
(12) UK Patent Application (19) GB (11) 2 103 361 A

- (21) Application No **8216857**
(22) Date of filing **10 Jun 1982**
(30) Priority data
(31) **282841**
(32) **13 Jul 1981**
(33) **United States of America**
(US)
(43) Application published
16 Feb 1983
(51) **INT CL³**
G01N 33/24 27/62 33/18
(52) Domestic classification
G1B BC CC
E1F 57
U1S 1252 G1B
(56) Documents cited
GB 1122430
US 2918579
GB A 2074726
(58) Field of search
G1B
E1F
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(54) Predicting hydrocarbon potential of an earth formation underlying a body of water

(57) A method for the on-site collection and examination of small concentrations of methane dissolved in water so as to predict hydrocarbon potential of an earth formation underlying a body of water, said formation being a source of said methane, comprises:

- (i) at a known geographic location continuously sampling said water at a selected flow rate and at a selected depth;
- (ii) continuously vacuum separating said water into liquid and gas phases;
- (iii) quantitatively separating interfering gas species from said methane at a series of separating stations by conveying said separated gas phase of step (ii) via an air carrier vented to atmosphere and flowing at a known flow rate, to and through said series of separating stations;
- (iv) quantitatively oxidising said methane at an oxidising station;
- (v) cryogenically trapping the resulting gaseous carbon dioxide and water vapor at a trapping station, and
- (vi) isotopically examining said trapped carbon dioxide and water vapour for carbon and deuterium distribution so as to determine the biological and/or thermogenic origin of said methane and thereby aid in the evaluation of the hydrocarbon potential of said earth formation.

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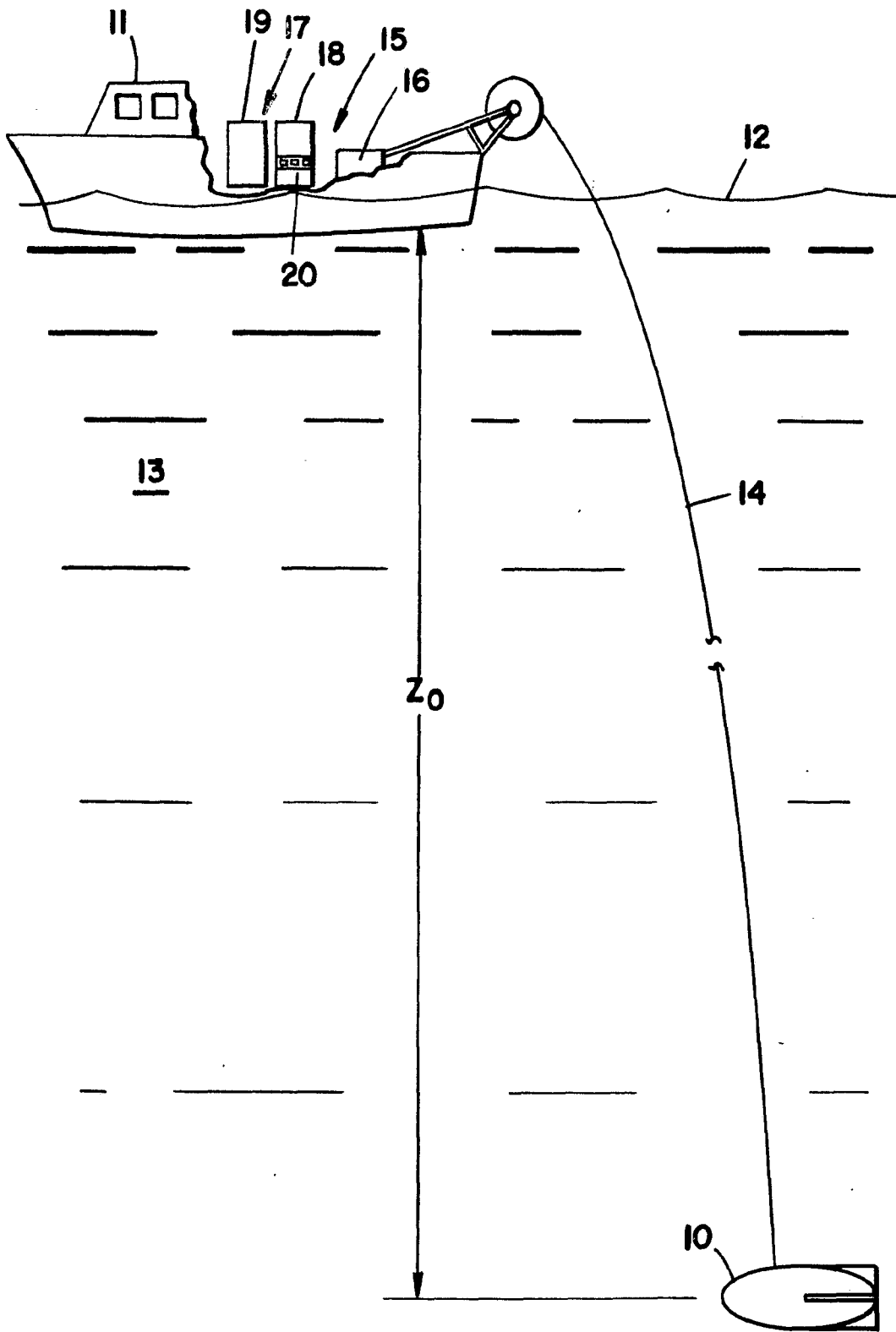


FIG _ 1

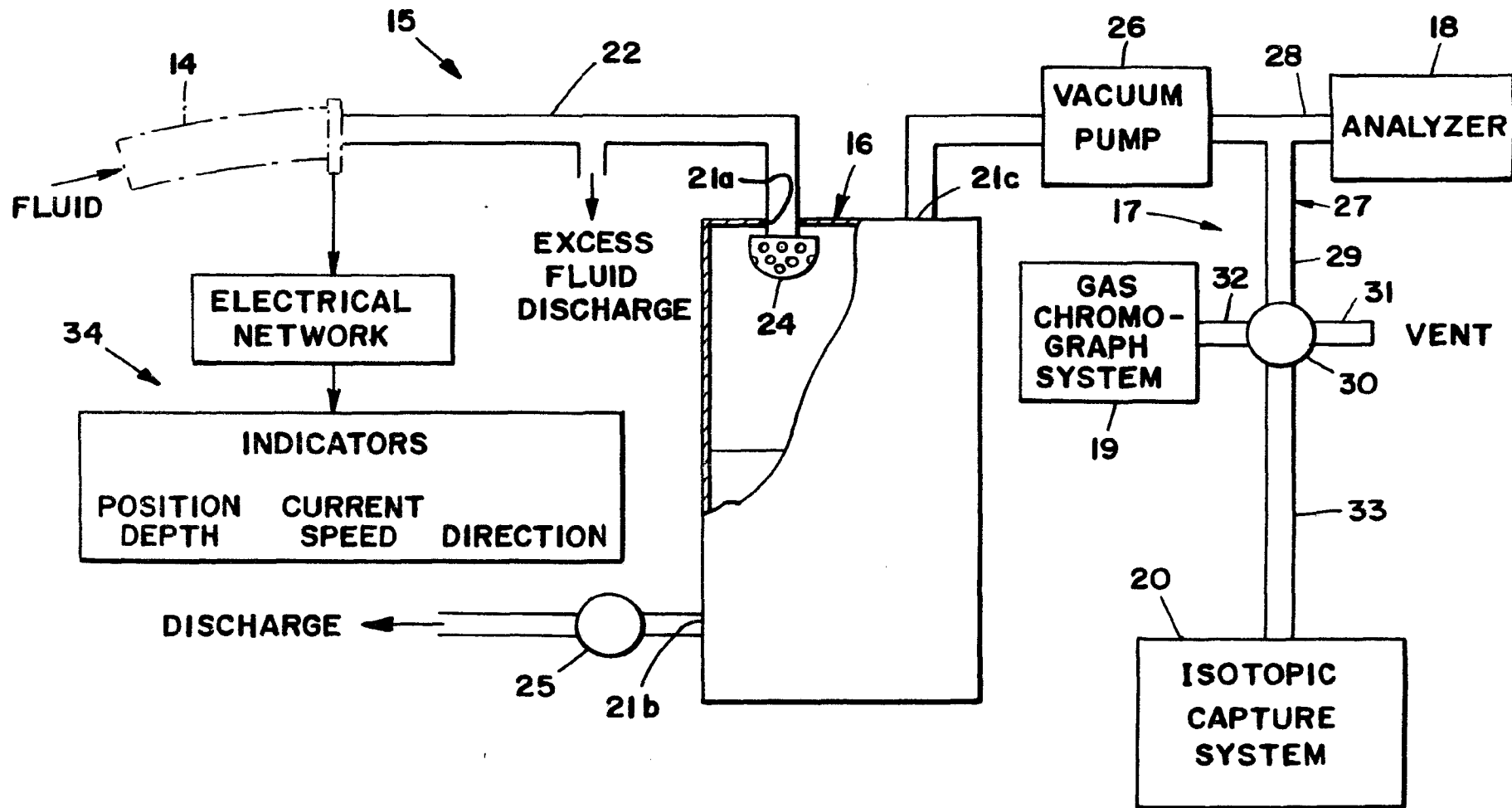


FIG - 2

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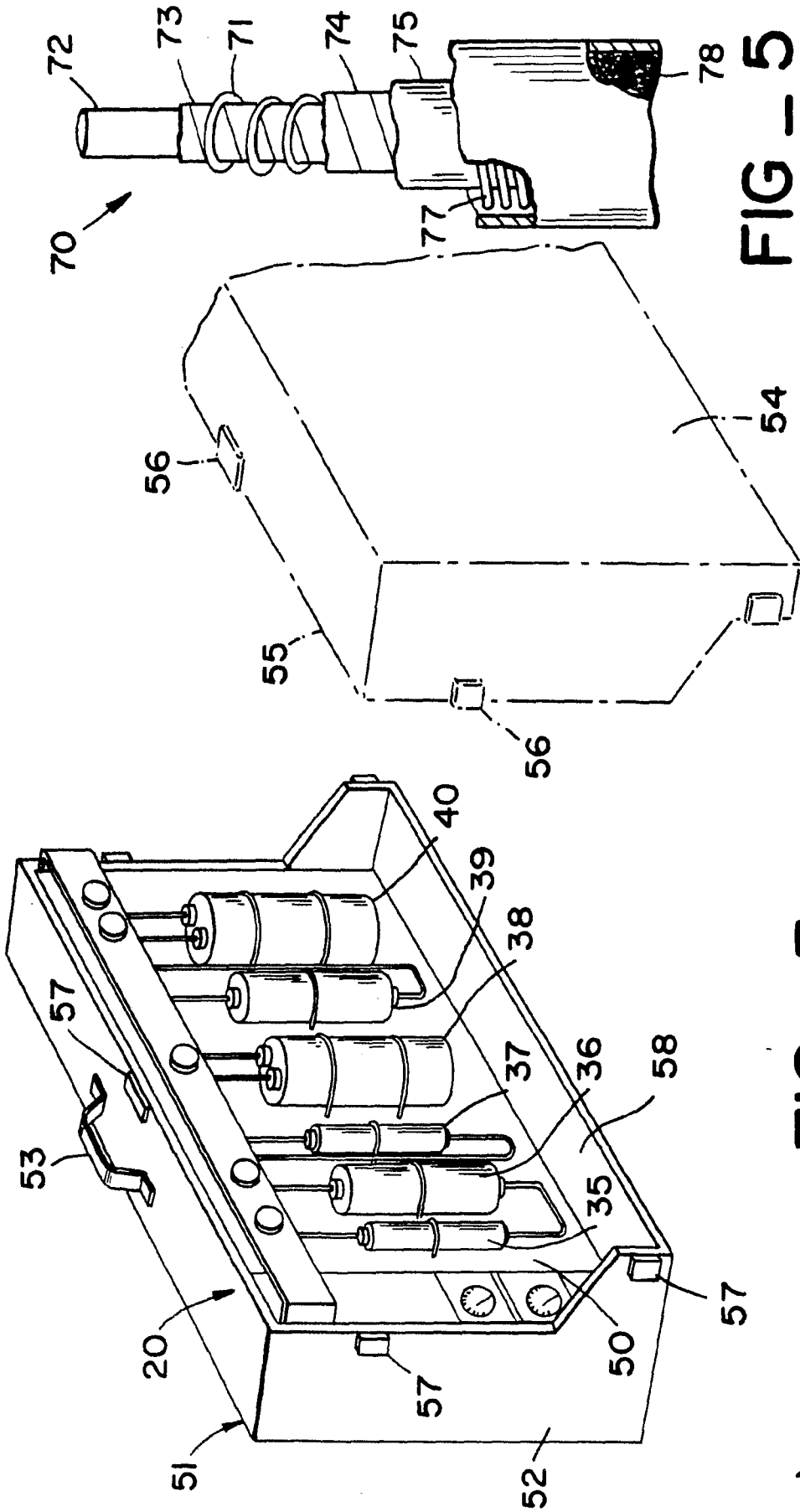


FIG - 5

FIG - 3

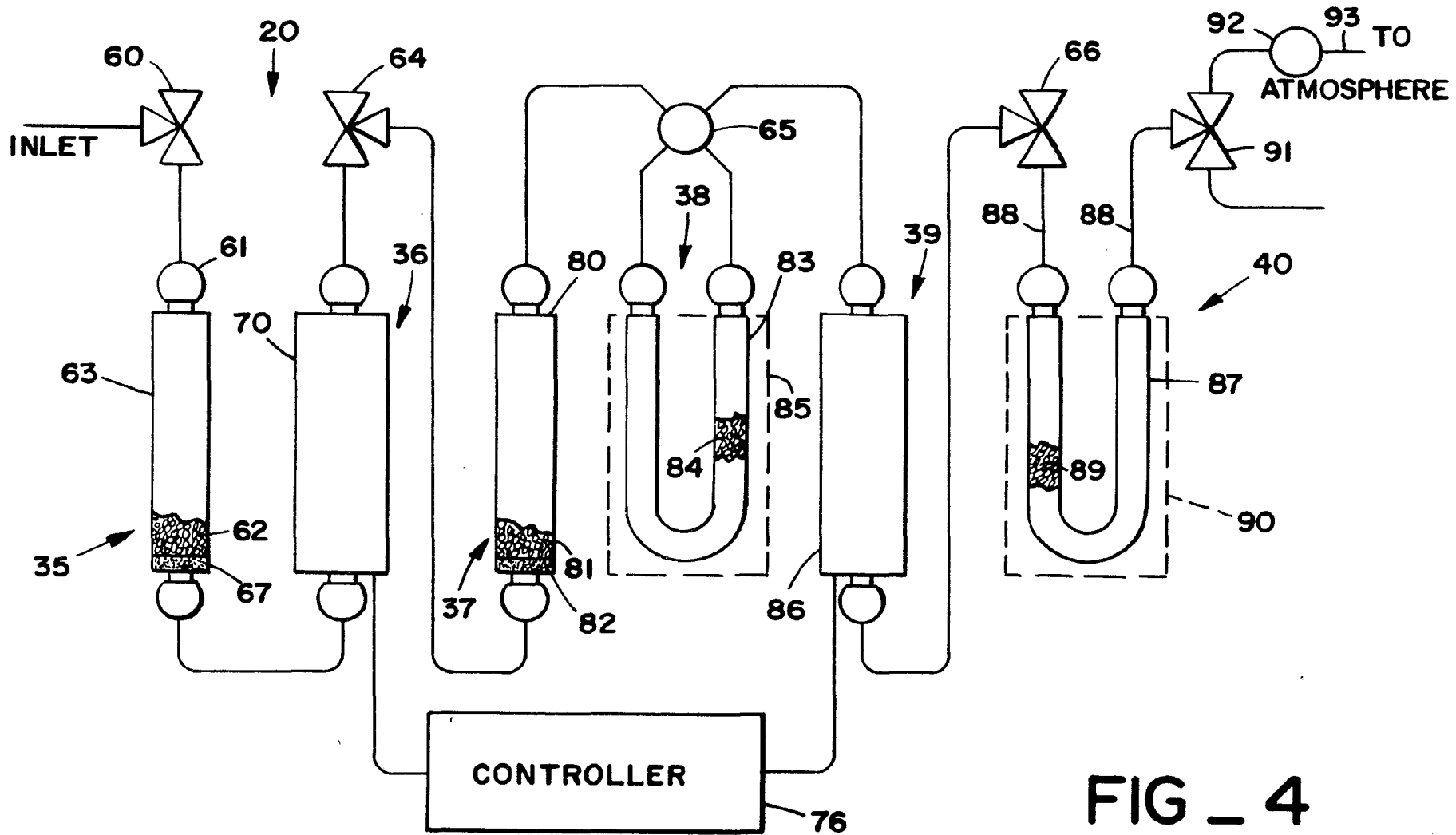


FIG - 4

SPECIFICATION

Predicting hydrocarbon potential of an earth formation underlying a body of water

5 This invention relates to a method and apparatus--in general--for providing for isotopic chemical analysis of methane seeping from a hydrocarbon pool or other source of organic matter associated with an earth formation underlying a body of water, and--in particular--for providing for on-site capture of such gas whereby indications of their biogenic and/or thermogenic origin of the pool can be accurately forecasted. 5

In one aspect, the present invention provides for the acquisition of highly accurate data related to the isotopic chemistry of extremely small concentrations of such gas, say 1 to 10 microliters per liter of the sea water, being constantly collected at depth. 10

In another aspect, the dissolved methane can be collected in sufficient amounts utilizing vacuum separation and selective capture techniques in the presence of an inert air carrier. The sequence of steps includes: Carbonaceous fluids are first separated from the water collected at depth; then the methane present is quantitatively converted to gaseous carbon dioxide and heavy water, if present. Basis of later analysis is the isotopic composition of the ^{13}C (or ^{14}C) and deuterium associated with the collected sample. 15
Further, since the normalized variation of ^{12}C to ^{13}C (i.e., the delta ^{13}C measurement) requires less amounts of methane to be collected, such analytical method is preferred. The delta ^{13}C measurement is defined in *Petroleum Formation and Occurrence*, B.P. Tissot, D. H. Welte, Springer-Verlag, N.Y., (1978) at p. 88 as:

$$20 \quad \delta^{13}\text{C} \text{ ‰} = \frac{(^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C})_{\text{sample}} - (^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C})_{\text{standard}}}{(^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C})_{\text{standard}}} \times 1000.$$

While marine exploration systems are presently available for continuously sampling water seeps so as to analyze for presence of carbonaceous fluids such as methane, none have the capability of providing a compositional parameter that is uniquely diagnostic of seep origin, and hence allowing the user/operator to distinguish the biogenically derived sample from a sample associated with a hydrocarbon source. 25

Reasons: Other interpretative tests were thought to be sufficient from a cost/result standpoint. Also, the lengthy and complexed nature of the steps involved in collecting, isolating and tagging sufficient amounts of the samples for such analysis were thought to be beyond the capability of present on-site collection and analytical systems. 30

We have previously noted in our earlier Application No. 8109591 (Serial No. 2074726) that hydrocarbon potential of earth formations (underlying bodies of water) could be evaluated based, *inter alia*, on ^{13}C (or ^{14}C and/or delta ^{13}C) content of collected methane samples, since when interest in shipboard collection and analysis techniques intensified. 35

It has now been discovered that if the heavier isotope of hydrogen, deuterium, is also a constituent of the captured methane, then yet a further interpretive clue to biogenic origin of the methane is provided.

Since the oxidation products of the collected methane (carried out at station 39 of Figure 4 of the accompanying drawings) are gaseous carbon dioxide and water, and since both such products are trapped in the subsequent trapping station in the above-identified embodiment (i.e., at station 40 of Figure 4), isotopic presence of deuterium can be easily determined by mass spectroscopic examination around the time that the previously described carbon isotopic testing was performed. 40

In accordance with the present invention, a quick, convenient and highly accurate technique for the acquisition of sufficient amounts of two constituents of methane dissolved in sea water is provided. Result: Indications of their isotopic character--and biogenically-and/or thermogenically-derived origin of the associated pool--can be easily and surprisingly accurately determined. 45

In more detail, sea water is first collected via an electro-hydraulic cable, at depth by a drone trailing from a sea-going vessel, the water being pumped at a substantially constant flow rate in a range from about 3 to 7 liters/minute. Up cable destination of the water: A vacuum chamber aboard the vessel where the water is broken into droplets under a slight vacuum (27-28 inches of mercury) and the gaseous constituents, liberated. These constituents are carried via an air stream to a continuous hydrocarbon flame monitor where, if the flame monitor response is positive, more complexed analytical equipment is brought into play; e.g., a multi-port valve can be energized as to allow the dissolved gases to be analyzed chromatographically. Or still another of the valve ports can be activated to allow the same constituents to flow into and through an isotopic trapping network where collection in microliter amounts occurs. Within the isotopic network, use is made of the flowing air stream (flow rate being preferably about 30 milliliters per minute in a range of 20-120 milliliters per minute). Gases of interest pass, in seriate, from station-to-station: Methane is isolated (by removing all interfering species), and finally converted to gaseous carbon dioxide and heavy water, if present (in a catalytically-aided complete oxidation reaction), and both are cryogenically trapped in a U-shaped trapping chamber. Next, the ends of the trapping chamber are heated and collapsed, sealing them from the atmosphere. 50
60

After being transported to a mass spectrometer, the chamber is re-opened so that isotopic analysis can occur. Using the latter results (along with geographic address data) allows for accurate biogenically- and thermogenically-associated predictions to be made.

65 Referring to the accompanying drawings, 65

Figure 1 illustrates operation of the present invention, utilizing a vessel positioned on a body of water overlying an earth formation that collects and analyzes, continuously, samples of water at depth;

Figure 2 is a schematic diagram of collection and analytical operations attendant on-site collection of water samples by the vessel of *Figure 1*; and

5 *Figures 3-5* are detailed drawings of an isotopic capture network of the associated on-site collection and analytical operations of *Figure 2*. 5

Figure 1 illustrates the present invention.

As shown, a drone 10 is positioned at a depth Z_0 below a vessel 11 floating at the surface 12 of the body of water 13. Within the drone 10, is a pump (not shown). The purpose of the pump: To draw water samples 10 interior of the drone 10 and pump them up cable (via electrohydraulic cable 14) to a diagnostic system 15 10 aboard the vessel 11.

In addition to pumping equipment, the drone 10 is fitted with various oceanographic devices, including a depth sensor; a current monitor is also provided that includes a bottom-oriented sonar device in combination with the electromagnetic sensor for measuring the speed and direction of the ocean currents 15 relative to the bottom. Signals from these devices pass via conductors in the side walls of the cable 14 so as to provide annotation (both visual and on tape), associated with geographic position (of the drone and/or the vessel), depth of the drone, etc., as shown. In that way, accurate geographic addresses for the samples as a function of drone and/or vessel location, is assured. 15

Diagnostic system 15 also provides for a series of geochemical tests, and includes vacuum separation 20 system 16 and a gas phase analysis network 17. Key to diagnostic results using network 17: determination that hydrocarbon gases are present and what types (using hydrocarbon analyzer system 18) in combination 20 with a gas chromatograph 19, and then isotopic examination via isotopic capture network 20.

Figure 2 illustrates operation of diagnostic system 15 in still more detail.

As shown, vacuum separation system 16 includes an air-tight chamber 21 for separating the water into 25 liquid and gas phases. Entry and egress from the chamber 21 via a series of inlets and outlets 21A-21C. Inlet 21A receives the water samples via cable 14 and associated manifold 22. A nozzle 24 breaks water into droplets. Note that even though the flow rate of the water can be as high as 7 liters per minute, usual flow rate is usually about 3.7 liters per minute. The separated liquid phase is discharged from the chamber 21 via outlet 21B and pump 25. The gas phase exits via outlet 21C through vacuum pump 26 and exhaust manifold 30 27 in the presence of a wet air carrier. 30

Also of importance in the operation of diagnostic system 15: storage and display of all annotation data via the electrical network/display 34 to allow for determination of geographic addresses of all samples taken by the drone, as previously explained.

Manifold 27 includes an arm 28 which terminates in a continuously operating hydrogen flame ionization 35 analyzer 18. Remaining arm 29 of the manifold 27 terminates at multi-port valve 30.

One port 31 of the valve 30 is open to the atmosphere. Another port 32 is disconnectable connected to gas chromatograph 19 which, when operating, providing gas chromatograms. Yet another port 33 of the valve 30 is disconnectably connected to isotopic capture system 20 of the present invention.

Since the gas chromatograph 19 as used in association with operations of the present invention is usual, 40 that is, the gas chromatograph 19 provides chromatograms of hydrocarbon components in the water, emphasis of description is placed on isotopic analysis system 20 of the present invention. 40

Figure 3 illustrates how easily isotopic capture system 20 can be transported aboard a vessel 11 in either an assembled or unassembled state and be effectively operated in any type of environment. And since all functions associated with the isotopic capture system 20 occur aboard a sea-going vessel often in a hostile 45 environment, constructional aspects related to portability, reliability and ruggedness are of some importance. 45

As shown, the capture system 20 includes a series of trapping and stripping stations 35-40 mounted to upright front panel 50 of carry-on capture box 51. The box 51 includes side, top and back panels 52, which form an enclosure interior thereof, wherein equipment associated with operations can be stowed either 50 temporarily as during transport (or permanently as required). Carry handle 53 facilitates hand-transport of the box 51 to and from the vessel. Note also that the front panel 50 intersects bottom panel 58 near its center. Hence, not only can the operator use bottom panel 58 as a floor for equipment associated with stations 35-40, but also he can place a separate cover 54 (shown in phantom line) in attachment with the panels 52, 58 as when transport of the box is required. In that way, the equipment comprising the stations 35-40 can be 55 protected against breakage during transport. Note that the cover 54 has extending side and top panels 55 of reverse orientation with respect to the shape provided the side, top and bottom panels. Result: Disconnectably connecting hinges 56 can be aligned with mounts 57 to releaseably attach the cover 54 with respect to the panels 50, 52 and 58.

Figure 4 illustrates operation of stages 35-40 of system 20 in more detail.

60 Assume the operator has allowed dissolved gases to enter the system 20 via valve 60 to station 35 to begin operations. 60

The key to isotopic operation of system 20 lies in quantitative oxidation of the dissolved "signature" gas of interest, i.e., methane, as within oxidation station 39 and subsequent collection at station 40, of selected oxidants thereof. These operations occur after sinusoidal travel of all the collected, dissolved gases via the 65 intermediate stations 35-38 as set forth below. The usual flow rate of the gas sample within system 20 is 65

about 30 microliters per minute. The amount of collection at station 40 is dependent on the methane concentration in the sample sea water, the flow rate of the air carrier system, and the separation efficiency of the vacuum separation system aboard the vessel. If the normal methane concentration is 1 microliter per liter of water, and the extraction rate of the drone is 7 liters per minute at depth, then 10 minutes will be needed to collect about 50 microliters of the gas of interest at station 40, assuming extraction efficiency at the vacuum system of 75%. In the vicinity of modest gas seeps, the concentration of methane can easily approach 10 microliters per liter of water (STP) particularly in deep water. A background sample typically containing 0.2 microliters of methane will take 50 minutes to collect.

Briefly with reference to Figure 4, the wet air carrier and the dissolved gases from the vacuum separation center enters station 35 at inlet 61. At the station 35, the gases percolate downwardly through the series of absorbent materials 62 supported in upright tube 63. Materials 62 remove both water vapor and molecular carbon dioxide. Next, the carbon monoxide which also occurs in variable abundance in water, is removed at station 36 by oxidation to carbon dioxide; the latter is subsequently removed from the carrier system after passing via valve 64 to station 37. The carrier gas stream containing both air gases and low molecular weight alkanes is then directed to stage 38 after passage through valve 65.

At the station 38, the lower, mid- and higher- range molecular weight hydrocarbons are removed, that is, all hydrocarbons above C_1 . The remaining methane then enters station 39 where it is oxidized to gaseous carbon dioxide and water. After passage through valve 66 the latter is subsequently retained at station 40. The details of operation of stages 35-40 will now be presented in more detail below.

Station 35.

Purpose: To trap water vapor and molecular carbon dioxide in the gas phase of the separated sample. The station 35 is constructed of the tube 62 attached to the front panel 50 of capture box 51 upright position, see Figure 3, the tube 63 usually being constructed of standard wall pyrex tubing. A bed of absorbent materials 62 is held in place by small wads of glass wool 67 placed at the ends of the tube 63. The absorbent materials 62 are conventional and are available in the industry for removing water vapor (viz calcium chloride, $CaCl_2$) and for absorbing molecular carbon dioxide (namely, sodium hydroxide, $Na(OH)$). Mixture ratio 1:1.

Station 36.

Purpose: To remove carbon monoxide which occurs in variable amounts in sea water using a flow-through furnace system 70.

As shown in detail Figure 5, furnace 70 consists of a helix 71 wound about a quartz tube 72, the tube being previously wrapped with a single layer of asbestos tape 73. The helix 71 is then covered with additional asbestos tape 74 as well as with a glass wool matting 75 forming a sidewall into which a thermocouple (not shown) can be inserted. The ends of the helix 71 and the thermocouple are electrically connected to thermal controller 76 of Figure 4. The controller 76 supplies regulated power to the furnace as a function of temperature. At the remaining annular space between the sidewalls of the wool matting 75 and the glass tube of the system 70 are positioned cupric oxide wire 77 along with platinized alumina pellets 78. The pellets 78 are placed at the downstream end of the tube 70, and held by quartz wool, not shown. The furnace operates about $125^\circ C$ whereby the carbon monoxide is oxidized to carbon dioxide.

Station 37

Purpose: to remove carbon dioxide previously generated at station 36. Station 37 is constructed of a glass tube 80 filled with an absorbent material 81 such as sodium hydroxide, $Na(OH)$, held in place with glass wads 82, and is similar in construction to station 35 previously described.

Station 38

Purpose: To remove lower-, mid- and high-range molecular weight hydrocarbons. Station 38 is constructed of a metallic tube 83 filled with inert chromatographic glass beads 84 in a size range of 60-80 mesh held in place by glass wool wads (not shown). When removal of low- mid- and high-range hydrocarbons is desired (removal of all hydrocarbons above C_1) a bath 85 consisting of liquid argon ($-180^\circ C$) or isopentane-liquid nitrogen slush ($-160^\circ C$) is placed circumferentially about the bed of beads 84.

If desired, station 38 can be by-passed via valve 65. Hence, clean-up of the tube 83 can be facilitated i.e., a clean gas can be passed via valve 65 through the tube 83 while the bed of beads 84 is heated to a temperature of about $200-300^\circ C$ for several minutes. Note that at temperatures above $400^\circ C$ however, the beads 84 will soften.

Station 39.

Purpose: To completely oxidize the methane of interest to gaseous carbon dioxide and water. The station 39 includes a furnace 86. It is similar in design and construction to the furnace 70 of station 36 shown in detail in Figure 5, except that furnace 86 operates at temperatures in excess of $600^\circ C$ in a catalytically aided reaction. The temperature preferred is about $650^\circ C$. Result: Methane is quantitatively converted to carbon dioxide at a lower operating temperature than would be normal, due in part to the effect of the cupric oxide helix and platinized alumina beads used as catalysts within the furnace 86. In this regard, it should be noted the combustion efficiency of the furnace 86 at different ranges and temperatures has been tested. A standard

hydrocarbon mixture consisting of say 66 parts per million methane, 10 parts per million C_2H_6 , 10 parts per million C_3H_8 , and 10 parts per million C_4H_{10} in a helium carrier, was passed through furnace 86 at 30 milliliters per minute. The test was repeated at 20 milliliters per minute. The vent of the furnace 86 was connected to a gas chromatograph equipped with a flame ionization detector. At the maximum sensitivity of the detector (approximately .5 parts per million CH_4 equivalent) with the above mixture flowing through the furnace 86 at the above rates, no methane was detected at the detector. The condition continued as long as combustion furnace 86 was above $600^\circ C$, say preferably $650^\circ C$. Larger amounts of methane were syringe-injected (say up to 400 microliters of methane) into the furnace with similar results. Thus, it is concluded that furnace 86 will quantitatively oxidize all methane concentrations that are likely to be obtained in the field.

Station 40

Purpose: To trap microliter quantities of carbon dioxide and heavy water, if any, oxidized at station 39.

Station 40 is constructed of a glass tube 87 bent into a U-shape. Its arms connect to transfer tubes 88 (and its inlet and outlet, respectively) which facilitate gas passage through the tube 87. The tube 87 is also filled with inert chromatographic grade glass beads 89 of average size, say 60-80 mesh forming a trapping bed. Beads 89 are held in place by wads of glass wool (not shown). Collection of the gaseous carbon dioxide and water is effected by immersing the tube 87 and beads 89 in a bath 90 of either liquid argon at $-180^\circ C$ or an isopentane-liquid nitrogen slush at $-160^\circ C$. Note that at the outlet of the station 40, the transfer tube 88 connects via valve 91 to either (i) flow meter 92 and vent 93 or (ii) to a vacuum pump (not shown). During collection, item (i), above, is connected to the tube 87. After the collection is complete, the valve 91 is operated to connect the interior of the tube 87 to the vacuum pump and the latter is turned on. The transfer tubes 88 are then sealed by heating them with a small oxy-propane torch. At a mass spectrometer site, the contents of the tube 87 (carbon dioxide and water vapor) and impurities, if they exist, (air gases, primarily) are introduced into a vacuum line where the carbon dioxide can be purified prior to isotopic analysis, if desired. Prior to reusing the tube 87 and beads 89, both are heated to $200-300^\circ C$ in the stream of clean air to remove organic contaminants. Note that cryogenic trapping by bath 90 can present some problems if the bath temperature are not maintained within a range of -160 to $-180^\circ C$. For example, it has been found that at higher temperatures (say $-125^\circ C$) using an isopentane-liquid nitrogen slush, the carbon dioxide can break through the tube 87 to vent 93 at modest flow rates, say 16 milliliters per minute. At lower temperatures, say $-196^\circ C$, oxygen can condense on the beads 89 interrupting the carrier flow. Carbon dioxide has been found quantitatively to be retained on the beads 89 at $-160^\circ C$ using an isopentane-liquid nitrogen slush, for 25 minutes at flow rates of about 100 milliliters per minute.

Thus, at air carrier flow rates of 20-30 milliliters per minute, the carbon dioxide will be retained for periods of two hours or more. Moreover, at $-180^\circ C$, the retention time of carbon dioxide will undoubtedly increase if liquid argon ($-180^\circ C$) is used.

Experimental data

An investigation of isotopic fractionation associated with system 20 of Figure 4, has been undertaken, such investigation utilizing standard 5% methane-argon and 10% methane-argon mixtures. Results of isotopic examination are as set forth below in Table I.

TABLE I

	Sample#	Std	vol. Inj.	Recovery %	SC ¹³ (PDB) ‰	
5						5
	HC-11	5 % CH ₄ /Ar	50	100	-39.31	
10	HC-12	5 % CH ₄ /Ar	50	100	-39.27	10
	HC-13	5 % CH ₄ /Ar	100	100	-36.36	
	HC-14	5 % CH ₄ /Ar	100	100	-39.57	
15						15
	HC-23	10 % CH ₄ /N ₂	100	100	-26.07	
	HC-24	10% CH ₄ /N ₂	100	100	-25.45	
20						20
	HC-25	10% CH ₄ /N ₂	100	100	-25.53	
	HC-26	10% CH ₄ /N ₂	100	100	-26.73	
25						25
	Ref-1	10% CH ₄ /N ₂	-	100	-30.50	
	Ref-2	10% CH ₄ /N ₂	-	100	-28.11	
	Ref-3	10% CH ₄ /N ₂	-	100	-29.13	
30						30

Samples HC-11 through HC-14 show good agreement and demonstrate a high level of precision at two concentration levels of 50 microliters and 100 microliters of the carbon dioxide (STP). Mean and standard deviations of the delta ¹³C composition were $-39.38 \pm .13$. Reference samples have not yet been analyzed.

35 Samples HC-23 through HC-26 and reference samples 1-3, provide similar results except the delta ¹³C distributions were systematically "lighter" by a value of -3.57 ‰. There is, at present, no explanation for the systematic bias noted above.

In a parallel study, sea water saturated with a methane/argon mixture at two temperatures (18°C and 2°C) was stripped of its dissolved methane. The dissolved methane was then condensed to carbon dioxide at an air carrier flow rate of 30 milliliters per minute. Approximately 30% of the methane was removed from solution in 10 minutes. Results of isotopic examination are set forth below with reference to Table II.

TABLE II

	Sample#	Std	Vol. Inj.	Recovery %	SC ¹³ (PDB) ‰	
45						45
	HC-15	5 % CH ₄ /Ar	1495 ^a	32	-40.16	
50						50
	HC-19	5 % CH ₄ /Ar	2180 ^a	30	-39.17	

a = saturation concentrations in 1 liter sea water at 18° and 2°C.

Note that samples HC-15 and HC-19 represent partially stripped sea water previously equilibrated with the 5% methane/argon mixture, the same mixture used to obtain the results in Table I. But also note that the results of Table II are not significantly different than those obtained for samples HC-11 through HC-14 of Table I which were achieved using the same source tank of methane/argon. Of particular interest in Tables I and II, is the fact that the fractionation associated with incomplete stripping of the samples HC-15 and HC-19 in Table II is less than 1‰. This is expected since the fractionation factor is about 1.03 (or the square root of 17/16). That is to say, for small methane stripping efficiencies (less than 1%), the resulting carbon dioxide will be 3‰ lighter than the parent methane. At 30% recoveries, the fractionation is within experimental error.

Isotopic fractionation is dependent on vapor pressures of C₁₂H₄ and C₁₃H₄, each of which being temperature dependent. At temperature extremes likely to be encountered at the surface of the earth (-2°C to 45°C), isotopic fractionation associated with gas extraction should be within experimental error. It is also worth noting that success of the present invention does not depend on the absolute delta C¹³ values

provided for either the biogenic or thermogenic methane fractions. Relative changes in a local region are the focus of interest.

CLAIMS

- 5 1. Method of on-site collection and examination of small concentrations of methane dissolved in water so as to predict hydrocarbon potential of an earth formation underlying a body of water, said formation being a source of said methane, comprising: 5
- 10 (i) at a known geographic location continuously sampling said water at a selected flow rate and at a selected depth; 10
- (ii) continuously vacuum separating said water into liquid and gas phases;
- (iii) quantitatively separating interfering gas species from said methane at a series of separating stations by conveying said separated gas phase of step (ii) via an air carrier vented to atmosphere and flowing at a known flow rate, in seriation to and through said separating stations;
- 15 (iv) quantitatively oxidizing said methane at an oxidizing station; 15
- (v) cryogenically trapping gaseous oxidants of step (iv) in the form of carbon dioxide and water vapor at a trapping station; and
- (vi) isotopically analyzing said trapped oxidants of step (v) for carbon and deuterium distribution so as to determine biological and/or thermogenic origin of said methane and thereby aid in the evaluation of the hydrocarbon potential of said earth formation. 20
2. Method of Claim 1 in which said air carrier of step (iii) is also used to convey the separated methane of step (iii) to the oxidizing station of step (iv) and the resulting oxidants of step (iv) to the trapping station of step (v).
3. The method of Claim 2 in which the flow rate of said air carrier is from 20-120 microliters per minute and a cryogenic capture period for trapping said oxidants is sufficiently long to trap at least 10 microliters of said carbon dioxide. 25
4. Method of Claim 1, 2 or 3 in which said cryogenic trapping temperature of step (v) is from -160° to -180° C at air carrier flow rates from 20-120 microliters per minute.
5. Method of Claim 1, 2, 3 or 4 in which step (iii) related to separation of gas species that might interfere with accurate trapping of said methane, includes the sub steps of: 30
- (i') removing water vapor and molecular carbon dioxide from passing gas in the presence of said air carrier;
- (ii') oxidizing carbon monoxide to carbon dioxide;
- (iii') trapping the carbon dioxide of step (ii'); and
- 35 (iv') cryogenically trapping out all low-, mid-, and high-range molecular weight hydrocarbons above C_1 . 35
6. Method of claim 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5 in which the oxidation of said methane in step (iv) is catalytically assisted.
7. Method according to any preceding claim in which cryogenic trapping of oxidants of methane in step (v) includes the sub-steps of:
- 40 (a) interrupting venting of said air carrier to the atmosphere, by connecting a downstream end to a vacuum pump; 40
- (b) with said vacuum pump operating, sealing both upstream and downstream ends of the cryogenic trapped carbon dioxide and water vapor; and
- (c) removing said trapped carbon dioxide and water vapor to a mass spectrometer for isotopic examination. 45
8. Method of Claim 7 in which said isotopic examination provides delta ^{13}C value and deuterium distribution of said oxidized methane.
9. Method of on-site collection and examination of small concentrations of methane dissolved in sea water so as to predict hydrocarbon potential of an earth formation underlying a body of sea water, said formation containing a hydrocarbon pool that is the source of said methane, comprising: 50
- (i) at known geographic locations continuously sampling said sea water at depth;
- (ii) continuously vacuum separating said collected sea water into liquid and gas phases;
- (iii) continuously monitoring said gas phase of said separated water for the presence of hydrocarbons;
- (iv) if hydrocarbons are present, quantitatively separating out all interfering gas species to the detection of methane and its oxidation product, carbon dioxide and water vapor; 55
- (v) quantitatively oxidizing said methane to carbon dioxide and water and then cryogenically trapping the resulting carbon dioxide and water vapor in the presence of an air mixture flowing at a rate of about 20 to 120 milliliters per minute; and
- (vi) isotopically examining the carbon and deuterium distribution of said oxidized methane, so as to determine its biological and/or thermogenic origin. 60
10. Method of Claim 9 in which said isotopic examination of step (vi) provides a series of delta ^{13}C and deuterium values indexed to known geographic locations associated with said sampling locations of step (i).
11. Method of claim 9 or 10 in which step (iv) includes the following sub-steps performed in sequence in the presence of an air carrier having a flow rate between about 20 and 120 milliliters per minute:
- 65 (a) removing water vapor and molecular carbon dioxide from said gas phase of said separated water, by 65

passing same through a bed of absorbent materials;

(b) oxidizing any carbon monoxide to carbon dioxide by passing said gas phase through a catalytically-aided oxidation oven, maintained at mid-temperatures;

(c) removing the carbon dioxide of step (b) by passing the gas phase through another bed of absorbent material; and 5

(d) cryogenically trapping out all low-, mid-, and high-range molecular weight hydrocarbons above C₁, by passing the gas phase through an inert bed of beads maintained at extremely low temperatures, whereby all interfering gas species in said gas phase are removed prior to oxidation of said methane.

12. Method of Claim 9, 10 or 11 in which step (v) includes the sub-steps of:

10 (a) oxidizing said methane to carbon dioxide and water vapor by passing said methane and air mixture through a catalytically-aided oxidation oven maintained at a selected temperature range; and

(b) cryogenically trapping out said carbon dioxide and water vapor of sub-step (a) by passing them through an inert bed of glass beads maintained at extremely low temperatures.

15 13. Method of Claim 12 in which said cryogenic-trapping temperatures of sub-step (b) is in a range between about -160°C and -180°C. 15

14. Method in accordance with Claim 1 of on-site collection and examination of small concentrations of methane dissolved in water so as to predict hydrocarbon potential of an earth formation underlying a body of water, said formation being a source of said methane, substantially as hereinbefore described with reference to the accompanying drawings.