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Researchers rolling on the river

SCIENTISTS, STUDENTS TRACKING SPRINGTIME FLOW OF HUDSON

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 05/5/06

BY KIRK MOORE
TOMS RIVER BUREAU

After the ship's propeller stopped stirring the sea into the color of blood, a probe was lowered over the side. Researchers went to work, charting the great ghostly traces of the Hudson River off the New Jersey beach.

Carrying nutrients for sea life — and toxic contaminants that have persisted in river mud since the Industrial Revolution — the Hudson River's springtime flow is being tracked offshore this week by scientists from Rutgers University and other institutions.

"We're looking at the dynamics of the plume. Surface water is going to be river water, and the water below is ocean water," said Jessica Connolly, a graduate student from California Polytechnic State University, as she examined a computer display of the sea below the research vessel Oceanus.

The 179-foot ship and the R/V Hatteras, both from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts, crisscrossed waters off Long Branch and Asbury Park on Thursday after marking the river flow with red rhomadine dye. The nontoxic, fluorescent colorant soon fades from the naked eye, but "the detectors are so sensitive to the dye they can track it for days," said Oscar Schofield, a Rutgers oceanography professor.

"We're the biological boat," said Schofield, whose crew includes students from Rutgers, California Polytech and the University of Florida. Their arsenal of sensors includes a battery of flasks that Connolly and fellow student Jenn Wost trigger by remote control, snatching water samples at different depths.

The river plume water is warmer, and less salty — about 25 parts per million of salt on the surface Thursday, compared to 32 ppm at the sea floor, the students said. Over this week, hundreds of samples will be drawn and analyzed.

The five-year project will help public health and environmental agencies track chemical contamination in fish, said Tom Frazer, an associate professor from the University of Florida.

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Researchers use a special red dye to determine where it flows along the

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