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Voyage around the Americas sees acidification off Alaska

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Scientists aboard the [Ocean Watch](#), a 64-foot yacht on a year-long voyage circling the Americas, are testing the waters as they go. Instruments on the vessel have picked up evidence of ocean acidification, another result of the spewing of carbon dioxide from tailpipes and smokestacks, they say.

Much of CO₂ pollution ends up in the atmosphere, but some is absorbed in the ocean, where it is converted into carbonic acid. The average pH of the world's oceans is about 8.1 and the lower the reading, the greater the acidity.

Scientists are concerned that if pH levels keep falling ocean waters could eat away the shells of organisms large and small. That would put the web of ocean life at risk, not to mention be a potential disaster for land-loving seafood lovers

Ocean Watch has picked up readings of 7.88 in the [Gulf of Alaska](#). Michael Reynolds, the scientist taking the measurements, said the preliminary data may show that the Gulf of Alaska is a primary "sink" for atmospheric carbon.

The good news is that readings have returned to normal as the voyage continues off the coast of South America.

The Ocean Watch has taken other environmental observations, on things like declining ice cover in the Arctic, and it sailed through the [Northwest Passage](#), one of only 100 ships to do so in the last 100 years. A special camera is observing the gaggles of jellyfish the ship encounters. The creatures are among the world's hardiest, so the scientists want to see what kind of jellyfish are thriving in waters that are acidic or are polluted in other ways and what changes they are undergoing.

"The boat is acting as a spotlight on issues known to scientists and local fisherman, but are not known to the general public," said David Rockefeller, a philanthropist who is sponsoring the \$2 million voyage for [Sailors for the Sea](#). He will climb aboard Ocean Watch later this month off the coast of Patagonia.

The sailors are sharing their observations and concerns with the public at ports along their journey.

Ellen Lettvin, an education expert at the Pacific Science Center, said the Ocean Watch scientists will analyze the data at the end of the voyage and provide it to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and other organizations tracking the health of the oceans.

Photo: David Thoreson

<http://blogs.reuters.com/environment/2010/01/08/voyage-around-the-americas-sees-evidence-of-acidic-arctic/>