Day 108: November 1, 2010

Still no whales. This lack of whales also means we are moving faster as we do not have whale sampling slowing us down or backing us up. If this lack of whales keeps up we will be in soon. Crew are already starting to think about what to do next because this leg clearly will not last 2 weeks.

I did a lot of computer-based work today. Spent some time working on details for next year's voyage because that will be on top of me in a blink. One exciting development is that our water collaborator Eric has told me that deep ocean water sampling is his bread and butter and so next year we will sample deeper into the water column where those dispersant plumes are thought to be. He has sampled up to 4000 meters which is 4-times deeper than where the whales go. I am already excited for those samples!

I went over a link to a new claim by NOAA that Gulf seafood is safe that Roger sent me. You may remember they first determined it was safe by smelling the fish or as they put it a "sensory test". Well, due to pressure they decided "...to ensure consumers have total confidence in the safety of seafood..." and added a second test. This test is the one we all expected to be the first test- they measured levels of a dispersant component in 1,735 piece of seafood. Finally. BUT. There is always a but. They carefully chose a dispersant component that they knew beforehand did not accumulate in fish tissue. Hence, surprise, surprise - the seafood only had trace amounts. Thus, they conclude it is safe. This component is also not specific to dispersants but it in many other products too, meaning that if it was found it could simply be from something else.

They actually point these aspects out stating (bold added by me for emphasis): "The new test detects dioctyl sodium sulfosuccinate, known as DOSS, a major component of the dispersants used in the Gulf. DOSS is also approved by FDA for **use in various household products and over-the-counter medication** at very low levels. **The best scientific data to date indicates that DOSS does not build up in fish tissues.**"

One wonders why they chose this approach. Was it simply poor oversight in a rush to do something? Or was it something more deliberate. One could rephrase their quote to say: "The new test detects dioctyl sodium sulfosuccinate, known as DOSS. We chose to test DOSS because it is a major component of the dispersants and we already know DOSS does not accumulate in fish tissues so that it would be unlikely would find anything in the fish and we could then declare our smell tests valid and the fish safe. However, we are a bit worried as the best scientific data to date about DOSS reporting this lack of accumulation come from a few poorly done studies, so we are not sure if they are correct. Thus to ensure that we cover our backsides, we also chose to measure DOSS because it is a component that has absolutely no specificity to dispersants and is actually in many household products and over the counter drugs. Consequently, if these few studies are in fact wrong, and we were to find DOSS levels in the fish, we can then blame those levels on household products and pharmaceuticals and deflect the blame from the oil spill. Moreover, we can claim that those levels in fish are "normal" and "have been there for years" as household products and

pharmaceuticals have been polluting the Gulf for a long time. Thus we have no worries of meaningful findings of dispersant levels in seafood coming from conducting this worthless test on 1,735 samples."

Here is the link to their announcement so you can read it for yourself:
http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2010/20101029_seafood.html

Remarkable.

Sunset attached from both starboard (where the sun actually was) and port side (where interesting colors formed up in the sky)

John