Large incursion of *Apolemia*, 'String Jelly'

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In the autumn of 2007 a phenomenal incursion of a species of *Apolemia was* recorded between the Isles of Scilly and Plymouth. It was probably *A.uvaria, a* Mediterranean species and if so it is yet another 'southern' species extending its range northwards and likely to be recorded more often in the future. Since the widespread publicity in the media, we now know that there have been scattered sightings of small numbers in recent years by fishermen and swimmers.

Photo - Neil Hope www.divingimages.co.uk

Apolemia uvaria was first described in 1815 by Lesuer. It is arguably the largest known invertebrate, forming strings (hence, the common name, 'String Jelly') several metres long, capped with a very small float. However, this far north, and often in rough water, most are inevitably broken into lengths well under a metre. In Norwegian seas, one of the species of *Apolemia* is known to have caused problems in a salmon farm. These were blue in colour and appropriately called 'Blue Fire'. The Cornish examples were all described as pink, although the colour may not be of specific significance. Another common name is 'Stinging Hydroid' which is very apt, because it can certainly sting, as many divers can testify. It is, indeed, a hydrozoan related to such siphonophores as the Portuguese Man-of-War (*Physalia physalia*).

Attention was first drawn to the presence of *Apolemia* by Rory Goodall, when he saw the strange creatures in vast numbers between Penzance and the Isles of Scilly. He informed Joana Doyle, Marine Conservation Officer of Cornwall Wildlife Trust and Ray Dennis, who compiles the marine sightings database for Cornish and Scillonian waters. Ray subsequently arranged for Paul Gainey, a local expert, to see this phenomenon. Paul describes them as being present in tens of thousands, varying in length, but mostly about 25 cms long, and all releasing minute reproductive medusae. Each long chain is headed by one small bladder.

Apolemia would normally feed on quite small zooplanktonic creatures. The accompanying picture shows a hapless small fish that must have been to close to a strand. The problems in the Norwegian fish farm, mentioned above, were presumably due to sheer numbers. The small stinging jellyfish *Pelgia noctiluca* devastated a salmon farm in Northern Ireland by weight of numbers. There is indeed "strength in numbers".