

# **MEDIA RELEASE**

**FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA**

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ATTENTION: CHIEFS OF STAFF; NEWS DIRECTORS

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## Micro-continents the size of Tasmania discovered off WA coast

A team of marine geologists have discovered two 'micro-continents' covering an area almost the size of Tasmania in the Indian Ocean west of Perth.

"It was more exciting than anticipated," said the University of Tasmania's Dr Jacqueline Halpin of the three-week expedition aboard Australia's national marine research vessel the RV Southern Surveyor.

Dr Halpin was one of the primary investigators on the CSIRO-operated cruise which culminated in the discovery of the two sunken plateaus, once part of the supercontinent Gondwana.

The plateaus, Batavia Knoll and Gulden Draak Ridge – named after 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch shipwrecks off the WA coast - lie approximately 1600km offshore and about 150km apart.

A Research Fellow with the Centre of Excellence in Ore Deposits (CODES) at UTAS, Dr Halpin teamed up with scientists from the University of Sydney and Macquarie University to map the seafloor of the Perth Abyssal Plain. They made the discovery through detailed seafloor mapping and by dredging rock samples from the slopes of the two plateaus that are now in water depths of more than 1.5 kilometres.

Collecting rocks from the abyss was no easy process, but the geologists were able to retrieve hundreds of kilograms. "A detailed analysis of these rocks will tell us about their age and how they fit into the Gondwana jigsaw," Dr Halpin said.

Prior to about 130 million years ago, when dinosaurs roamed the Earth, India was located adjacent to Western Australia as part of a supercontinent which also encompassed Antarctica, South America, Africa, Madagascar and the Arabian Peninsula. When India began to break apart from Australia the plateaus may have formed part of the last link between the two continents.

The ancient journey of these micro-continents is chronicled in magnetic stripes in the ocean crust.

University of Sydney geophysicist Simon Williams, chief scientist of the expedition, explained: "The main issue we faced was when our

magnetometer, which is towed 200 metres behind the ship, sprung a leak on the third day of the cruise, possibly due to a shark attack. Fortunately Geoscience Australia had lent us a backup unit for just such an eventuality, which we used to collect detailed magnetic profiles for the rest of the cruise.”

**Information Released by:**

**Communications and Media Office, University of Tasmania**  
**Phone: (03) 6226 8518; 0429 336 328 (Peter Cochrane)**  
**Email: [Media.Office@utas.edu.au](mailto:Media.Office@utas.edu.au)**