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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 25, 2016

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Scientists discover largest sponge known in the world during deep-sea explorations in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument

(Honolulu) – This week, the scientific journal *Marine Biodiversity* published a study describing the largest sponge known in the world, found at a depth of 7,000 feet within Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument during a deep-sea expedition last summer. The sponge was close to 12 feet long and 7 feet wide, comparable in size to a minivan.

The sponge was documented during an expedition aboard NOAA Ship *Okeanos Explorer* to explore deep-water habitats in the Monument using remotely-operated vehicles at depths ranging between 2,300–16,000 feet.

“The largest portion of our planet lies in deep waters, the vast majority of which has never been explored,” said Papahānaumokuākea research specialist Daniel Wagner, Ph.D, science lead of the expedition with NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. “Finding such an enormous and presumably old sponge emphasizes how much can be learned from studying deep and pristine environments such as those found in the remote Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.”

While not much is known about the lifespan of sponges, some massive species found in shallow waters (<100 feet) are estimated to live more than 2,300 years.

The sponge was captured on high-definition video during a remotely-operated vehicle dive on a ridge extending from a seamount south of Pearl and Hermes Atoll within Papahānaumokuākea. Scientists from NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, NOAA’s Office for Exploration and Research and the University of Hawai‘i described the sponge after a year of study.

The article, titled “The largest sponge in the world?” can be viewed online at <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12526-016-0508-z>.

Images and video available at <https://drive.google.com/a/noaa.gov/folderview?id=0B-Z8cjZfKObnbTIMNWNpcUNUOEU&usp=sharing>. All images courtesy of NOAA Office of Exploration and Research/Hohonu Moana 2015

Information about the expedition:
<http://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/okeanos/explorations/ex1504/welcome.html>

Papahānaumokuākea is cooperatively managed to ensure ecological integrity and achieve strong, long-term protection and perpetuation of Northwestern Hawaiian Island ecosystems, Native Hawaiian culture, and heritage resources for current and future generations. Three co-trustees - the Department of Commerce, Department of the Interior, and State of Hawai‘i - joined by the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, protect this special place. Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument was inscribed as the first mixed (natural and cultural) UNESCO World Heritage Site in the United States in July 2010. For more information, please visit www.papahanaumokuakea.gov.

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