

Microfaunal analysis of Late **Quaternary** deposits
of the northern Bering Sea

by

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Abstract

Holocene **microfaunal** associations and distribution patterns define three inner-shelf (<20 m) **biofacies** in Norton Sound, northern Bering Sea. The first **biofacies** is composed of typical bay faunas dominated by the species **Eggerella advena**, **Buccella frigida**, **Ammotium cassis**, and **Reophax dentaliformis**. The second **biofacies** contains bay to inner-shelf faunas indicative of deeper, more marine waters; such inner-shelf species as **Reophax arctica**, **R. fusiformis**, **Spiroplectammina biformis**, and **Textularia torquata** dominate. The third **biofacies**, common in **deltaic** areas with high sedimentation rates and freshwater input, is characterized by abundant **Elphidium orbiculare** and **E. clavatum**. The distribution of other **microfaunal** groups (diatoms, **ostracods**, **tintinnids**, and fragments of larger invertebrates and plants) corresponds to current and sedimentary patterns.

These Holocene **facies** relations are the basis for interpreting early Holocene and Late Pleistocene environmental conditions in the northern Bering Sea area. Within older deposits the sequence of **biofacies** can be used to interpret the Holocene **transgressive** cycle in Norton Sound. Norton Sound cores provide evidence of two marine transgressions and **varying river input**.

Introduction

Shpanberg Strait, northern Bering Sea, was breached by marine waters **about 11,800 B. P.**, when sea level rose to -30 m. This event separated Saint Lawrence Island from the Alaskan mainland and marked the beginning of the Holocene transgression in Norton basin (Hopkins, 1973). The **rising sea level and warming** climate brought about a sequence of physical and biologic changes that transformed the basin from a tundra-covered plain containing peat bogs to a shallow sea. This transformation is recorded in a thin veneer of Holocene sedimentary deposits in Norton Sound.

Holocene and older transgressive-regressive cycles in the Bering Sea have been studied **by McManus** and others (1969), Hopkins (1972, 1973), **Nelson** and Hopkins (1972), **Knebel** and Creager (1973), Herman (1974), **McManus** and others (1974, 1977), Coachman and others (1975), Hopkins and others (1976), **Cacchione** and others (1977), Nelson and **Creager** (1977), and Nelson (this volume). Few of these studies have considered the **biologic changes and faunal distributions** that reflect these cycles. In particular, data on **foraminifers**, which are sensitive ecologic indicators, have not been previously reported for the northern Bering Sea.

Holocene **foraminiferal** studies along the west coast of Alaska considered the ecologic relations of inner-shelf (<20 m) assemblages of the southern Bering Sea (**Anderson, 1963**) and the **Chukchi Sea (Cooper, 1964)**. Fossil **foraminiferal** studies include those by R. J. **Echols** (in **Knebel and others, 1974**) south of Saint Lawrence Island and **Beljaeva (1960; see also Kummer and Creager, 1971)** in the Gulf of **Anadyr**. These works recognized inner-shelf assemblages, using criteria formulated during Holocene studies to interpret the **paleoenvironment**. Faunas from depths of less than 20 m were not identified. Because Norton Sound is mostly shallower than 20 m (**McManus and others, 1977**), **foraminiferal** assemblages and faunas representing the Holocene transgression could only be considered as representative of the inner **neritic biofacies** of earlier workers. **Microfaunal** analysis limited by this conceptual framework would provide little or no further information on the Holocene transgression. This investigation was conducted to determine what **biofacies**, if any, **could** be recognized in the shallow marine waters of Norton Sound, what physical parameters might be related to any of the **biofacies** found, and which of these **biofacies** relations might be useful in interpreting the **paleoecology** of the Holocene transgression.

Norton Sound **is** a shallow **epicontinental** shelf sea bounded on the southwest by the Yukon **delta** and on the north by Seward Peninsula, **Alaska** (fig. 1). Water depths are commonly less than 20 m (**McManus** and others, 1977). Warmer (**6°-9°C avg** summer temperature), less saline (**≤31‰**) Alaskan coastal water **fills** Norton Sound and, circulating in a counterclockwise direction, moves generally northward (Anderson, 1963; Coachman and **others**, 1975; **McManus** and others, 1977). Runoff from the Yukon River carries sand, silt, and low-salinity water into Norton Sound, where little of the sediment actually accumulates beyond the modern prodelta (Nelson and **Creager**, 1977). Strong storm surges frequently resuspend the sediment and periodically disrupt the substrate (Nelson, this volume).

From an analysis of 35 stained surface samples from Norton Sound, three **foraminiferal biofacies** can be recognized: bay, bay/inner-shelf, and delta. The bay **biofacies** is associated with slightly higher salinities, lower water temperatures, and fine sand. The bay/inner-shelf **biofacies** is associated with cool water temperatures, normal salinity, and greater depths. The delta **biofacies** is associated with shallow water depths, low salinity, warmer water temperatures, and sandy substrates (Howard and Nelson, this volume). Other **microfaunal** and **microfloral** groups (diatoms, **ostracods**, **tintinnids**, and **fragments of larger** invertebrates and plants) are also associated with specific **environmental** conditions in Norton Sound. Fossil assemblages interpreted as representing the Holocene transgression contain many of the species presently living in Norton Sound. These assemblages indicate a progressive change in Norton Sound from a tundra-covered **plain** to a shallow sea. **Foraminiferal** assemblages from earlier **transgressive-regressive** cycles are not included in this discussion.

Holocene **microfaunas**

During 1976 and 1977 surface (box cores) and subsurface (**vibracores** and piston cores) samples were taken from Norton Sound, northern Bering Sea (fig. 2). **Of** these samples 35 surface samples form the basis of the Holocene surface data; these samples were collected from the top 1 to 2 cm of the box cores **and** were stained **with rosebengal** solution onboard the research vessel Sea Sounder. Subsequent laboratory processing of both surface and subsurface samples included soaking samples **in** water and wet sieving through a 63-mesh (**250 μ**) screen. From the dried residues, 300 organic specimens (**foraminifers**, diatoms, **ostracods**, **tintinnids**, and fragments of **larger** invertebrates and plants) and, where possible, 300 **foraminiferal** specimens were counted and identified. These **microfaunal** data (total assemblages) were subjected to both visual and statistical (cluster and factor) analysis.

Benthic **foraminiferal** species constitute one of the major **microfaunal** groups in the Holocene surface samples. In all, 53 **foraminiferal** species were recorded; although diversity ranges from 1 to 17 species, most assemblages are dominated by 3 or 4 species. By cluster and factor analysis these assemblages were separated into three groups, identified here as the bay, bay/inner-shelf, and the delta **biofacies** (figs. 3-5).

The bay **biofacies** is characterized by Eggerella advena, Buccella frigida, Ammotium cassis, and Reophax dentaliformis. E. advena is the most abundant, and makes up 10 to 80 percent of the faunas. Stained specimens were difficult to recognize because most of the tests are yellow to brown and thus **obscure** the red stain. **Living** specimens were, **however**, noted in samples south of **Nome**, Alaska, and west of Port Clarence (an embayment northwest of **Nome**). Buccella frigida and Ammotium cassis, the next most abundant species, range in abundance from 1 to 35 percent. A. cassis is more abundant in areas where the bay assemblages make up less than 40 percent of the faunas and the sedimentary material is coarser; no living specimens were recognized. B. frigida, which is more evenly distributed, increases in abundance in the central parts of Norton Sound and in the bay/inner-shelf assemblages; living specimens are present in both the bay and bay/inner-shelf **biofacies**.

Faunas dominated by the bay **biofacies** are most abundant **in** the north-eastern and central parts of Norton Sound as well as around Port Clarence. These faunas are absent in samples from off the Yukon delta and Cape Rodney, northwest of Nome (fig. 3). This distribution correlates with water depths between **10** and 30 m (Hopkins and others, 1976; **McManus** and others, 1977) **salinities** of 29 to 31.5‰ (Coachman and others, 1975), and temperatures below 12°C (**avg** summer temperature). The substrate in these areas is a fine sand (**<4.0 φ**) derived from the Yukon River or Seward Peninsula (**McManus** and others, 1977).

The bay/inner-shelf **biofacies** is characterized by Spirolectamina biformis, Textularia torquata, Reophax arctica, and R. fusiformis. R. arctica and R. fusiformis, the most common of the four diagnostic species, together average more than 20 percent of the bay/inner-shelf **biofacies**; Spirolectamina biformis and Textularia torquata are less common and occur more sporadically. Inner-shelf species that occur infrequently in association with this **biofacies** are Cassidulina islandica, Buliminella elegantissima, and Nonionella auricula.

The bay/inner-shelf **biofacies** makes up about 20 percent of the species in the depression in Norton Sound, southeast of Nome, and higher percentages of the assemblages in the western part of Norton Sound (fig. 4). **Species diagnostic of this biofacies frequently occur in association with the species characteristic of the bay biofacies, although little to no overlap with the delta biofacies is evident.** Water depths are generally 20 m or greater, summer water temperatures are below 12°C, and salinities are 29‰ or higher (Coachman and others, 1975). The substrate is composed of several sedimentary types in these areas and fine sand predominates (McManus and others, 1974).

The delta **biofacies** is characterized by Elphidium clavatum and E. orbiculare; these two species together constitute greater than 50 percent of the delta faunas. Four other species of Elphidium were identified in the Norton Sound assemblages: E. albumbilicatum, E. bartletti, E. incertum, and E. frigidum. These other species do not occur frequently or abundantly but could be included as species characteristic of the delta **biofacies**. They occur most frequently in the outer fringes of the delta **biofacies**-- areas where the delta and bay faunas are mixed. E. frigidum occurs principally in the bay/inner-shelf assemblages and thus cannot be used as diagnostic of the delta **biofacies**.

Specimens of Elphidium were the most commonly stained group; the rose bengal stain colored all chambers except the last (living) chamber. Because of this staining pattern, none of the specimens are believed to have been alive at the time of collection.

Faunas dominated by the delta **biofacies** are concentrated around the Yukon delta, the southeastern part of Norton Sound, and in an area immediately south of Nome, Alaska (fig. 5). This distribution correlates with the shallowest water depths (<10 m) to about 20 m, warmer water temperatures (to 12°C average summer temperature; Coachman and others, 1975), and lower salinities ($\leq 29\text{‰}$). The substrate is dominated by Yukon silt and fine (<4.0 ϕ) sand (McManus and others, 1974).

The **interrelation** of the three **biofacies** is **evident in** two transects of surface samples across **Norton Sound**. Most **faunal** assemblages contain species from all three **biofacies**. Species diagnostic of each **biofacies** are present in every assemblage except those directly affected by the Yukon River (samples **Mf4763, Mf5461, Mf5462**). The **bay/inner-shelf biofacies** exists principally in the **deeper waters** and **only** where the delta species make up less than 50 percent of the assemblage (figs, 6, 7).

The three **biofacies** recognized here refine the inner-shelf sublittoral **biotopes** recognized in the southern Bering Sea and the **faunal** assemblages recognized in the **Chukchi Sea**. The **deltaic biotope** of Anderson (1963) and the delta **biofacies** of this study are equivalent. Both the **delta biofacies** and **biotope** are dominated by species of **Elphidium** and controlled **largely** by salinity. No clearly **deltaic** assemblage was recognized in the **Chukchi Sea**. The bay and bay/inner-shelf **biofacies** of this study resemble the inner shelf **biotope** of Anderson (1963) of which they may be subdivisions. The transitional **biotope** of Anderson (1963) was not recognized in the Norton Sound surface samples but was recognized in the subsurface samples; this **biotope** contains abundant occurrences of **Buccella frigida** and **Buliminella elegantissima** and is therefore unlike the **bay or bay/inner-shelf biofacies** of this study. The group 11 and group 111 **faunal** assemblages in the **Chukchi Sea** (Cooper, 1964) resemble the bay and bay/inner-shelf **biofacies** in Norton Sound, although Cooper's groups are not so clearly defined or restricted,

Other **faunal and floral** groups recognized are plant fragments, larger Invertebrate fragments, **ostracods**, diatoms, and **tintinnids**. **Plant** fragments were present in every sample and very high abundances were observed in samples from near the Yukon **delta**. Larger invertebrates include worm tubes, crustaceans, and mollusks, present throughout Norton Sound and generally the only **living** (stained) component of the assemblages. **Ostracods** were considered separately from the other invertebrates; **this faunal** group is concentrated in the eastern part of Norton Sound, where they make up as much as **one-fourth** of the faunas (fig. 8). Elsewhere in Norton Sound, **ostracods** were only minor **components (<5%)**. Larger diatoms, which occur in the **foraminiferal** residues, are present throughout and increase **in** abundance from east to west as the water **becomes** deeper and more normal marine (fig. 8). Smear slides contained oceanic, **neritic** marine, **benthic** marine, and freshwater diatoms; no particular pattern has yet been recognized. **Tintinnids (Tintinnopsis fimbriata)** are minor members of all assemblages, except in a few samples from the extreme eastern part of Norton Sound (fig. 8), where the **tintinnids** make up as much as one-fifth of the organic remains. Abundant **tintinnids** are also found in the depression south of **Nome**, a distribution that probably reflects the current pattern and transport of **fine-grained** sediment, **Echols and Fowler** (1973) reported this same species in the **Chukchi** Sea and note that it may be used as an indicator of Yukon River sediment.

Holocene **transgression**

Refinement of the shallow-water **biofacies serves** as a basis for interpreting **environmental** changes during the Holocene transgression. Five cores from different parts of Norton Sound were selected for study. In these cores the biologic changes, particularly in the **benthic foraminiferal** faunas, were examined and related to **paleoenvironmental** conditions to provide a clearer picture of the transition taking place during the transgression. Sample preparation was the same as for the surface samples discussed previously.

Core 78-22 (fig. 2) was northwest of the present Yukon delta (lat 63.21° N., long 165.50° W.) in an area now dominated by the bay **Biofacies**. Subsurface samples were taken at about 50-cm **intervals** between -2 and -513 cm. Faunal analyses indicate a progression from an interval dominated by plant **fragments**, assumed to represent a **nomarine** environment (-513 cm), to one dominated by the delta **biofacies** (-450 to -250 cm). The **benthic foraminiferal** assemblages in this fossiliferous interval also contained a few species of the bay **biofacies** and the transitional **biotope** of Anderson (1963). Samples between -250 and -50 cm were dominated by plant fragments. One specimen of **Eggerella advena** occurred at -200 cm, and several diatoms were present in the sample at -250 cm. The sample at -2 cm was, as expected, dominated by bay species and included rare **delta** species.

Core 76-145 (including **76-145B**) was northeast of the present Yukon delta (**lat 63.22° N.**, long 163.07' U.; fig. 2), in an area dominated by the delta **biofacies**. Subsurface samples were at -3, -9, -10, -15, -20, and -85 cm; the **beginning** of the Holocene transgression was not reached **in** this core. The **lowest** sample (-85 cm) contained an assemblage composed of **60** percent bay species and 40 percent delta species. **Plants** were the only organic remains in the samples at -20 and -15 cm. The higher samples (-10, -9, and -3 cm) were all dominated by **deltaic** species, which make up the modern Norton Sound faunas in this area (fig. 10).

Core 78-3 and core 77-17 were south of Nome, Alaska (lat 64°55' N., long 165.29° **W.**, and **lat 64.05° N.**, long 165.29° **W.**, respectively; fig. 2), in an area dominated by the bay **biofacies**. Assemblages containing as much as 20 percent bay/inner-shelf **biofacies** were obtained just east of these sites, and assemblages **dominated** by the delta **biofacies** just west of the sites. Information from core 77-17 was used to supplement the unsampled part of core 78-3. Samples in core 78-3 were taken at approximately 50-cm intervals between -100 and -550 cm; core 77-17 was sampled at 50-cm intervals from -5 to -130 cm. The Holocene transgression begins above the **plant-dominated** assemblages at -30 cm in core 78-3 (C. H. Nelson, oral **commun.**, 1980). The benthic **foraminiferal** assemblages between -5 and -300 cm in these cores are dominated by species indicative of the bay **biofacies**. Evidence of an initial delta fauna was not found in these cores. A **minor number** of bay/inner-shelf species appeared at **-5** cm. Delta species also appear as minor components in the assemblages at -50 and -5 cm. No **plant-fragment-dominant interval** was evident **in** the upper part of the core (fig. **11**).

Core 78-15 was west of Port Clarence (**lat 65.14° N.**, Long 167.25° **W.**; fig. 2), in an area **now** dominated by bay and bay/inner-shelf species. The Holocene transgression begins above the peat at -144 cm (**C. H. Nelson, oral commun., 1980**). The upper part of the core was sampled at -130, -80, -30, and -3 cm. **Benthic foraminifers** at -130 cm represent the delta **biofacies**. The delta assemblage is overlain by plant dominated intervals at -80 and -30 cm. The highest **sample** resembles the modern **fauna** in this area: 17 percent delta **biofacies**, 67 percent bay **biofacies**, and 15 percent bay/inner-shelf **biofacies** (fig. 12).

PALEOENVIRONMENTAL INTERPRETATION OF THE HOLOCENE **TRANSGRESSION**

Biofacies analysis of these five cores indicates changes in the biological and physical conditions of Norton Sound. Two **benthic** assemblages are recognized in the cores examined. The lower **benthic foraminiferal** faunas indicate **biofacies** patterns that differ from the modern pattern; the upper **benthic foraminiferal** faunas resemble modern faunas and represent similar **biofacies** patterns. The two assemblages are separated by several plant-fragment-rich intervals in all cores but one.

When the **Shpanberg** Strait was breached, marine waters encroached from the south. The initial benthic **foraminiferal** faunas indicate very shallow water depths (<10 m) and low salinities; these initial faunas were observed only in the western cores (78-22, 78-15). The next fauna to appear is **dominated by** species of the bay **biofacies**. Environmental changes included increased water depths and increased salinities. The presence of **bay/inner-shelf** and transitional species in several lower samples suggests that **transgressive** water depths reached the present **level** or that salinities increased to 31‰/00.

In cores 78-22, 76-145, and 78-15, an interval barren of **benthic foraminifers** and dominated by plant fragments separates the lower from the upper **assemblages** and abruptly alters the **benthic foraminiferal** assemblages. This **change** in faunas may indicate the time at which the Yukon River began actively to influence the water quality and sedimentation in Norton Sound (Nelson, **this volume**). The upper **benthic foraminiferal** assemblages and **biofacies** patterns resemble modern assemblages and patterns. The modern **foraminiferal assemblage** is strongly influenced by the Yukon River.

Concl usi ons

Three **biofacies can** be recognized in the shallow waters of Norton Sound: bay, bay/inner-shelf, and delta. The **faunal** species and the distribution of the **biofacies** are influenced by such physical factors as salinity, water temperature, and sedimentation. These modern **biofacies** are useful in interpreting the **paleoenvironmental** conditions **in** Norton Sound since the Holocene transgression began. As sea level rose Norton Sound was first occupied by low-salinity waters that became progressively more marine and deeper. Then water quality or sediment regime changed possibly because of changes in the Yukon River discharge and formation of the modern lobe about 2,500 **B.P.** (Nelson, this volume). Above the level of this change, **benthic foraminiferal** assemblages have the same distribution and interrelations as the modern faunas.

Acknowl edgments

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Plate 1

1. Psamosphaera fusca Schulze, sample **Mf3928**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
2. Protoschista findens (Parker), sample **Mf3928**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
- 3* Reophax arctica Brady, sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
4. Reophax curtus Cushman, sample **Mf5036**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
5. Reophax scotti Chaster, sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
6. Reophax subfusiformis Earland, sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 300 um.
7. Milliammina fusca (Brady), sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 300 um.
8. Ammotium cassis (Parker), sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 300 um.
- 9* Trochammina nitida Brady, sample **Mf5028**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 30 um.
10. Eggerella advena (Cushman), sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
11. Quinqueloculina sp., sample **Mf5036**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 30 um.
12. Quinqueloculina subrotunda (Montagu), sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
13. Guttulina lactea (Walker and Jacob), sample **Mf3928**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 30 um.
14. Guttulina austriaca d'Orbigny, sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
15. Discorbis baccata (Heron-Allen and Earland), sample **Mf3928**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 30 um.
16. Neoconbrina sp., sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
17. Buccella frigida (Cushman), sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
18. Elphidium bartletti Cushman, sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.
19. Elphidium clavatum Cushman, sample **Mf5028**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 30 um.
20. Elphidium albumbilicatum (Weiss), sample **Mf3934**, 0-1 cm. Bar equals 100 um.

Figure 1.--Index map of study area in northern Bering Sea and southern Chukchi Sea.

Figure 2.--Locations of surface samples (A) and cores (O). East-west and north-south lines indicate cross sections in figures 6 and 7.

Figure 3.--Distribution of bay biofacies in Norton Sound. Percentage of indicative bay specimens in each sample is contoured to show distribution pattern.

Figure 4.--Distribution of bay/inner-shelf biofacies in Norton Sound. Percentage of indicative bay/inner-shelf specimens in each sample is contoured to show distribution pattern.

Figure 5.--Distribution of delta biofacies in Norton Sound. Percentage of indicative delta specimens in each sample is contoured to show distribution pattern.

Figure 6.--Foraminiferal composition and depth. West-to-east transect through Norton Sound shows that percentage of bay/inner-shelf species (vertical lines) in surface samples decreases as water depths decrease, whereas percentage of the bay (dots) and delta (horizontal lines) species increases. The unpatterned area represents those species not associated with any of the three recognized biofacies.

Figure 7.--Foraminiferal composition and depth. North-to-south transect through Norton Sound shows that bay/inner-shelf species (vertical lines) occur only in deeper northern part of Norton Sound and that percentage of delta species (horizontal lines) increases rapidly near the Yukon River. Only a small percentage of foraminiferal faunas is not associated with one of the recognized biofacies.

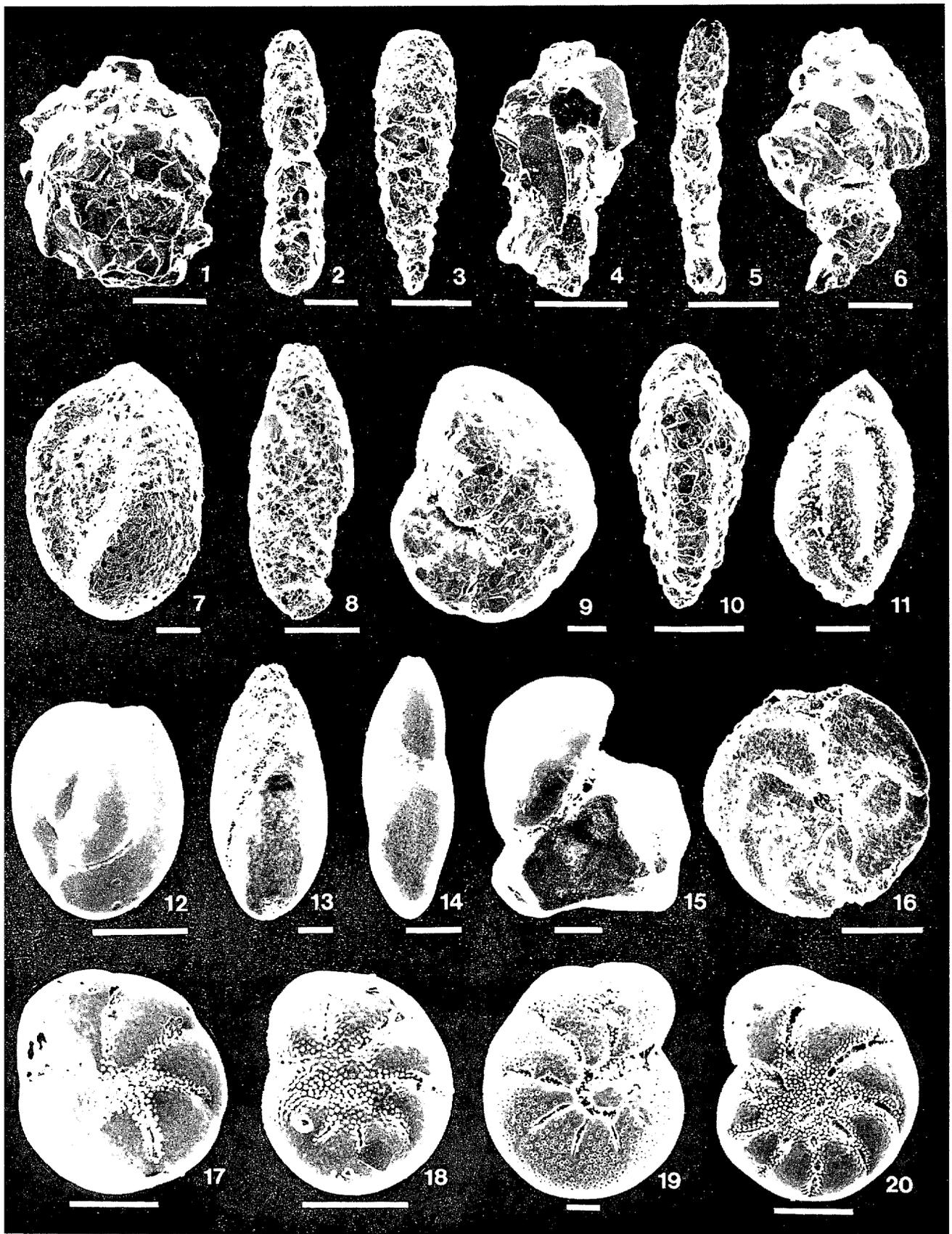
Figure 8. --Distribution of associated **microfossil** groups, **Ostracods** and **tintinnids** were common in eastern part of Norton Sound, whereas diatoms were common in samples from western part.

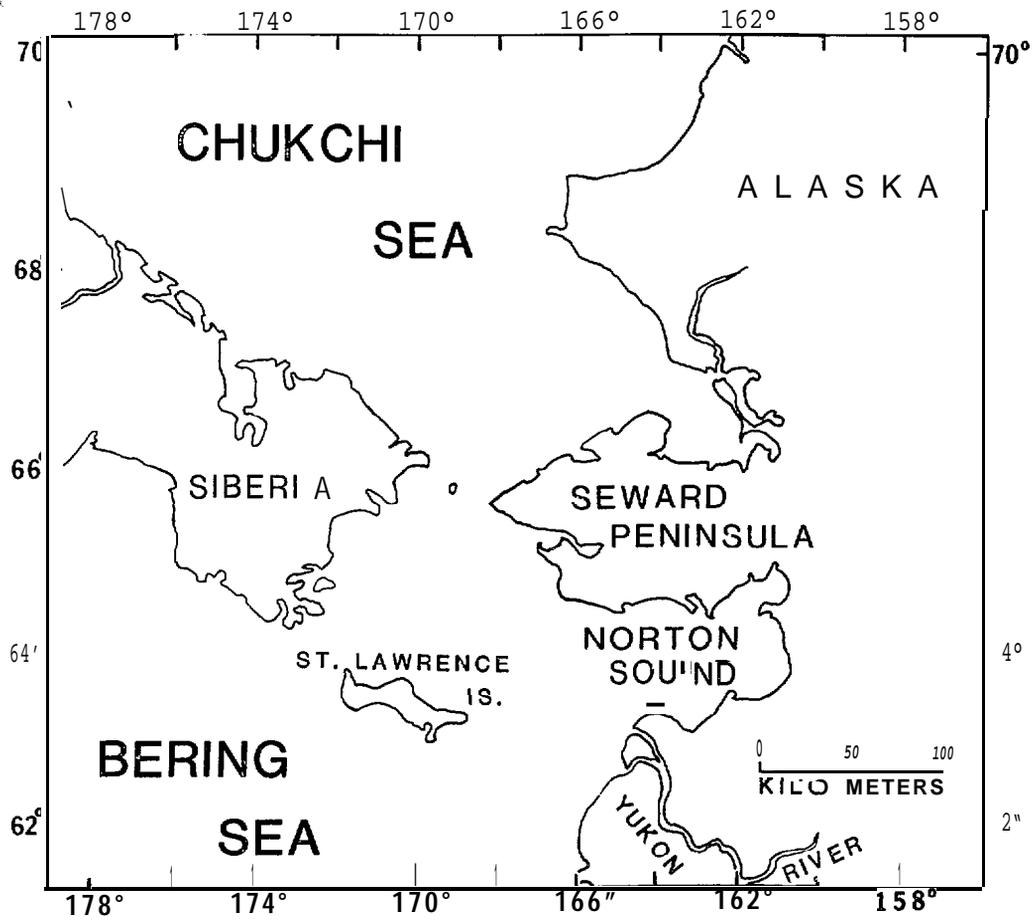
Figure 9. --**Faunal** composition of core 78-22. **Foraminiferal** assemblages in lower part of core are dominated by delta species (horizontal lines); bay species (dots) and species representing transitional **biotope** of Anderson (1963) are also present. Above interval of plant fragments, **benthic foraminiferal** species of bay **biofacies** predominate.

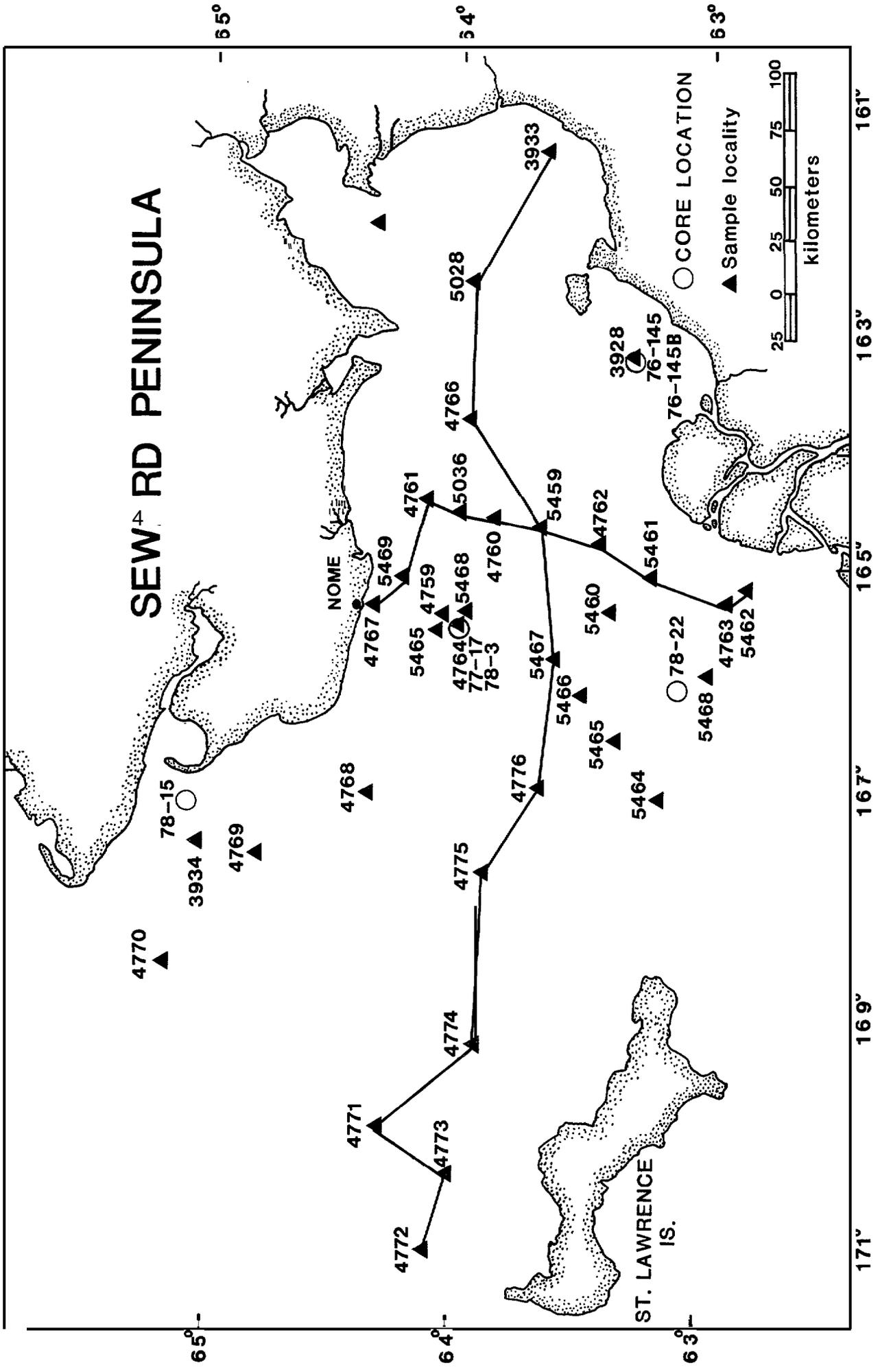
Figure 10. --**Faunal composition** of core 76-145 (including core **76-145B**). **Foraminiferal** assemblages in lower part of core contain nearly equal proportions of delta (horizontal lines) and bay (dots) **species**. Above interval of plant fragments, delta species predominate.

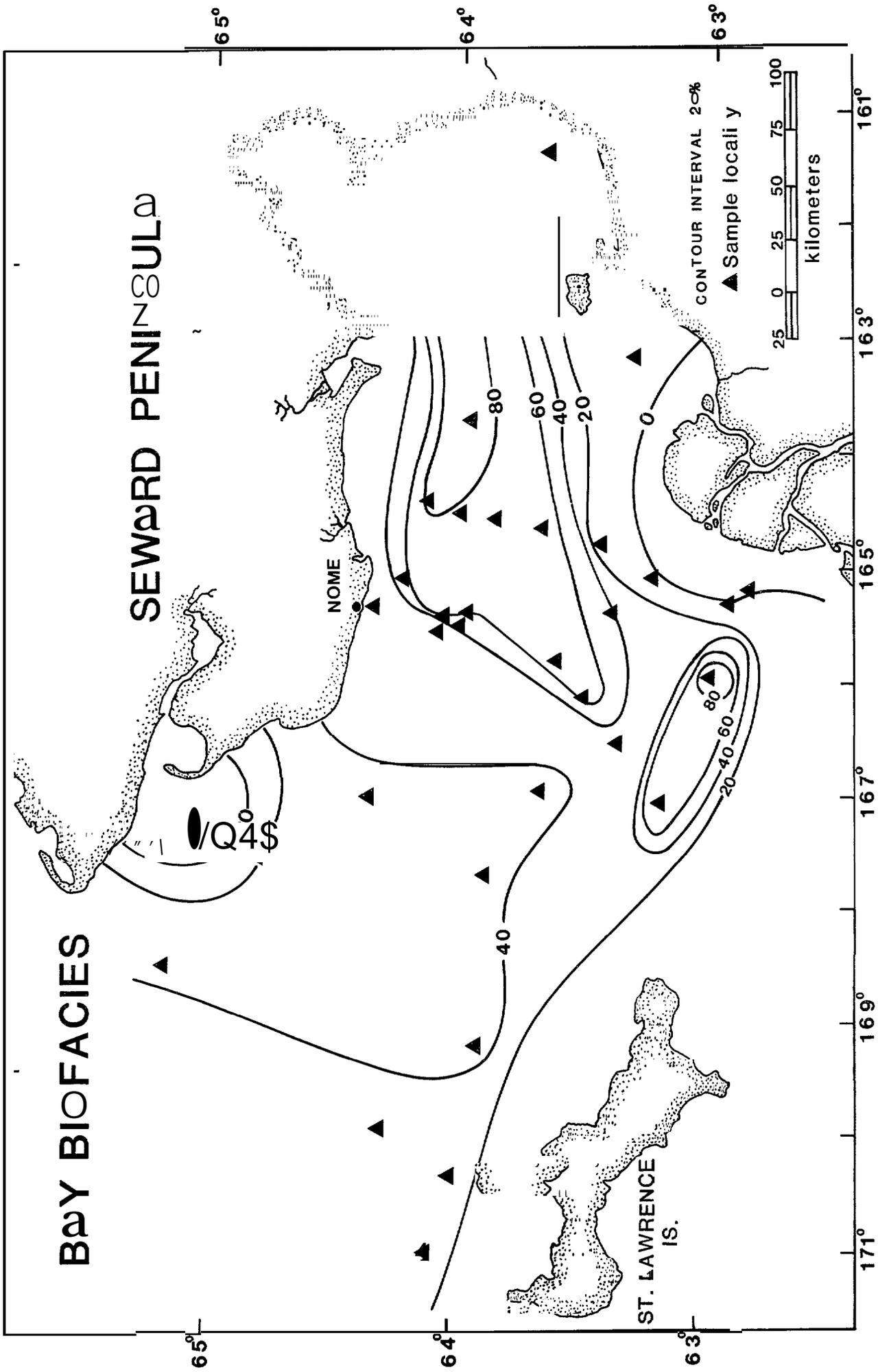
Figure 11. --**Faunal** composition of cores 78-3 and **77-17**. Benthic **foraminiferal** species characteristic of bay **biofacies** (dots) predominate throughout.

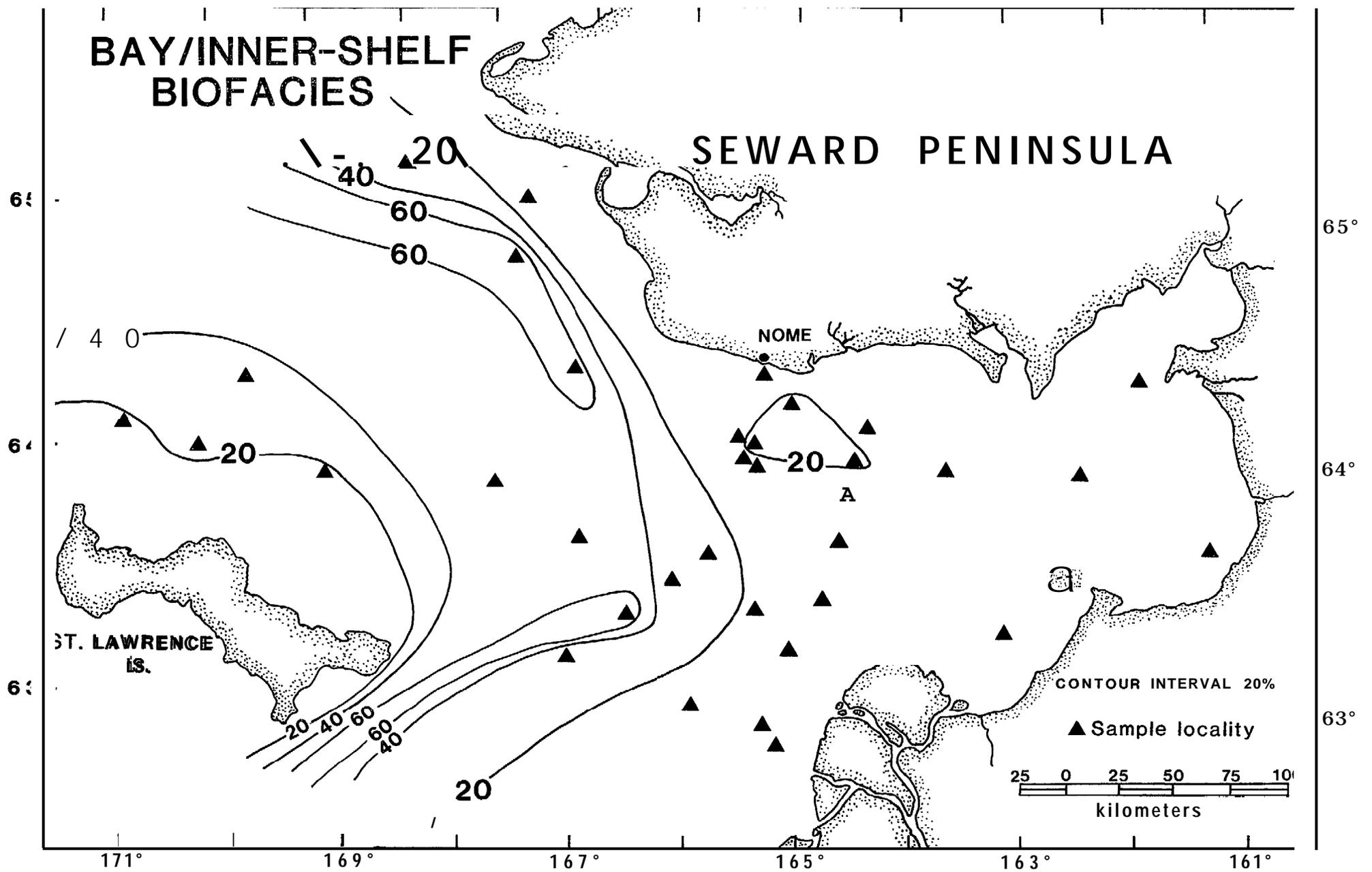
Figure 12. --**Faunal** composition of core 78-15. **Benthic foraminiferal** species characteristic of delta **biofacies** (horizontal lines) predominate in assemblages below plant-fragment-dominated interval, whereas **bay (dots)** predominate above.

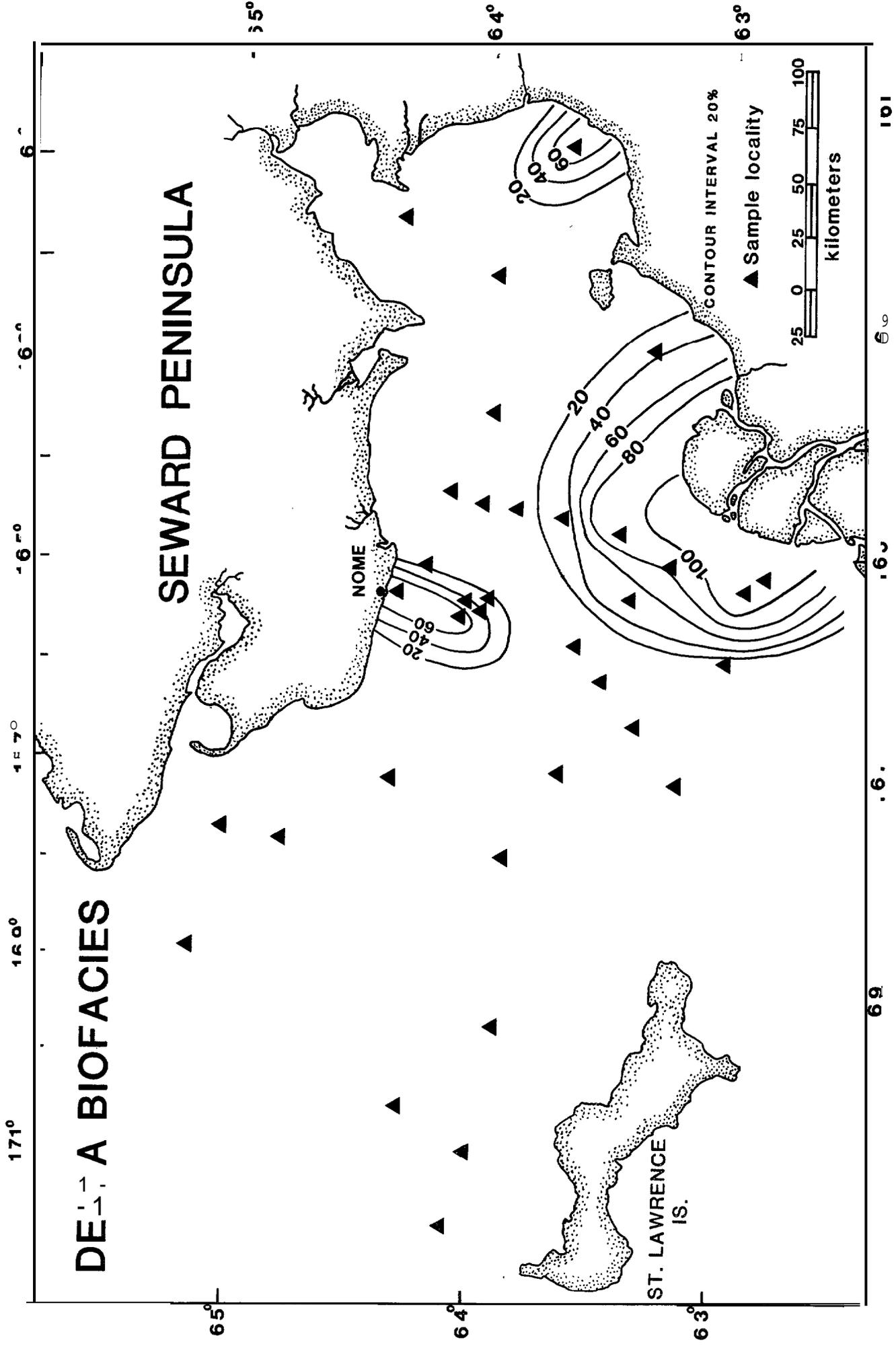












69

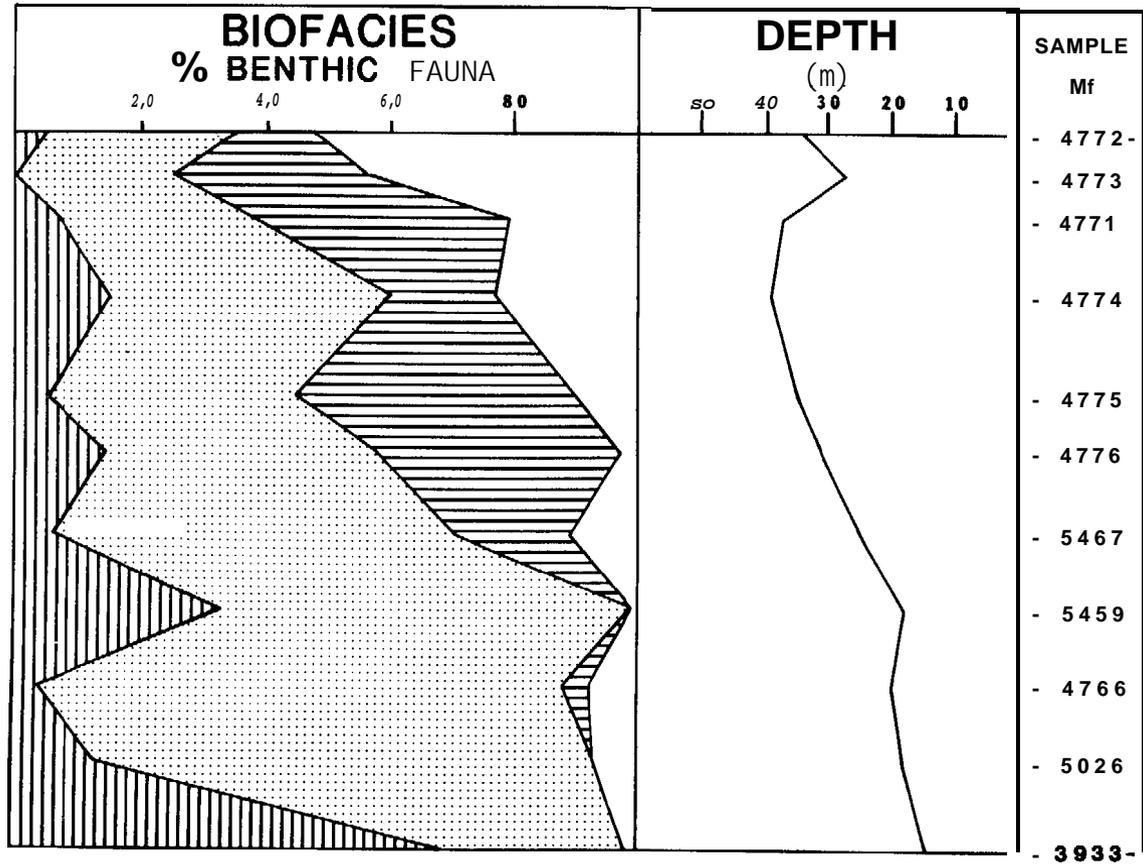
66

63

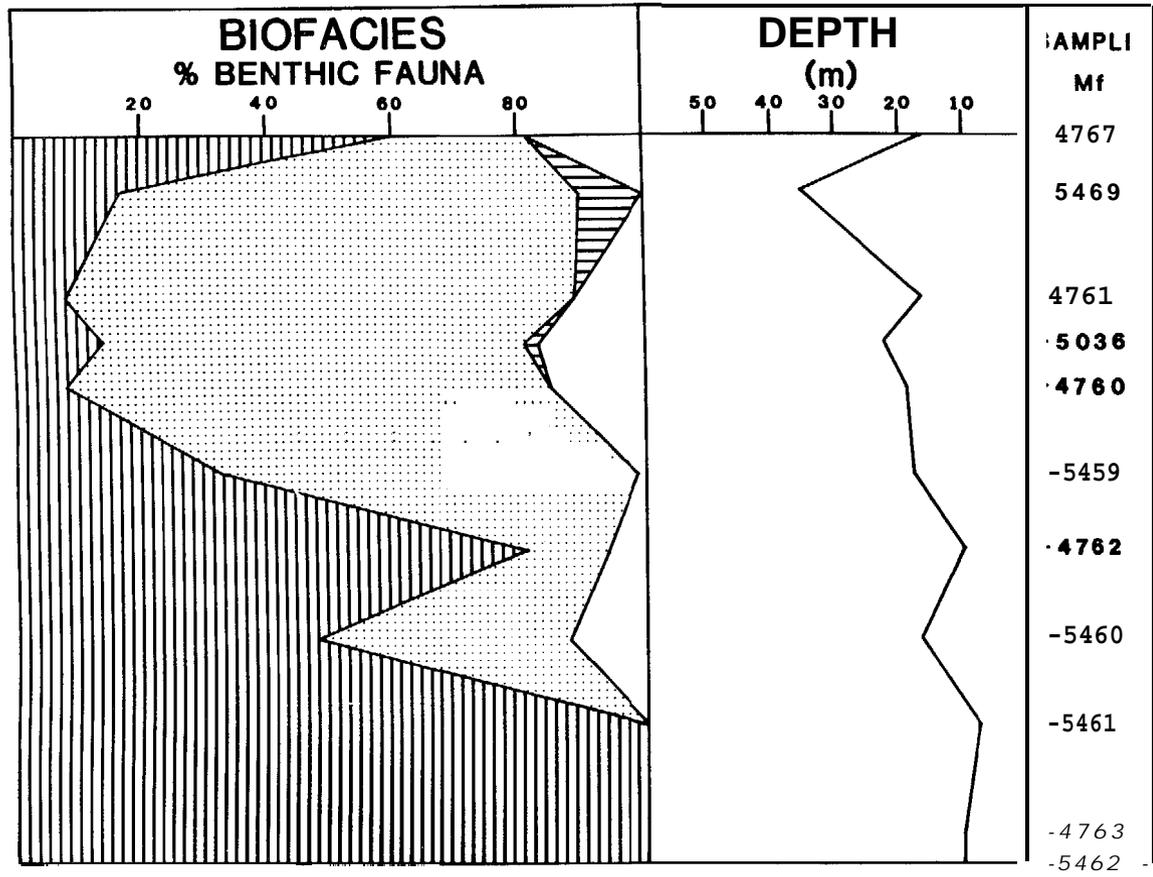
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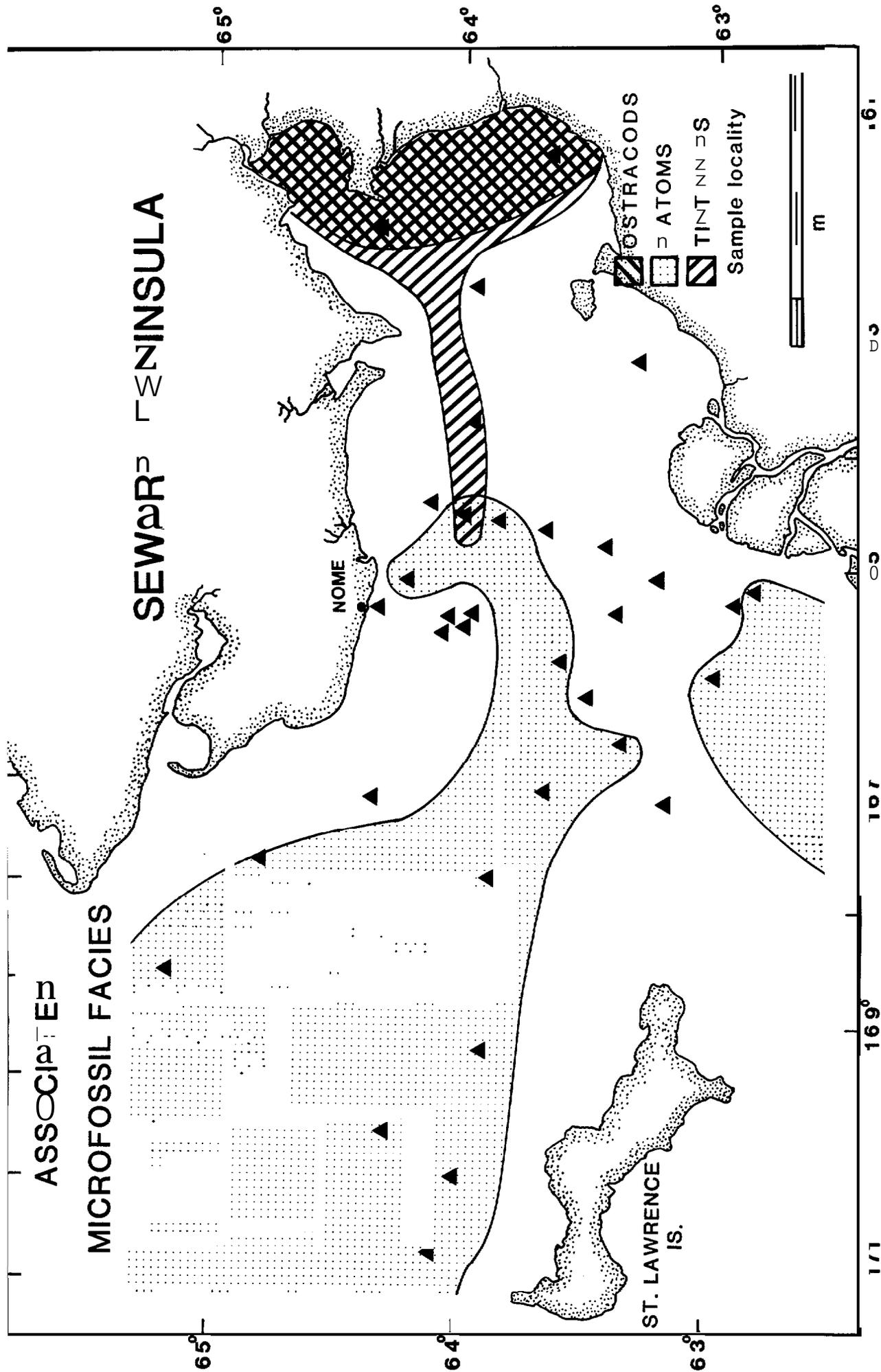
101

 BAY / INNER-SHELF BIOFACIES
  BAY BIOFACIES
  DELTA BIOFACIES

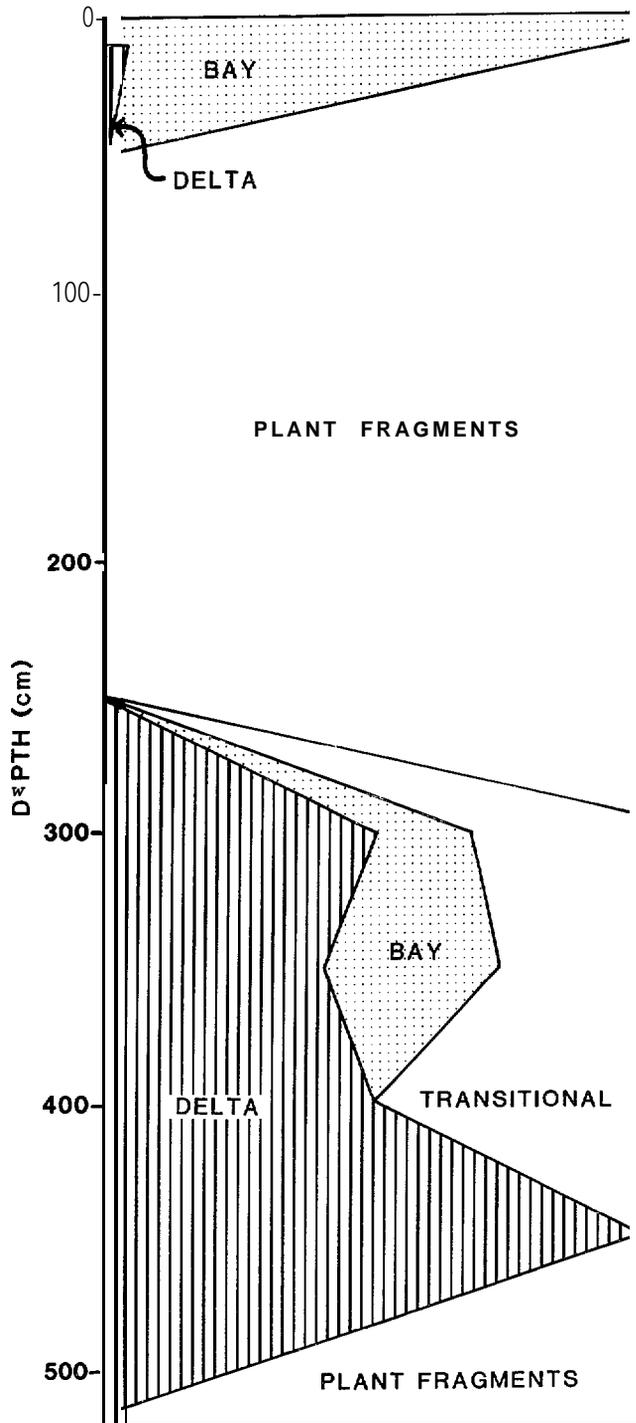



 BAY/ INNER-SHELF BIOFACIES
 
 BAY BIOFACIES
 
 DELTA BIOFACIES

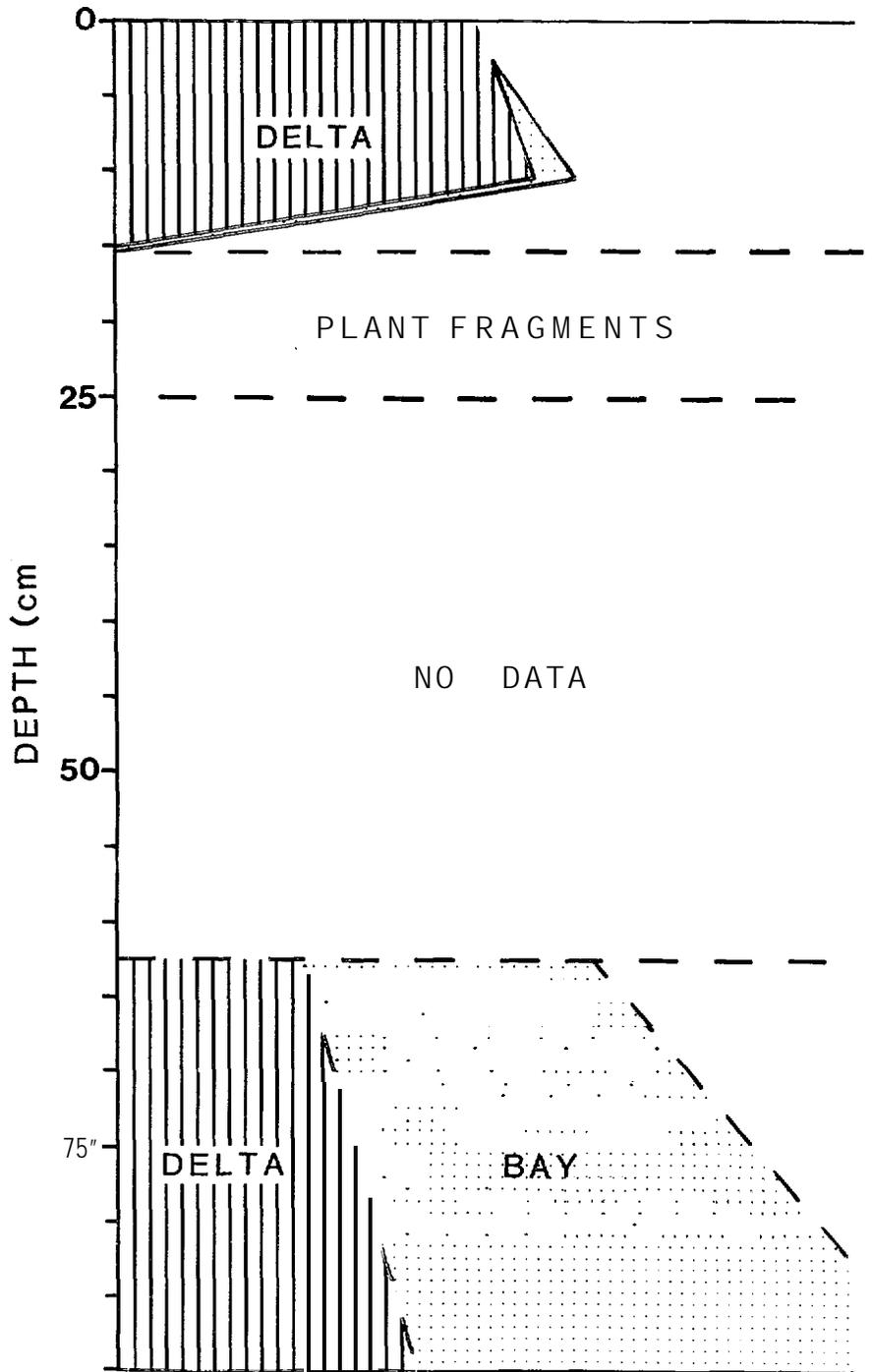




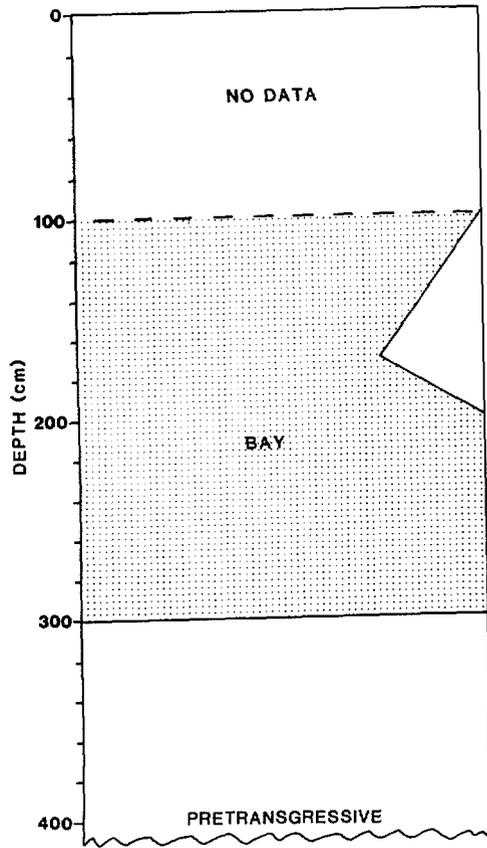
CORE 78-22



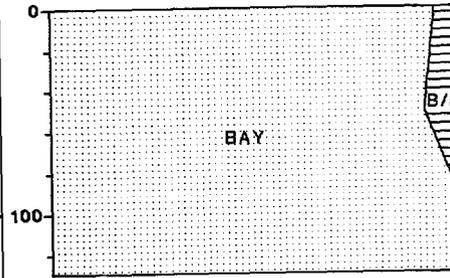
CORE 76-145



CORE 78-3



CORE 77-17



CORE 78-15

