

Connecticut's

DEEP SEA EXPLORER

by Peg Lopata

Have you ever wondered what lies below the ocean's surface? What strange stories could we learn by seeing the great battleships, merchant vessels, and majestic ocean liners of past times that now lie quietly upon the ocean floor? Does this question intrigue you? If so, maybe someday you'll become an oceanographer like Dr. Robert Ballard, whose fascination with what lies at the bottom of the sea has led him to make some pretty famous discoveries. Perhaps his most famous find was in 1985, when he led a team of researchers in a joint French-American expedition and discovered the final resting place of the *Titanic*.

Like many scientists, Dr. Ballard wears many hats. He is an explorer-in-residence for the National Geographic Society, where his mission is to organize expeditions that explore the unknown regions of the world's deep ocean. He is also president and founder of the Mystic Aquarium Institute for Exploration, or the IFE.

This institute is a part of one of Connecticut's most popular destinations: the Mystic Seaport and Aquarium.

The discoveries of Dr. Ballard and his colleagues' most recent expeditions can be seen in "Challenge of the Deep," an exhibit at the aquarium. Here you can see hydrothermal vents, strange life forms, artifacts recovered from Roman trading ships, undersea mountain ranges, active volcanoes and lava pools, remnants of ancient civilizations, and remains of the *Titanic* and other famous shipwrecks.

Not only did Dr. Ballard discover the *Titanic*, but he also discovered that there was a tremendous amount of interest in undersea archaeology when he received thousands of letters from schoolchildren wanting to know how he discovered the famous ship. In 1989, Dr. Ballard founded the JASON Project, a program allowing student and teacher argonauts to work side by side with leading scientists at actual expedition sites.

Scientists explore these sites to understand ancient trade patterns better and to learn about human history by studying ancient settlements, ships, and cargoes.



ROVs and Dr. Ballard are often a team when exploring the wrecks of sunken ships.

For example, the IFE conducted a recent expedition to search the ocean floor off the coast of Block Island, Rhode Island, for evidence of a now-submerged landmass where Native Americans of the last Ice Age once lived. To explore these kinds of deep-sea mysteries, the IFE has designed and developed deep-submergence vehicles such as *Hercules*, a remotely operated vehicle (ROV), which can conduct archaeological excavations of ancient shipwrecks lost in water depths of more than 12,000 feet.

Caring for and protecting our oceans is a noble endeavor. The Mystic Seaport and Aquarium, the IFE, and Dr. Ballard are part of this mission. Through their patient exploring and their sharing of these oceanic biological, ecological, and cultural treasures, we can all become a part of this endeavor, too.



About 1,500 people died when the *Titanic* sank on April 14–15, 1912, about 400 miles south of Newfoundland.