

Submarine prowls Burrard Inlet

Unmanned vessel rehearsing for military mine detecting role

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If you've spied something unusual in Burrard Inlet -- say, resembling a submarine -- don't be alarmed.

There's no espionage afoot in Vancouver harbour; rather the Canadian Navy has been trying out some new technology.

Canadian Department of National Defence is testing a remote operated vessel called Dorado. The surface-piercing mast of the unmanned vehicle has been spotted in recent weeks looping around the SeaBus terminals and under the Lions Gate Bridge.



CREDIT: photo submitted

The unmanned sub Dorado hangs above Burrard Inlet. It is currently being used to map the seafloor.

Manufactured by a Coquitlam company, Dorado is an eight-metre semi-submersible autonomous underwater vehicle. That means it is capable of performing basic tasks on its own while transmitting sonar data via its periscope-like mast.

And although it may appear to act independently, a crew on the nearby Yard Diving Tender Sooke is keeping a close watch on Dorado, and the information it transmits.

"We're mapping the sea bed," explained navy Lt. Bernie Perron by phone from aboard the ship.

Perron is overseeing the exercise and collecting information on the depths and features of the seabed in Burrard Inlet. For now, Dorado's sonar technology is mostly turning up images of rocks and logs, but it's designed to deal with far more dangerous materials.

"The real purpose of the vehicle is to detect mines," Perron said, but added that people should not be concerned about mines in Vancouver

harbour. "Right now we're developing our tactics and getting used to operating and controlling the vehicle."

While the risk of sea mines turning up in Canadian waters is very minimal, other parts of the world face a very real threat. New technology means ground mines buried in the sea bed and moored mines floating on the surface are even harder to detect and more volatile.

Remotely operated vehicles such as Dorado will help the Canadian Navy locate mines and deal with them remotely.

"Dorado could be potentially deployed elsewhere in the world if requested," Perron said, adding that the system is designed to be portable.

Perron and his crew are scheduled to complete their work with Dorado by Nov. 28.

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