurice Ewing.

"They said they had state-of-the-art technology and highly trained personnel, but they couldn't even detect a sand bank or a coral reef?" said Rosario Sosa, president of the Yucatan-based civilian Association for the Rights of Animals and their Habitat.

The environmental protection agency called the accident "inexplicable," noting the reef was clearly marked on navigational charts for the area.

Officials with Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth

Observatory, which operates the Maurice Ewing, had no immediate comment on the accident.

The Mexican government said the accident affected about 20 square yards of underwater rock formations and about 10 square yards of coral.

"It takes coral a hundred years to grow one meter, so ten meters, that's like a thousand years lost," Sosa said.

"I have never made but one prayer to God, a very short one: 'O Lord, make my enemies ridiculous.' And God granted it."

--Voltaire

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