



CREATURE OF THE DEEP: An unidentified octopus spotted in the sea off Port Elizabeth on Walters Shoal.

PICTURE: SARAH GOTHEIL

Top SA scientists unveil Indian Ocean mysteries

HELEN BAMFORD

NORWEGIAN research vessel Dr Fridtjof Nansen has arrived in Port Elizabeth following an expedition to reveal the mysteries of southern Indian Ocean seamounts – underwater mountains of volcanic origin that are hotspots of marine biodiversity.

On board were some of the world's leading marine biologists, including five South African scientists.

Researcher Tommy Bornman said there were millions of seamounts around the world. Some were just below the surface and others, thousands of metres deep. Six were studied during the expedition.

Bornman said seamounts were targeted for fishing on the high seas where there was no control.

"These six were discovered about 10 years ago by fishing companies and have been badly overfished for orange roughy (a deep-sea fish favoured by Americans) by both South Africa and Namibia."

He said they had also mapped the sea floor, sent fine nets down for specimens and trawled for fish.

"We suspect we have found several new species," he said.

The aim of the project was to help improve conservation and management of Indian Ocean marine resources.

The 40-day expedition, led

by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, started on November 11 at Reunion. The research team included people from the UK, Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, South Africa, Madagascar, Norway, and France.

● Visit www.seamounts2009.blogspot.com to see where they went and what they found.