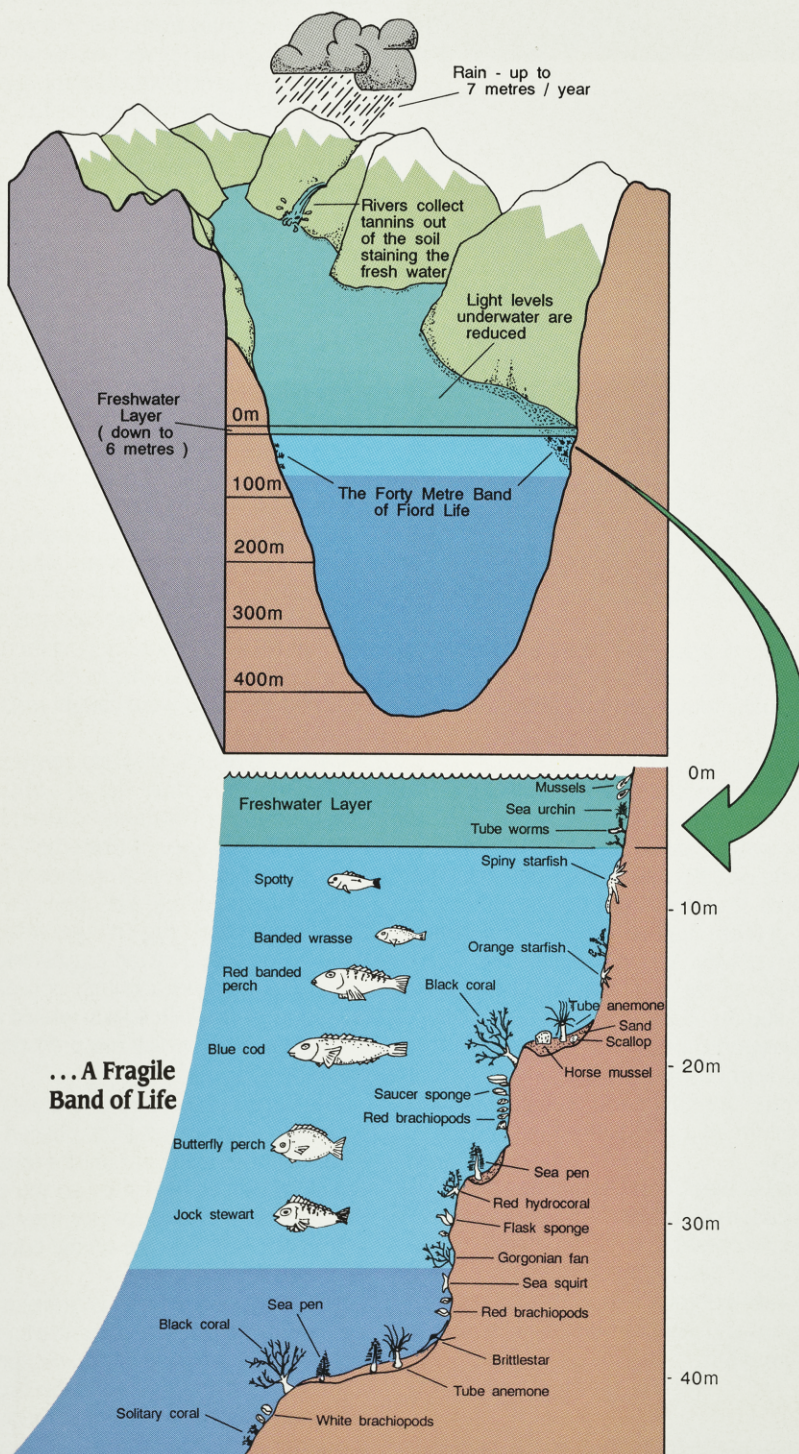


Some small fish - apparently immune to the effect of the stinging tentacles - use jellyfish as protection from predators. This jellyfish measured around 1900mm in width.  
Photo: Warren Farrelly

Bright yellow zoanthids look similar to anemones except they have only one ring of 24 or more tentacles and a long stalk. In some areas these striking organisms occur in extensive beds. Photo: Kathy Walls

## Fiordland's Underwater world...



These slug-like creatures, known to scientists as *Stichopus mollis*, are widespread throughout Fiordland, lying both on the mud and sandy sediments at the head of the fiords and clinging to the sheer rock walls.

Their similarity to cucumbers is in their shape; in colour they range from greyish brown to black, providing excellent camouflage from potential predators.

The cucumber's mouth is surrounded by special sticky tentacles, which collect sediment lying on the rock walls and sea floor, and pass it into the mouth.

As in our society, the cleaners - while often underrated - play an extremely important role. Many organisms which inhabit the fiords rely on a clean environment, with low levels of sedimentation.

## Long-lasting effect

The extraction of this seemingly insignificant animal could have an important and long-lasting effect on other animals of the fiords.

While the cucumber's shape suggests that it remains lying in one place all day, closer observations have revealed that these creatures can often be found partially raised off the surface gently swaying back and forth in the current. The reason for such behaviour is unknown.

Divers have also observed sea cucumbers practise a defence mechanism, known as auto-evisceration. This involves the organism "throwing up" its entire stomach, complete with sticky threads, in an attempt to put off any would-be attacker.

Large sea cucumbers are common in many places but it is difficult to find many animals which are 8cm or less. Whether they are hiding in rock crevices or perhaps spend part of their lifecycle in another marine habitat, is also unknown.

Sea cucumbers occur around the New Zealand coast, so given the special conditions of Fiordland, it needs to be asked whether this is an appropriate location for extraction. Kina appears to be the next species to be targeted in the sheltered waters of the fiords.

The importance of the fiords' 40m band goes beyond commercial extraction. This is an internationally recognised area which over the years has attracted many notable visitors, including Jacques Cousteau, National Geographic and Television New Zealand's *Wild South*.