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Quibbletown pupils participate in lecture given from bottom of Pacific Ocean

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Eighth-grade earth-science pupils at Quibbletown Middle School recently dove into their studies with a long-distance telephone call to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

About 20 youngsters last month participated in a live conference call with scientists aboard the research ship Atlantis and its submersible vessel Alvin. The vessels were in the Sea of Cortes in the Pacific Ocean studying deep-sea hydrothermal vents and marine life at the earth's crust.

The expedition was led by Craig Cary of the University of Delaware and funded by the National Science Foundation. It included scientists and graduate students from several universities in the United States and abroad.

As part of the 21-day expedition, the scientists held conference calls with a total of 50 schools, including Quibbletown. Cary talked with students about the team's work, then students were allowed to ask questions.

Mohamad, 13, won a contest in Bev Hall's earth-science class, earning the right to ask the scientists why it was necessary to study the ocean floor and how it helps scientists understand the earth.

"They said the ocean was over 70 percent of the earth," Mohamad said. ""If we only study the surface of the earth we live on, we only study less than 20 percent of the earth."

Bradlee, 13, said he was excited about the call.

"I was thinking it's cool," he said. "I mean, we talked to people under water. I thought it was going to be cool because it was special."

Edward Cohen, Bradlee's science teacher, said he thought the Atlantis' mission would be a good way to get students more interested in topography and mapping -- two subjects they study in earth science.

"I thought maybe we can connect that to topography ... besides, they don't really like it," he said.

Cohen said the prevelance of Global Positioning System mapping systems is often used by students to dismiss the necessity of studying mapping. But Cohen pointed out that most of the ocean floor remains a mystery.

Jason, 13, said he was impressed by the researchers aboard the Alvin. The vessel is 23 feet by 12 feet, but the scientists work in a 6.5-foot-in-diameter sphere.

"Just the way they were able to go down and sustain all that underwater pressure," he said.

Casey, 13, said he liked learning about the glass that protects the researchers from that pressure.

"I really thought it was interesting how they made that special glass to go that deep," he said.

Hall, Cohen and student teacher Jessica Jennings devised the curriculum together. Jennings said she also devised a computer game in which students could take the Alvin to different levels of the ocean and learn about different marine life at each level.

Cohen said the unit seemed to be effective.

"They like things that are different," he said. "I think they're definitely more involved and interested in science, more on-task."

Eric, 13, said he was definitely interested, though not enough to want to join in one of the Alvin's eight-hour underwater missions.

"No. Never," he said. "I couldn't handle something that small and being under water for so long."