Seafloor Features and Characteristics of the Black Ledges Area, Penobscot Bay, Maine, USA.

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INTRODUCTION

Habitat mapping is currently an area of intense focus by the United States Geological Survey, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association’s National Marine Fisheries Service, and state-level equivalents. In order to properly assess seafloor habitat, knowledge of the surficial geology is essential. Geophysical tools such as sidescan sonar and shallow seismic reflection profiling permit the necessary observations.

Penobscot Bay, a large, productive estuary in the Gulf of Maine has been a focus area for such mapping (Figure 1). Previous studies in Penobscot Bay, specifically the sub-embayment of Belfast Bay, have revealed a dynamic seafloor environment dominated by football stadium-sized features known as pockmarks. KING and MACLEAN (1970) first described these features on the Scotian Shelf. They are believed to form from pressurized pore fluid escape (HOVLAND and JUDD, 1988). While these features are best studied in one part of Penobscot Bay, they also occur throughout the region (BARNHARDT and KELLEY, 1995; FADER 1991).

Pockmarks release methane into the water column and potentially into the atmosphere. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas. It traps infrared radiation up to 21 times more readily than carbon dioxide (LAMMERS et al., 1995). Not only does this release have the potential to alter the global climate system, but it also provides a readily available source of labile carbon for biological activity. The contribution of the marine system to the global carbon cycle is unquantified (LAMMERS et al., 1995). Clearly, a better understanding of these features, the relationships between biological and physical processes, and their effects on the marine system is needed.

The Black Ledges area, the focus of this study, is also within Penobscot Bay, but sufficiently removed from Belfast Bay (Figure 1) to be influenced by different water masses and current regimes (XUE et al., 1999). Workers from the Maine Geological Survey and the Department of Geological Sciences at the University of Maine collected several reconnaissance lines in the area between 1984 and 1999. These few lines showed a potential for pockmarks and prompted a more intensive investigation.
This paper reports on the first portion of a major research effort focused on shallow-water, estuarine pockmarks. This portion involves baseline surficial and subsurface mapping of a pockmarked area and the surrounding seafloor to identify features and characteristics of the area. The ultimate goal is to determine the source of methane, the origin and age of the source materials, their role in sea-level changes, potential mechanisms for formation, life cycles, effect on the global climate system, and effects on sedimentation and seafloor habitat. In this report we present new data from a series of newly discovered pockmark fields. More importantly, we develop evidence for a model of pockmark evolution, including, for the first time, the late stages of development and senescence.

**METHODS**

The seafloor was mapped with sidescan sonar and shallow seismic reflection profiling equipment during four daylong cruises, three in August 2000 and one in January 2001, in the Black Ledges area. The two systems, an Edgetech DF1000 digital, dual-frequency sidescan sonar towfish and a surface-towed boomer seismic system (Ocean Research Engineering’s analog GeoPulse during August 2000 and Applied Acoustics Engineering’s digital system in later cruises), were towed simultaneously. Sidescan sonar data were collected at 100kHz and 500kHz and seismic data were collected at 700-2000 Hz. A Triton-Elics International topside processing unit was used to acquire and post-process the data for both digital systems. Sidescan data were collected and processed with Isis Sonar v4.54 and Delph Map. All data were slant-range corrected. Digital seismic data were collected and processed with Delph Seismic and Seismic GIS. Analog seismic data were analyzed without computer technology. Surficial and subsurface mapping and spatial analysis were conducted with ArcView and ArcInfo geographic information systems software. Navigation was supplied via differential global positioning system and converted to Universal Transverse Mercator projection for use. The Capn, a digital navigation package produced by Nautical Technologies, was used for cruise planning, cruise navigation, autopilot interface, and 30-second position logging.

The shallow water (<40 m) allowed for collection of sidescan data at 100 m range. The fish was towed about four to six meters deep at between four and six knots.
RESULTS

A total of 38 km2 of seafloor was imaged with sidescan sonar and over 600 km of seismic data were collected during four cruises. A complete sidescan sonar mosaic was created for the area (Figure 2).

A stratigraphic framework of Penobscot Bay was developed from seismic data and supported with sediment cores. (BARNHARDT et al., 1997; BELKNAP and SHIPP, 1991; KNEBEL and SCANLON, 1985). Seismic records show acoustic basement as bedrock, overlain by till, glaciomarine sediments, capped with Holocene mud. Till was not present in all locations and was thickest on southeastern slopes. Two major unconformities, the basal erosional unconformity created during a sea-level lowstand, and the ravinement unconformity formed during the latest transgression, truncate the glaciomarine sediments (BARNHARDT et al., 1997; BELKNAP and SHIPP, 1991).

Natural gas, methane, is found within the section at many places. It occurs as areas of large-scale acoustic wipeout or gas-enhanced reflectors (Figure 4) (YUAN et al., 1992; FLOODGATE and JUDD, 1992; FADER, 1991). Stratigraphically, the methane occurs within the Holocene muds or along the Holocene-Pleistocene unconformity. Pockmarks have been observed over areas of acoustic wipeout and gas-enhanced reflectors and both indicators of methane have been observed without associated pockmarks. The enhanced reflectors suggest methane is migrating along the unconformity. Methane is hypothesized to be the fluid involved in pockmark formation (KELLEY et al., 1994).

The degree of backscatter from the sidescan data was interpreted as a proxy for bottom sediment type. Areas of high backscatter, such as gravel and rock, appear dark gray to black while areas of low backscatter, such as mud, appear light gray to white. The surficial sediment type was mapped following a sixteen-part scheme with four end members of mud, sand, gravel, and rock and 12 intermediates (BARNHARDT et al., 1996; 1998).
Sea-Floor Features, Maine

Figure 3. Seismic line A-A'. Location of seismic line is shown in Figure 2. Upper panel shows uninterpreted data, lower panel is interpreted. Gas-enhanced reflectors (GER) originate from large areas of acoustic wipeout (NG) suggesting migration along the reflector. Pockmarks, depressions on the seafloor, (PM) occur directly over NG and GER. Other units include till (T), bedrock (BR), glaciomarine (GM) and Holocene mud (M). VE=14x.

Figure 4. Sidescan sonar mosaic of the Black Ledges area. A mosaic was created from 38 km2 of sidescan sonar data. Light areas, low backscatter, are interpreted as fine-grained sediments (muds) and dark areas, high backscatter, are interpreted as hard surfaces (rock and gravel). Pockmarks are associated with fine-grained, low backscatter areas. Box A locates Figure 5 and Box B locates Figure 6.
Figure 5. Circular Pockmarks of the Black Ledges. Pockmarks, generally circular in form occur in large concentrations around the Black Ledges. The circular form indicates the pockmarks are active. Refer to Figure 4 for location.

Figure 6. Elliptical pockmarks of the Black Ledges. Elliptical pockmarks indicate that the processes that form and maintain pockmarks (gas-escape) are no longer the dominant processes. The elliptical shape likely arises from scouring by currents. These pockmarks are orientated 045° (true) azimuth and occur sub-parallel to the 37 m isobath. They are only found deeper than the 37 m isobath. Elliptical pockmarks represent a previously unrecognized late stage of development.
Sea-Floor Features, Maine

The occurrence of elliptical pockmarks suggests subsequent modification by current activity. The elliptical nature also suggests that current activity is more important in the development of the form of these pockmarks than methane escape. This is validated by the present lack of methane (acoustic masking and gas-enhanced reflectors) imaged with seismic devices in the vicinity of the elliptical pockmarks. This implies that the reservoir of natural gas, or the generation potential of organic-rich sediments is exhausted; seismic data from areas with circular pockmarks show larger numbers of gas-enhanced reflectors and large-scale acoustic wipeout. Seasonal variability in subsurface natural gas concentrations (MARTENS et al., 1998) or alignment of survey lines are possible alternate explanations for the lack of gas in the area.

The sediments and stratigraphy of the entire area, which comprises thin Holocene sediments, gravel, and boulder lags developed on glaciomarine sediments suggests an overall erosive environment compared to one of sediment accumulation that characterizes pockmark formation in Belfast Bay. The pockmark formation and maintenance process accentuates the erosion of muddy sediments. Over 2 \times 10^6 m^3 of muddy sediments and pore water were removed. Pockmarks in all but one field appear unmodified by currents or slumping. Features in the northern most area mapped appear elliptical with their long axis orientated at about 045° and sub-parallel to the 37 m contour (Figure 6). All of these features occur deeper than the 37 m contour.

**DISCUSSION**

BARNHARDT et al. (1996) initially interpreted the Black Ledges as a mud and rock-dominated system. Their interpretation was produced from bathymetric analysis and only a few survey lines in the area. New data presented in this study confirms their interpretation of a mud-dominated seafloor, but does not identify rock as a major surficial unit. Our data show that mud covers 64% and gravel 35% of the area; rock crops out on only 1% of the study area.

Pockmarks occur in other regions of Penobscot Bay, most notably in Belfast Bay (ROGERS, 1999; KELLEY et al., 1994; KNEBEL and SCANLON, 1985). These features are attributed to methane escape from the seafloor. Seismic lines from the area show shallow subsurface acoustic masking and gas-enhanced reflectors originating in large areas of acoustic wipeout in close proximity to pockmarks, suggesting that methane is the fluid for pockmark excavation. Pockmarks frequently occur over gas-enhanced reflectors, suggesting methane is migrating from areas of acoustic wipeout. The pockmarks are only observed in muddy sediments. Other researchers (e.g. FADER, 1991; HOVLAND and JUDD, 1988) have presented data suggesting fine-grained sediments are needed to trap migrating methane to allow a pressurized reservoir to develop. An analysis of captured in situ pore fluids confirms methane is the gas (H. A. CHRISTIAN, personal communication, 2000).

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**CONCLUSIONS**

The Black Ledges area is a mud-dominated system that hosts seven major pockmark fields. In one of these fields,
the pockmarks are elliptical in form, suggesting that current action has replaced methane venting as the major pockmark-related process. This and the rest of the pockmark fields occur in thin Holocene sediments with few zones of large-scale acoustic wipeout and gas-enhanced reflectors. This suggests the subsurface methane supply is depleting or is exhausted. Both of these observations point to a previously unrecognized late stage of pockmark field evolution. This is in great contrast to pockmark systems recognized in other estuaries which show large amounts of gas-charged sediments and pockmarks (KELLEY et al., 1995; FADER, 1991; HOVLAND and JUDD, 1988).

The volume of gas is unknown at this time. Future research is aimed at determining the source of methane, the age and depositional environment of the source material, and the potential for methane generation. In addition, the flux of methane from estuarine pockmarks to the water column and atmosphere will be investigated.

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LITERATURE CITED


