

Scientists worried about tiny Tahoe creatures dying

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

A first-of-its-kind circuit by scuba divers around Lake Tahoe is complete. Now, experts are seeking to understand worrying changes on the bottom of the landmark alpine lake.

Members of the scuba team that 13 years ago reached the wreck of a famous steamer sunk in Tahoe's frigid depths completed the first circumnavigation of the lake by divers in October. Scientists are examining the data collected to understand why some of the lake's tiniest bottom dwellers and the plants they depend on appear to be disappearing at an alarming rate.

The dive team will likely cast significant light on an issue of mounting concern, scientists said.

"We basically have new habitats being created in the shallows," said Sudeep Chandra, a freshwater science expert at the University of Nevada, Reno. The lake bottom, Chandra said, serves as the "backbone" for chemical cycling of the lake's waters. Changes now taking place could come with profound effects.

"It's the sponge of the lake, basically," Chandra said. "Protecting Lake Tahoe and its clarity in the long run is really dependent on a functional lake bottom."

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