

# Radiocarbon evidence for annual growth rings in the deep-sea octocoral *Primnoa resedaeformis*

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**ABSTRACT:** The deep-sea gorgonian octocoral *Primnoa resedaeformis* is distributed throughout the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans at depths of 65 to 3200 m. It has a 2-part skeleton of calcite and gorgonin. Towards the inside of the axial skeleton gorgonin and calcite are deposited in concentric growth rings, similar to tree rings. Colonies were collected from the NE Channel (NW Atlantic Ocean, southwest of Nova Scotia, Canada) from depths of 250 to 475 m. Radiocarbon was measured in individual rings isolated from sections of each colony, after dissolution of calcite. Each  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  measurement was paired with a ring age determined by 3 amateur ring counters. The precision of ring counts averaged better than  $\pm 2$  yr. Accurate reconstruction of 20th century bomb-radiocarbon showed that (1) the growth rings are formed annually, (2) the gorgonin is derived from surface particulate organic matter (POM) and (3) useful environmental data are recorded in the organic endoskeletons of deep-sea octocorals. These results support the use of *P. resedaeformis* as a long-term, high resolution monitor of ocean surface conditions, particularly in temperate and boreal environments where proxy data are lacking.

**KEY WORDS:** *Primnoa* · Deep-sea coral · Octocoral · Growth rings · Gorgonin · Bomb radiocarbon

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## INTRODUCTION

For generations, fishermen in Atlantic Canada have known about the occurrence of habitat-forming, deep-sea corals offshore (Breeze et al. 1997). There has been recent interest in using these corals as historical monitors of deep and intermediate water mass variability (Smith et al. 1997, Frank et al. 2004). This interest stems from the fact that deep-sea corals generally live for hundreds of years or more and their skeletons contain discrete growth layers (Druffel et al. 1995, Risk et al. 2002, Adkins et al. 2004). Geochemical sampling of these layers may provide long-term, high resolution records of proxy climate information, far beyond the range of instrumental records (Heikoop et al. 2002, Roark et al. 2005).

The deep-sea gorgonian coral *Primnoa resedaeformis* is one of the dominant corals found off eastern

Canada, particularly in canyons along the shelf break (Breeze et al. 1997). It is also distributed throughout the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans at depths of 65 to 3200 m (Smithsonian holdings: <http://goode.si.edu/webnew/pages/nmnh/iz/Query.php>). The arborescent skeletons of *P. resedaeformis* are made up of calcite and gorgonin, a tough horny protein, deposited in concentric rings (Risk et al. 2002); 3 growth zones are evident: (1) an inner 'central rod' and (2) 'horny axis', both made of calcite and gorgonin, and (3) an outer 'calcite cortex', containing practically no gorgonin (Sherwood 2002). Growth rings in the horny axis are visible as light–dark couplets; the darker parts contain a higher percentage of gorgonin:calcite (Risk et al. 2002). Rings in the calcite cortex are more ambiguous; often they are barely visible as slight differences in translucence. Using  $^{210}\text{Pb}$  dating, Andrews et al. (2002) inferred that the growth rings in an Alaskan *P. resedaeformis* are

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formed annually. Based on radiocarbon dating of fossil *P. resedaeformis* specimens collected near Georges Bank, life-spans of individual colonies may exceed several hundreds of years (Risk et al. 2002).

In this paper, we use bomb-produced radiocarbon to validate annual ring formation in colonies of *Primnoa resedaeformis* collected off Nova Scotia, Canada. Oceanic uptake of bomb- $^{14}\text{C}$  produced by atmospheric nuclear weapons testing in the late 1950s and early 1960s provides a time-varying tracer. In the North Atlantic, the timing of the increase is well defined by direct measurements of dissolved inorganic carbon (DIC; Nydal 1998) and from indirect measurements of  $^{14}\text{C}$  in annually banded reef corals from Bermuda and in Florida, USA (Druffel 1989), and in a long-lived quahog (*Arctica islandica*) from Georges Bank (Weidman & Jones 1993). The initial rise of bomb- $^{14}\text{C}$  in the ocean surface provides a unique time-marker which may be used to establish or validate skeletal chronology (Kalish 1993, Kerr et al. 2005). Additionally, if one knows the year of the post-bomb maximum for a certain location or water mass, the post-bomb peak itself can be used as a reference tie-point (e.g. Roark et al. 2005). Since the gorgonin fraction of gorgonian corals is formed from recently exported particulate organic matter (POM; Griffin & Druffel 1989, Roark et al. 2005, Sherwood et al. 2005, this volume), we expect that living colonies of *P. resedaeformis* incorporated the bomb- $^{14}\text{C}$  pulse. We focused on younger colonies (<75 yr), so that rings in the horny axis could be dated more easily.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Colonies of *Primnoa resedaeformis* were collected offshore Nova Scotia, Canada, from the Northeast Channel (approx.  $42^{\circ}00' \text{N}$ ,  $65^{\circ}50' \text{W}$ ), located between Georges Bank and Browns Bank, at depths of 250 to 475 m. Collections were made in August 2001, during an expedition using the remotely operated submersible 'ROPOS' aboard the CCGS 'Martha Black', and in the summer of 2002 by trawl, during routine oceanographic surveys conducted by the Bedford Institute of Oceanography. Some of the specimens were frozen at the time of collection, others were air-dried. Skeletal sections were cut from the thickest part of each recovered colony using a rock saw.

The sections were ground and polished on a diamond lap wheel and photographed with a digital camera in macro mode under UV light. The UV light improves the appearance of ring couplets and makes it easier to distinguish the rings from cracks in the sections (Fig. 1).

To isolate the gorgonin fraction for radiocarbon assays, the sections were dissolved in 5% HCl until reaction ceased, which took up to 3 wk. The sections were then placed in a Petrie dish filled with distilled water and the rings were teased apart with tweezers and scalpel under a binocular microscope, starting at the outside of each section, and moving in toward the centre. The exact position of each sample on a section was marked on photographic prints overlaid with transparency film. The separated rings were placed in 5 ml polyethylene vials, topped with 5% HCl, and left for an additional 2 d to ensure that all the calcite dissolved. Subsequently, samples were triple-rinsed in de-ionised water and dried at  $70^{\circ}\text{C}$  overnight. From

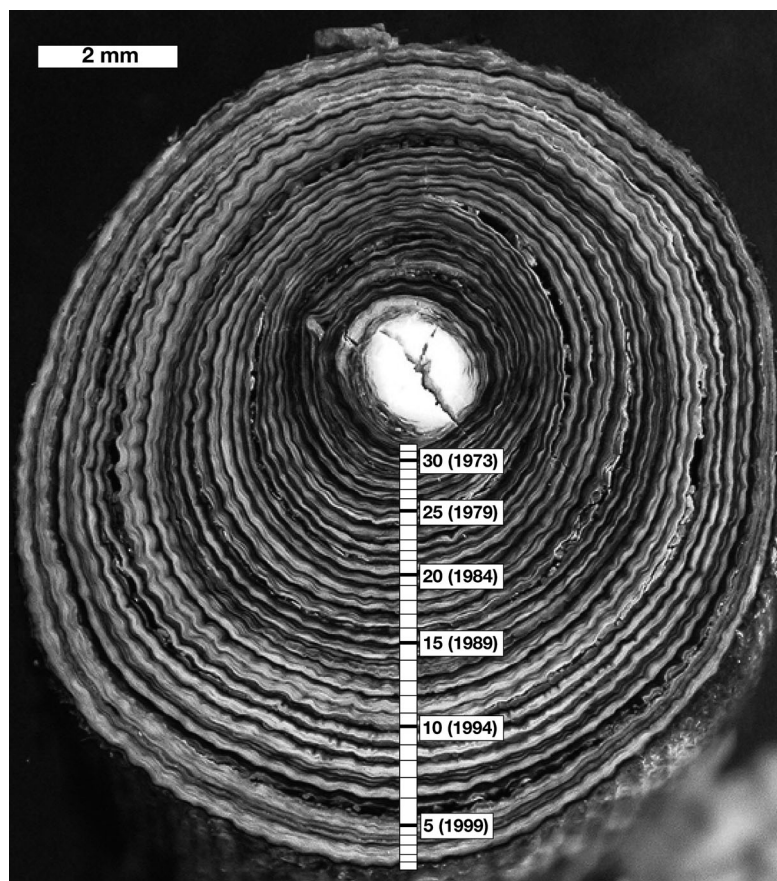


Fig. 1. *Primnoa resedaeformis*. Example section of Colony ROPOS-6400013 (collected live in 2001). Lighter centre is central rod; outer banded section is horny axis. Calcite cortex is not present. Markings show individual rings isolated in preparation, with corresponding calendar age (in parentheses), determined by 3 amateur counters

each colony, anywhere from 1 to 10 rings were selected for  $^{14}\text{C}$  analysis, depending on colony age and the ease with which the annual ring couplets could be identified and counted. Samples were preferentially selected to bridge the expected rise in bomb- $^{14}\text{C}$  between 1958 and the early 1970s, because this provides the best constraint on chronology. Samples were combusted in individual quartz tubes and reduced to graphite in the presence of iron catalyst. Delta- $^{14}\text{C}$  was determined on graphite targets at the Center for Accelerator Mass Spectrometry. Results include a background and  $\delta^{13}\text{C}$  correction and are reported as  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  according to Stuiver & Polach (1977).

To obtain ring counts as objectively as possible, the photographic prints of each section were circulated randomly among departmental colleagues with no prior experience in counting rings in gorgonian corals or any other organism. The first transparency film was removed from the prints, which were then overlaid with a second transparency layer. Ring counters were briefed for 5 min on how to identify an annual ring. They were then asked to mark the positions of annual rings on the second transparency. This involved drawing a line radially across parts of the sections where rings were most easily recognised, and marking the annual rings along that line (Fig. 1). Each ring identified was assigned to a calendar year based on whether the outermost layer represented 2001 or 2002, depending on the year of collection. In 2 of the 7 colonies, there was tissue necrosis on the outer margin of the skeleton. For these 'dead' colonies, a chronological control point was provided by the peak in  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  (see 'Results'). Afterwards, the first transparency was replaced, and calendar years were paired with the rings isolated earlier. The counting experiment was repeated 3 times by different counters.

### RESULTS

The precision of growth ring counts, as measured by the standard error among 3 different ring counters, averaged  $\pm 1.2$  yr (Table 1). Ages ranged from 24 to 78 yr. The standard error increased slightly with age; this was expected, because the chronological error is compounded with increasing age. The spread in values reflected differences in the 'quality' of rings

Table 1. *Primnoa resedaeformis*. Summary of sections used in growth ring counting and  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  determinations. Average year and standard error calculated from 3 different ring counters. CAMS: Center for Accelerator Mass Spectrometry analytical identifier

Sample	Ring no.	Avg. year	SE	CAMS no.	$\Delta^{14}\text{C}$ (‰)	$\pm$ SE
DFO-2002-con5A1	5	1990	1.9	97097	36	5
DFO-2002-con5A1	10	1979	2.4	97098	52	4
DFO-2002-con5A1	16	1970	2.8	97099	71	4
DFO-2002-con5A1	21	1965	2.4	97100	59	4
DFO-2002-con5A1	25	1960	2.1	97101	-47	3
DFO-2002-con5A1	31	1953	2.1	97102	-77	3
DFO-2002-con5A1	37	1948	2.2	97103	-80	3
DFO-2002-con5A1	43	1942	2.8	97104	-72	3
DFO-2002-con5A1	50	1934	3.3	97105	-77	3
DFO-2002-con5A1	58	1924	3.3	97106	-72	3
HUD-2001-055-VG15-A3	10	1981	0.6	111140	67	4
HUD-2001-055-VG15-A3	19	1971	0.7	111142	90	4
HUD-2001-055-VG15-A3	27	1963	1.7	111143	-18	5
HUD-2001-055-VG13-2	22	1980	1.5	111139	59	4
NED-2002-037.46-1A	1	2002	0.3	111328	33	5
NED-2002-037.46-1A	16	1984	0.6	111329	68	5
NED-2002-037.46-1A	58	1947	0.7	111330	-82	4
NED-2002-037.46-5-1	25	1978	1.2	111331	63	4
ROPOS-639009-C4	19	1972	0.9	111623	82	4
ROPOS-639009-C4	27	1963	1.5	111624	-46	4
ROPOS-639009-C4	40	1951	0.3	111625	-70	3
ROPOS-6400013-E1	10	1994	1.2	111626	52	4
ROPOS-6400013-E1	15	1989	1.5	111141	54	4
ROPOS-6400013-E1	20	1984	1.5	111627	67	5
ROPOS-6400013-E1	25	1979	1.9	111628	61	4
ROPOS-6400013-E1	31	1972	3.3	111629	82	4

viewed in different sections. The least precise age estimates were generated on the older sections, but these were still relatively good ( $\pm 3.5$  yr).

The accuracy of growth ring counts is demonstrated in a plot of  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  against calendar year in Fig. 2. Data from the 5 live colonies clearly indicated that the peak in  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  occurred around 1972. Additional data from the 2 'dead' colonies were added to Fig. 2 by using 1972 as a chronological control point. An all-time high of +90‰ was measured in 1 colony, so this point was assigned to the year 1972. In the other specimen, a spline curve was fit through a plot of  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  versus ring number in order to determine which ring number should be assigned to 1972.

The  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  curve for *Primnoa resedaeformis* is identical to that previously measured in the ocean quahog *Arctica islandica* collected at a depth of 75 m on nearby Georges Bank (Weidman & Jones 1993; present Fig. 2). A similar curve based on the otoliths of the haddock *Melanogrammus aeglefinus* collected on the southern Grand Banks has also been published (Campana 1997; present Fig. 2). The *P. resedaeformis*, *A. islandica*, and *M. aeglefinus* curves all ranged from a pre-1958 low of ca. -80‰ to an early 1970s peak of ca. +80‰, followed by a gradual decrease to ca. +40‰ at the present.

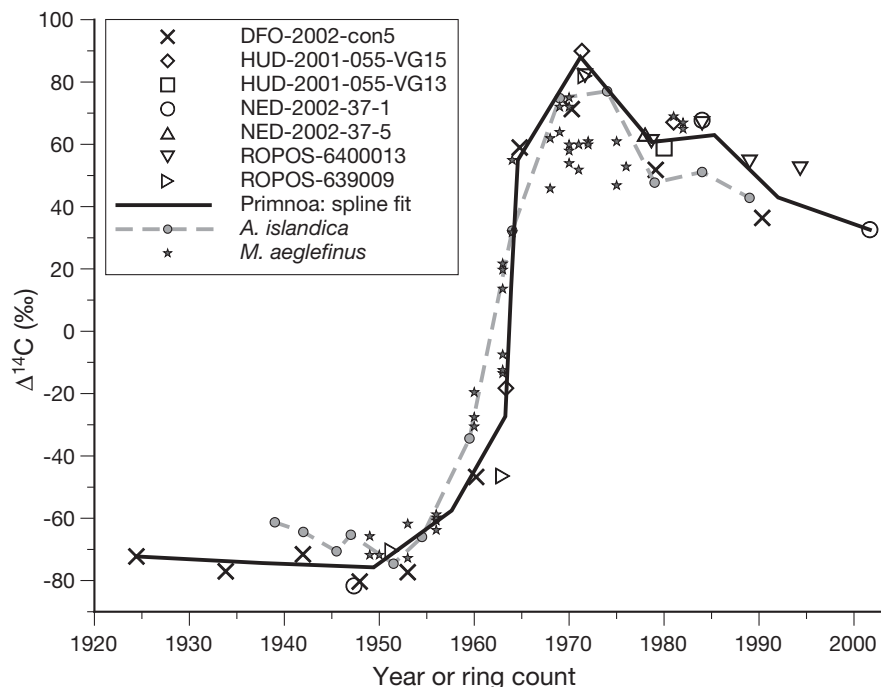


Fig. 2. *Primnoa resedaeformis*.  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  vs. age for 7 different colonies collected in NE Channel; spline fit is drawn through data. Also shown for comparison are data for *Arctica islandica*, collected at 75 m on nearby Georges Bank (Weidman & Jones 1993) and *Melanogrammus aeglefinus* otoliths collected from Grand Banks (Campana 1997)

## DISCUSSION

The growth ring counting method used herein is a relatively simple and effective way to age specimens of *Primnoa resedaeformis* with an acceptable level of precision ( $\text{SE} < 2$  yr). The counters had no previous training in growth ring counting and were not asked to count any more than 3 specimens each, so no one individual became an expert counter. The precision of ring counts largely depended on the quality of the sections. In some cases the growth rings were very narrow, making counting difficult. Subannual rings (Risk et al. 2002) could have been mistaken for annual rings. In addition, 'calcite cortex' material was sometimes inter-layered with the horny material. Gorgonian colonies may bend and twist throughout their lives to keep their fans oriented perpendicularly to prevailing currents (Wainwright & Dillon 1969). These growth variations affect the appearance of rings. Therefore, future studies involving ageing of *Primnoa* species should select for the straightest and highest quality colonies. Similar considerations are routine in dendochronology and sclerochronology.

Samples for  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  and growth ring counts were made on the same sections, such that each  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  measurement had a matching calendar age. Data from 8 different colonies were used to establish a 20th century

record of  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$ . This record was identical to previously published  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  records derived from a mollusc shell (Weidman & Jones 1993) and haddock otoliths (Campana 1997) collected from the NW Atlantic. The *Primnoa resedaeformis*  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  curve is also in phase with the record from annually banded reef coral skeletons from Florida and Bermuda (Druffel 1989), and with direct measurements of surface water DIC (Nydal et al. 1998). The results are consistent with the interpretation that the ring couplets found in the horny axis region of *P. resedaeformis* are formed annually.

Andrews et al. (2002) also validated annual ring formation in an Alaskan *Primnoa resedaeformis*; however, they measured the rate of decay of  $^{210}\text{Pb}$  over the length of a colony to validate growth ring counts. Among shallow water gorgonians, annual growth rings have also been demonstrated by non-radiometric methods. Usually, this

has involved the correspondence in age estimated from the height of a colony with the age estimated from growth rings (e.g. Grigg 1974). The method described here is a more direct way of validating annual growth rings, since  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  and age determinations were made on the same sections.

Similarity in the range and timing of  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  measured in *Primnoa resedaeformis* growing between 250 to 475 m with *Arctica islandica* growing at 75 m on Georges Bank suggests that the skeletons of these organisms are derived from the same pool of DIC. The carbonate shell of *A. islandica* incorporates  $^{14}\text{C}$  directly from DIC (Weidman & Jones 1993). The shelf waters on Georges Bank are well mixed; so DIC will have about the same  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  from 0 to 75 m. In contrast to Georges Bank, the slope waters which occupy the Northeast Channel are stratified. If the gorgonian in *P. resedaeformis* were derived from ambient DIC at depth,  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  would be much lower than actually measured (Bauer et al. 2002). As in shallow water gorgonians that have been studied *in situ* (e.g. Ribes et al. 1999), zooplankton and sinking POM probably constitute the main diet of this species. Therefore,  $^{14}\text{C}$  is assimilated by phytoplankton in surface waters, and is incorporated by *P. resedaeformis* via the plankton food web. The lack of a time lag in peak  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  rules out the possibility that *P. resedaeformis* feeds on

older, more refractory POM, as we have found with  $\delta^{15}\text{N}$  data (Sherwood et al. 2005). These results corroborate earlier work showing that gorgonin is derived from sinking POM (Griffin & Druffel 1989, Roark et al. 2005).

The range of  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  values measured in *Primnoa resedaeformis*, *Actica islandica*, and *Melanogrammus aeglefinus* (ca.  $-80$  to ca.  $+80\text{‰}$ ) is depleted compared to reef coral records from Florida and Bermuda (ca.  $-60$  to ca.  $+160\text{‰}$ ; Druffel 1989). This difference has been explained by the supply of  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$ -depleted Labrador Sea water to the NW Atlantic shelf and slope (Weidman & Jones 1993). In the subtropics, more intense stratification prevents dilution of the bomb signal by  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$ -depleted deep waters.

From a paleoceanographic standpoint, the formation of annual rings makes *Primnoa resedaeformis* analogous to reef scleractinian corals. Geochemical proxy records from reef corals have been a mainstay of Holocene paleoceanography ever since Knutsen et al. (1972) conclusively demonstrated annual timing of density bands with  $^{90}\text{Sr}$ . Accurate reconstruction of 20th century surface water  $\Delta^{14}\text{C}$  demonstrates that useful environmental data are recorded in the organic fraction of *Primnoa* spp. skeletons. In addition, the stable C and N isotopic composition of gorgonin may reflect surface water productivity (Sherwood et al. 2005); thus, long-term, high resolution reconstructions of surface processes may be feasible (Heikoop et al. 2002). The oldest colony in the present study was 78 yr, but colonies may live for at least 320 yr (Risk et al. 2002). Useful information on ambient conditions at depth may also be contained in the skeletal calcite, since this fraction is derived from ambient DIC at depth (Griffin & Druffel 1989, Roark et al. 2005).

There has been increasing interest in the frequency of climate-forcing mechanisms such as the North Atlantic Oscillation. High resolution proxy reconstructions from *Primnoa* spp. may help to resolve the 'spectral gap' issue between instrumental and proxy-based climate records, particularly in temperate and boreal environments, where proxy marine climate data are lacking.

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