

Transformation of coral communities subjected to an unprecedented heatwave is modulated by local disturbance

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Corals are imminently threatened by climate change-amplified marine heatwaves. Yet how to conserve reef ecosystems faced with this threat remains unclear, since protected reefs often seem equally or more susceptible to thermal stress as unprotected ones. Here, we disentangle this apparent paradox, revealing that the relationship between reef disturbance and heatwave impacts depends upon the focal scale of biological organization. We document a heatwave of unprecedented duration that culminated in an 89% loss of coral cover. At the community level, losses hinged on pre-heatwave community structure, with sites dominated by competitive corals—which were predominantly protected from local disturbance—undergoing the greatest losses. In contrast, at the species level, survivorship of individual coral colonies typically decreased as local disturbance intensified, illustrating that underlying chronic disturbances can impair resilience to thermal stress at this scale. Our study advances understanding of the relationship between climate change and local disturbance, knowledge of which is crucial for coral conservation this century.

30 INTRODUCTION

Marine heatwaves threaten the persistence of tropical scleractinian corals (1–3), and with them
32 the biologically diverse ecosystems these foundational reef-building species support. Corals are
particularly vulnerable to temperature anomalies, with increases of only 1°C capable of
34 disrupting their obligate symbiosis with the photosynthetic dinoflagellate microalgae (family
Symbiodiniaceae (1)) that normally fuel them, causing the coral animal to expel its symbionts
36 and bleach (4, 5). Prolonged bleaching typically leads to coral starvation and mortality (5).
Although climate change has long been recognized as a serious threat to tropical corals (6–8), the
38 recent preponderance of marine heatwaves—persistent anomalously warm ocean temperatures
(9)—has shifted focus from the threats posed by gradually rising temperatures and ocean
40 acidification (8) to these punctuated disturbances (1, 3). Already, three global coral bleaching
events triggered by El Niño-fueled marine heatwaves (1997–1998; 2010; 2014–2017) have
42 caused devastating coral losses (10, 11). Climate change models project that both the intensity
and frequency of marine heatwaves will increase in the coming decades (1, 3), such that many of
44 the world’s coral reefs are predicted to undergo annual bleaching events by mid-century (12).
None of these events will, however, occur in isolation. On almost all reefs, climate change is
46 superimposed on a suite of chronic local anthropogenic disturbances (13)—ranging from coastal
development and associated pollution and reef sedimentation to overexploitation, destructive
48 fishing practices, and disease—that have already significantly altered coral communities through
reductions in coral cover and changes to community composition, with largely unknown
50 consequences for species and ecosystem resilience to thermal stress.

52 Given the intensification of marine heatwaves and the ubiquity of local anthropogenic
disturbances on coral reefs, there is an urgent need to understand how these stressors interact
54 (14). Yet to date, few coral bleaching studies have explicitly examined multiple stressors (15).
Chronic local anthropogenic disturbance might mediate coral reef responses to thermal stress,
56 either increasing susceptibility—as documented for massive corals on the Mesoamerican Reef
following the 1998 El Niño (16, 17)—or conversely enhancing resilience, if disturbances have
58 already eliminated the most vulnerable coral species, leaving behind only the hardiest species
(18)—as documented on Kenyan reefs (19). Alternatively, exposure to chronic local disturbance
60 may have no effect, with thermal stress impacting corals irrespective of underlying protection, as
found recently on the Great Barrier Reef (20). The degraded state of most modern reefs is widely
62 acknowledged (8, 13, 21, 22), and as managers seek to understand how to manage coral reefs
under climate change, one might expect that examination of multiple stressors would be common
64 practice in modern coral reef research. However, when we systematically reviewed studies
reporting on the effects of recent marine heatwaves (2014–2021)—a period that includes six of
66 the seven hottest years on record—we found that only 10% ($n = 20/194$) had explicitly tested if
local anthropogenic disturbance (or conversely, local protection) influenced heat stress effects on
68 corals (fig. S1, supp. data S1). Approximately half of those that did ($n = 9/20$) reported a positive
effect of protection and increased survival of corals during heat stress events, while 40% ($n =$
70 $8/20$) reported no effect and 15% ($n = 3/20$) of studies stated that protection reduced coral
resilience to heat stress. Conflicting evidence amongst the few bleaching studies that have tested
72 for the effects of local anthropogenic disturbance, and the overall lack of attention to this
fundamental aspect of modern coral reefs, impedes understanding of how best to manage these
74 ecosystems in a warming world.

How coral reefs are transformed by climate change this century will depend not only on their
76 exposure to thermal stress and local anthropogenic disturbance but also on the sensitivity and
response capacity of individual coral species to these stressors (23–25). Coral sensitivity to
78 thermal stress is determined by biological traits, such as tissue thickness (26), and physiological
tolerance, which is influenced by factors including the type and abundance of the coral colony’s
80 obligate algal endosymbionts (27–30). Response capacity, in turn, may reflect species-specific
propensity for acclimatization (e.g., the flexibility to switch or shuffle symbionts or to upregulate
82 host thermal stress responses) and adaptation (e.g., selection for traits of either the host or
symbionts that confer a fitness advantage under stressful conditions) (28, 31, 32). Interspecific
84 differences in sensitivity to thermal stress have long been recognized (23, 26, 33), with ‘winners’
generally able to either avoid bleaching during thermal stress or recover from it after warming
86 subsides, and ‘losers’ tending to bleach and die quickly in response to warming (34). Since
environmental filtering is stronger under stressful conditions (35–37), reefs increasingly stressed
88 by marine heatwaves may lose diversity and converge towards simpler assemblages as ‘losers’
are eliminated from the species pool. However, because repeated heatwaves may turn some
90 ‘winners’ into ‘losers’ and vice versa (38), questions remain about how corals with different
sensitivities will respond to heatwaves of increasing frequency, duration and intensity. Which
92 corals will endure in communities will also depend upon whether species exhibit positive or
negative co-tolerance to thermal stress and local anthropogenic disturbance (35, 39). Predicting
94 future reef states thus requires not only accounting for underlying anthropogenic disturbances but
also understanding interspecific variability in survivorship through heatwaves. To date, however,
96 most heatwave studies have focused on quantifying coral bleaching, a symptom of thermal
stress, rather than coral mortality, a fundamental parameter required to quantify the demographic

98 effects of such events. This disconnect reflects the challenge of quantifying coral mortality,
which under the strictest standards requires following individual colonies over time, and at
100 minimum requires quantifying coral cover before and after a heatwave, as opposed to bleaching
assessments which require only a single site visit. Although bleaching may be an accurate proxy
102 for mortality in short heatwaves, during prolonged events that are becoming the norm, for corals
that either bleach quickly and die (and hence are unlikely to be recorded in the bleached state) or
104 those that can persist in a bleached state for prolonged periods, it will not (40).

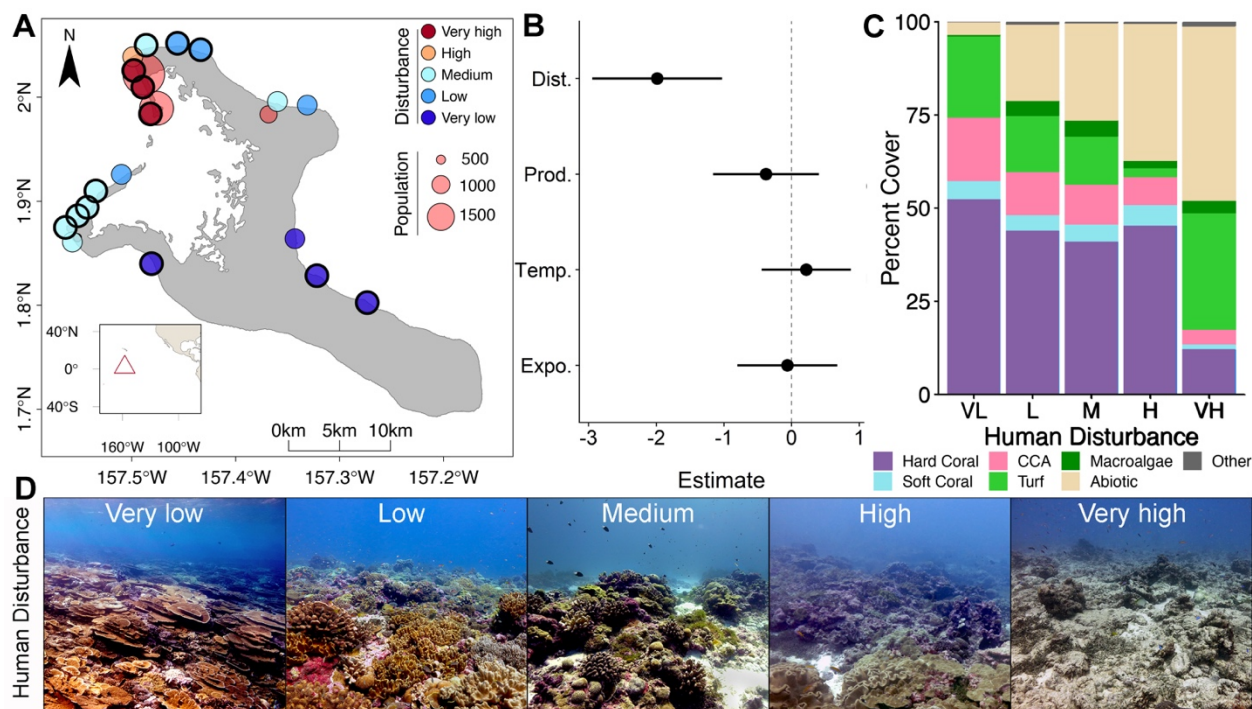
106 Here, we took advantage of the ecosystem-scale natural experiment created at the epicenter of
the 2015–2016 El Niño, the central equatorial Pacific Ocean, where prolonged heat stress
108 blanketed a spatial gradient of chronic local anthropogenic disturbance on the world’s largest
atoll, Kiritimati. We quantified thermal stress around the atoll using high-precision *in situ*
110 temperature loggers and satellite data. Our primary objective was to evaluate if protection from
local disturbance modulates the impacts of stress on corals. We sought to examine this question
112 both at the community level (i.e., amongst coral species) and at the species level (i.e., for
individual coral species). In addition, we evaluated if coral bleaching, the most commonly
114 recorded reef metric during heatwaves, accurately predicts coral mortality. Thus, over the course
of nine expeditions (2013–2017) before, during, and after the heatwave, at sites exposed to
116 varying levels of local disturbance (Fig. 1, A and D, fig. S2, S3), we quantified coral community
composition and bleaching (n > 250,000 points from 94 photo surveys) and, in one of the largest
118 longitudinal studies of individual corals to date (41), tracked the fate of > 850 individual coral
colonies.

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RESULTS

122 **Prolonged heat stress superimposed on reefs spanning a local disturbance gradient**

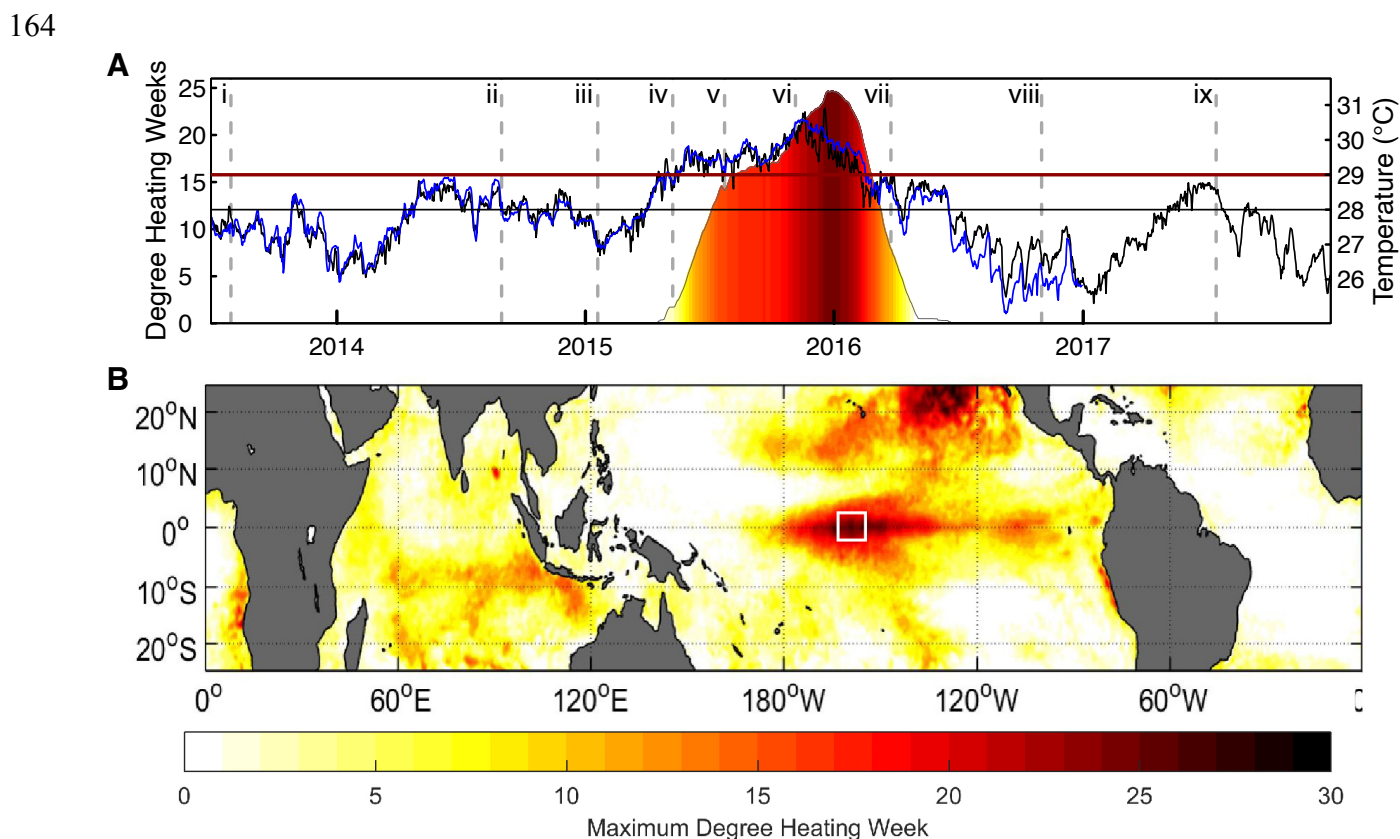
124 Prior to the El Niño, benthic communities varied dramatically across the atoll's forereefs, with sites ranging from a high of 62.7% hard coral cover to a low of only 1.6% (Fig. 1). Chronic local human disturbance (fig. S2, S3, table S1; detailed in Supplementary Materials), including 126 dredging and pollution, was the primary determinant of these differences, with coral cover declining significantly as local disturbance increased ($z = -4.063$, $P < 0.001$; Fig. 1B). Abiotic 128 factors, including oceanographic productivity, site exposure (windward versus sheltered), and sea surface temperature, did not significantly influence coral cover amongst sites (Fig. 1B, table 130 S2). Reefs far from villages, with very low exposure to chronic local human disturbance, were amongst the most pristine remaining on the planet before the heatwave, with almost three- 132 quarters of their benthos composed of hard and soft corals and beneficial crustose coralline algae (mean = $52.4 \pm 13.2\%$ (SD) hard coral cover) (Fig. 1C). In contrast, reefs exposed to the highest 134 levels of local human disturbance had little hard coral cover ($12.2 \pm 17.3\%$), with most of the benthic community composed of turf algae ($31.3 \pm 18.6\%$), sediment ($28.4 \pm 15.5\%$), sand ($11.9 \pm 3.2\%$), and rubble ($5.1 \pm 1.7\%$) (Fig. 1C). The effects of different intensities of chronic human 136 disturbance on reef states were strikingly evident visually prior to the El Niño-induced heatwave 138 (Fig. 1D).



140 **Fig. 1. Reef communities across a gradient of chronic human disturbance, prior to thermal**
 142 **stress.** (A) Reef sites on Kiritimati (central equatorial Pacific Ocean) at which coral community
 144 structure and individually tagged coral colonies (sites encircled in black) were tracked over the
 146 course of the 2015–2016 El Niño; (B) parameter estimates and 95% confidence intervals for
 148 factors examined (Dist. = local human disturbance, Prod. = net primary productivity, Temp. =
 150 temperature, Expo. = wave exposure) for their influence on hard coral cover prior to thermal
 stress; (C) mean community composition (CCA = crustose coralline algae; turf = turf algae;
 abiotic = sediment, sand, rubble) of the forereef benthos amongst sites, classified by their
 exposure to chronic local human disturbance; (D) photos of the coral reef communities prior to
 the El Niño, at sites representing each of the atoll's levels of local human disturbance.

As the epicenter of the 2015–2016 El Niño, Kiritimati's coral reefs experienced a sustained
 152 heatwave (Degree Heating Weeks (DHW, °C-weeks) > 0) for approximately one year (Fig. 2).
 Heat stress started accumulating on 17 April 2015 and exceeded 4 °C-weeks (NOAA's Coral
 154 Reef Watch (CRW) Bleaching Alert 1) from 28 May 2015 until 13 April 2016; DHWs > 0
 persisted until 17 July 2016 (Fig. 2A). Accumulated heat stress rapidly exceeded both NOAA's
 156 CRW Bleaching Alert Level 2 threshold (8 °C-weeks) and its 12 °C-weeks threshold, reaching
 an unprecedented level (> 24.7 °C-weeks; Fig. 2A, table S3) by January 2016. Heat stress was

158 remarkably consistent around the atoll, varying by a maximum of only 4.3% (1.08 °C-weeks)
across sites over the course of the event (fig. S4, table S3). Maximum temperature anomalies
160 ranged across sites from 2.83°C to 3.05°C above the reef's normal maximum monthly mean
(MMM) temperature during the event (table S3). The heat stress sustained by Kiritimati's reefs
162 during this El Niño far exceeds that at any other time point from the recent past for which there
are records (fig. S5).



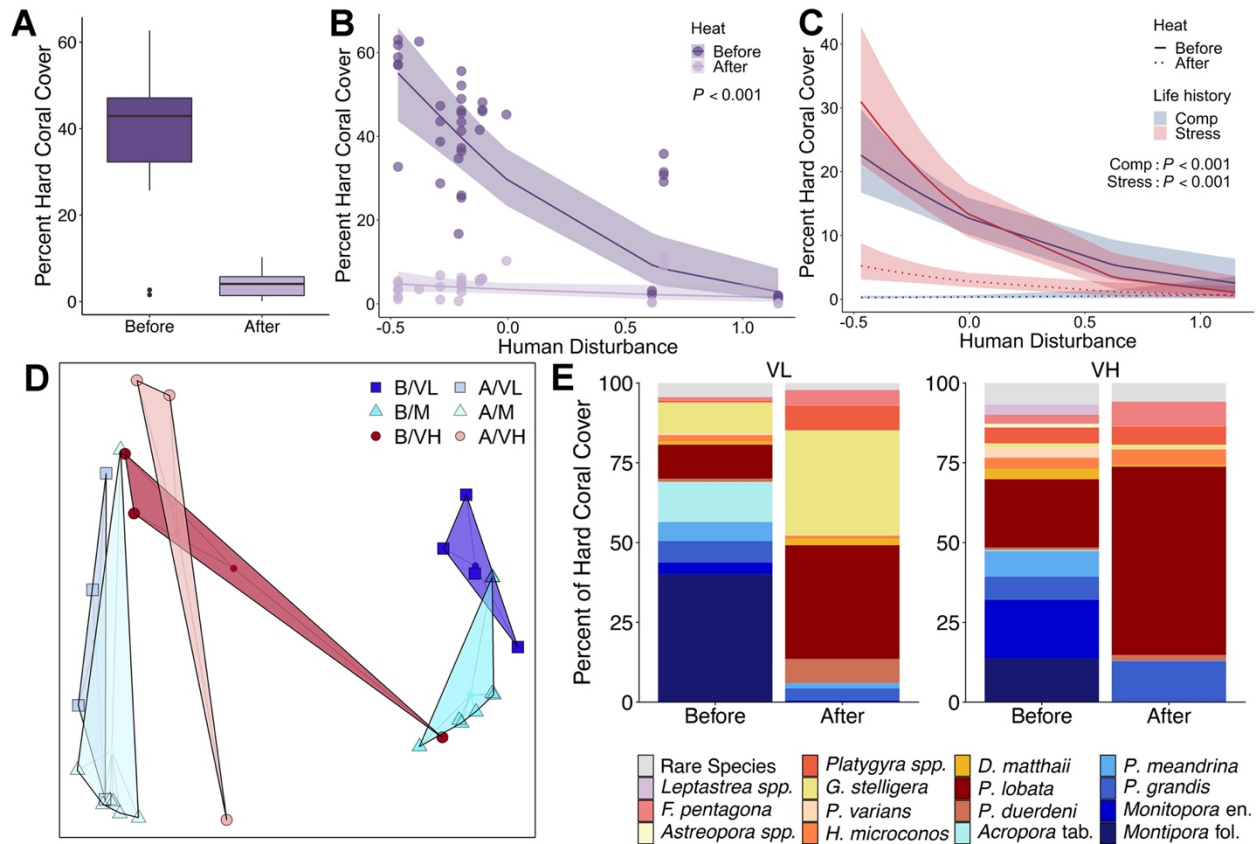
166 **Fig. 2. Thermal stress at the epicenter of the 2015–2016 El Niño.** (A) *In situ* (blue line) and
168 satellite (black line; from NOAA (42)) temperature on Kiritimati's reefs, with maximum
monthly mean (MMM) temperature and bleaching threshold for reference (black and red
170 horizontal lines, respectively; from NOAA CRW (Coral Reef Watch) (43)); all right axis. Color
shows cumulative heat stress on Kiritimati as degree heating weeks (DHW, °C-weeks; left axis),
172 from NOAA CRW (43). Dashed vertical lines denote the timing of expeditions prior to (i–iv),
during (v–vii), and after (vii–ix) the event. (B) Global heat stress on coral reefs during the 2015–
174 2016 El Niño (May 2015–June 2016) from NOAA CRW, with white box denoting Kiritimati's
location at the epicenter of the heat stress during this event. Color (scale at bottom) indicates
176 maximum thermal stress (°C-weeks).

178 **Prolonged heatwave impacts primarily reflect differences in coral community composition**

180 The exceptional heat stress unleashed on Kiritimati during the 2015–2016 El Niño caused
staggering coral mortality, culminating in an overall estimated loss of $89.3 \pm 7.1\%$ of the
182 forereef's hard coral cover (Fig. 3A, 4). Consistency in thermal stress around the atoll meant that
DHW was not a significant factor explaining variability in overall hard coral cover amongst sites
184 ($z = -0.447$, $P = 0.655$; table S4). Nor was bleaching prevalence early in the heatwave (fig. S6)
related to the final overall loss of coral cover in the community ($z = -0.633$, $P = 0.527$). Instead,
186 we found that heat stress period (i.e., before vs. after the event; $z = 18.096$, $P < 0.001$) and local
disturbance ($z = -5.146$, $P < 0.001$) were both significant predictors of coral cover. The
188 interaction between local disturbance and heat stress period was also significant, indicative of the
absolute loss of corals being much greater at minimally disturbed sites than at those exposed to
190 very high disturbance (Fig. 3B), which resulted in the strong inverse relationship between coral
cover and local disturbance being completely eroded by the end of the heatwave ($z = 6.538$, $P <$
192 0.001 ; slope = -0.73 , 95% CI: -1.66 – 0.21 ; Fig. 3B, table S4). Relative coral cover losses also
tended to be greater with lower local disturbance: on average, minimally disturbed sites
194 underwent an estimated $91.9 \pm 1.9\%$ decline in coral cover, ending the heatwave with only $4.7 \pm$
 1.5% coral cover, while sites exposed to very high levels of local disturbance—which already
196 had depressed levels of coral cover—declined by a further $64.6 \pm 15.1\%$, ending the heatwave
with only $3.89 \pm 4.6\%$ coral cover (Fig. 3B, 4). However, this difference in relative coral cover
198 losses was not quite statistically significant ($t = -3.1124$, $P = 0.09$), likely due to variable losses
at the high local disturbance sites. Reef-building corals were replaced primarily by turf algae,
200 which rapidly overgrew the dead coral, and at some sites also by macroalgae (Fig. 4, fig. S7).

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206 **Fig. 3. Impact of a prolonged heatwave on coral community composition.** (A) Overall
 208 change in hard coral cover across all sites from before to after the 2015–2016 El Niño on
 210 Kiritimati (sites as in Fig. 1A); model predictions of the effect of local human disturbance on
 212 percent coral cover before versus after the heatwave for (B) the overall coral community and (C)
 214 stress-tolerant (red) and competitive (blue) corals; (D) PCoA plots of coral assemblage structure
 216 before (B) and after (A) the event at very low (VL), medium (M), and very high (VH) levels of
 local human disturbance; and (E) comparison of average coral community composition across
 sites exposed to very low disturbance versus those exposed to very high levels of disturbance,
 before and after the heatwave (stress-tolerant species in shades of red – yellow, competitive
 species in blues).

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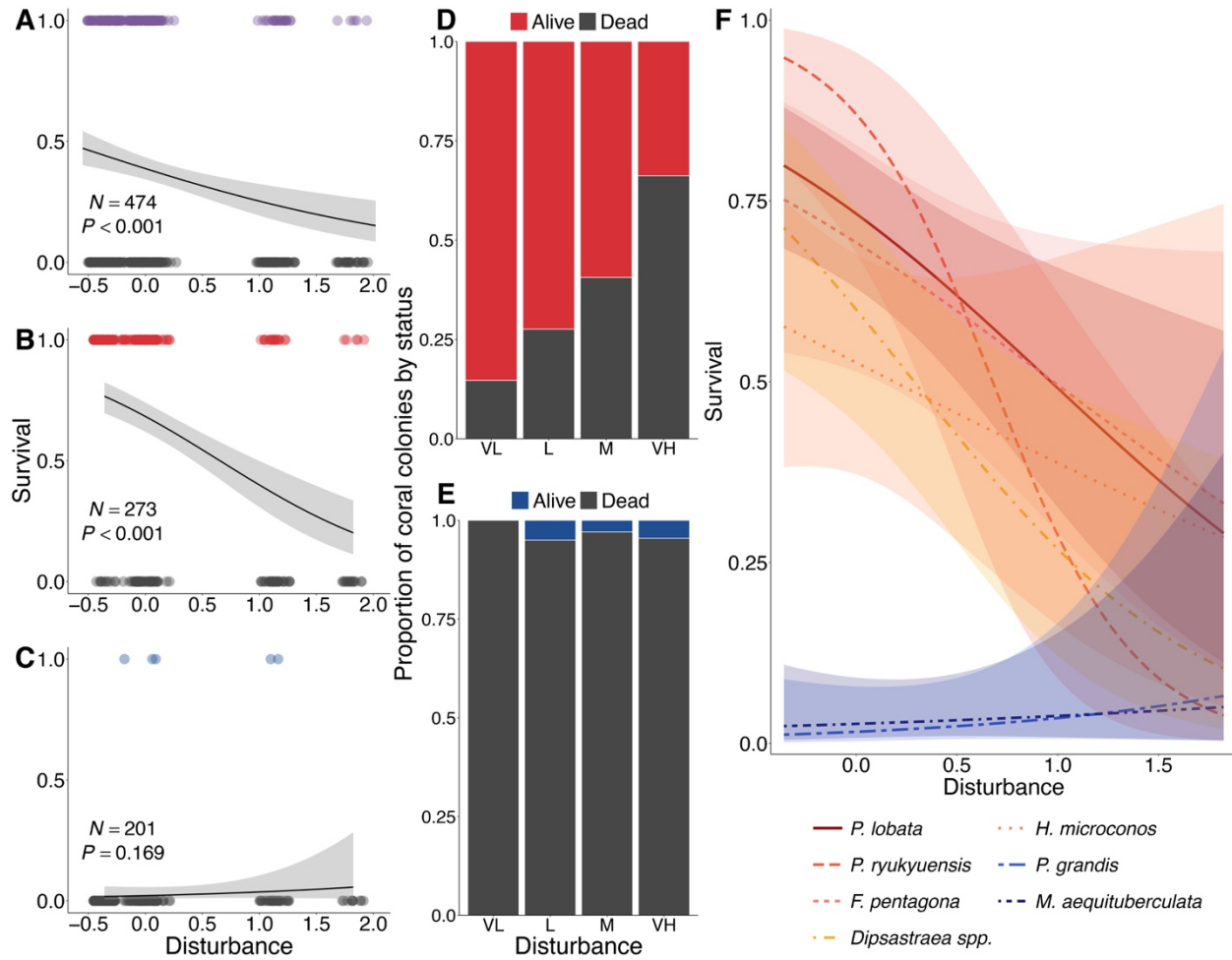
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Fig. 4. Transformation of a minimally disturbed coral reef by a heatwave of unprecedented duration. (A) Before (July 2015) and (B) after (July 2017) the 2015–2016 El Niño-induced mass coral mortality event at one site (VL1) with very low exposure to chronic local stressors on Kiritimati. Virtually all coral in (B) is dead and overgrown by turf algae. Photo credits: (A) Kieran Cox, University of Victoria and (B) Kristina Tietjen, University of Victoria.

244

We hypothesized that differences in coral cover loss across the local disturbance gradient reflected distinct coral communities, comprised of species with variable thermal stress tolerances, found at different disturbance levels. Examining these coral communities revealed

246 that not only did community composition vary with disturbance prior to the heatwave
(PERMANOVA, $pseudo-F = 4.4$, $P < 0.001$; Fig. 3D, dark shaded polygons), but that it also
248 changed significantly as a result of it (PERMANOVA, $pseudo-F = 15.3$, $P = 0.002$), with sites
exposed to very low or medium local disturbance experiencing greater turnover than those
250 exposed to very high disturbance (PERMANOVA, $pseudo-F = 3.9$, $P = 0.022$; Fig. 3D).
Underlying this change was the loss of corals with a competitive life history strategy, namely all
252 large tabulate and corymbose *Acropora* at very low local disturbance sites (100% loss) and all
foliose *Montipora* at very low and medium local disturbance sites (100% loss; Fig. 3E, 4).
254 Models testing the relationship between pre-heatwave community composition and coral cover
showed that sites dominated by ‘competitive’ corals were more strongly impacted by the
256 heatwave than those dominated by ‘stress-tolerant’ corals ($z = -3.169$, $P = 0.002$; fig. S8).
Moreover, separate models of competitive and stress-tolerant coral cover revealed that while the
258 cover of both life histories decreased significantly due to the heatwave (competitive: $z = -13.252$,
 $P < 0.001$; stress-tolerant: $z = -12.293$, $P < 0.001$; Fig. 3C, table S4), the degree of change was
260 substantially greater for competitive corals ($96.8 \pm 4.8\%$) than for stress-tolerant ones ($78.7 \pm$
 10.5% ; $t = -6.8807$, $P < 0.001$). We also found that, unlike for overall hard coral cover, the
262 magnitude of thermal stress at each site ($^{\circ}\text{C}$ -weeks) was statistically significantly related to the
cover of both competitive and stress-tolerant corals; however, its effect size was much smaller
264 than that of local disturbance or heat stress period (Table S4).



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Fig. 5. Survival of n = 475 individually tracked colonies throughout the heatwave. Logistic regressions of coral survival versus disturbance for: **(A)** all coral colonies, **(B)** stress-tolerant (red) species, **(C)** competitive (blue) species, and **(F)** all coral colonies, with species modelled as a fixed effect, in a two-way interaction with local disturbance; bar plots of coral colony survival by local disturbance level for **(D)** stress-tolerant and **(E)** competitive coral species.

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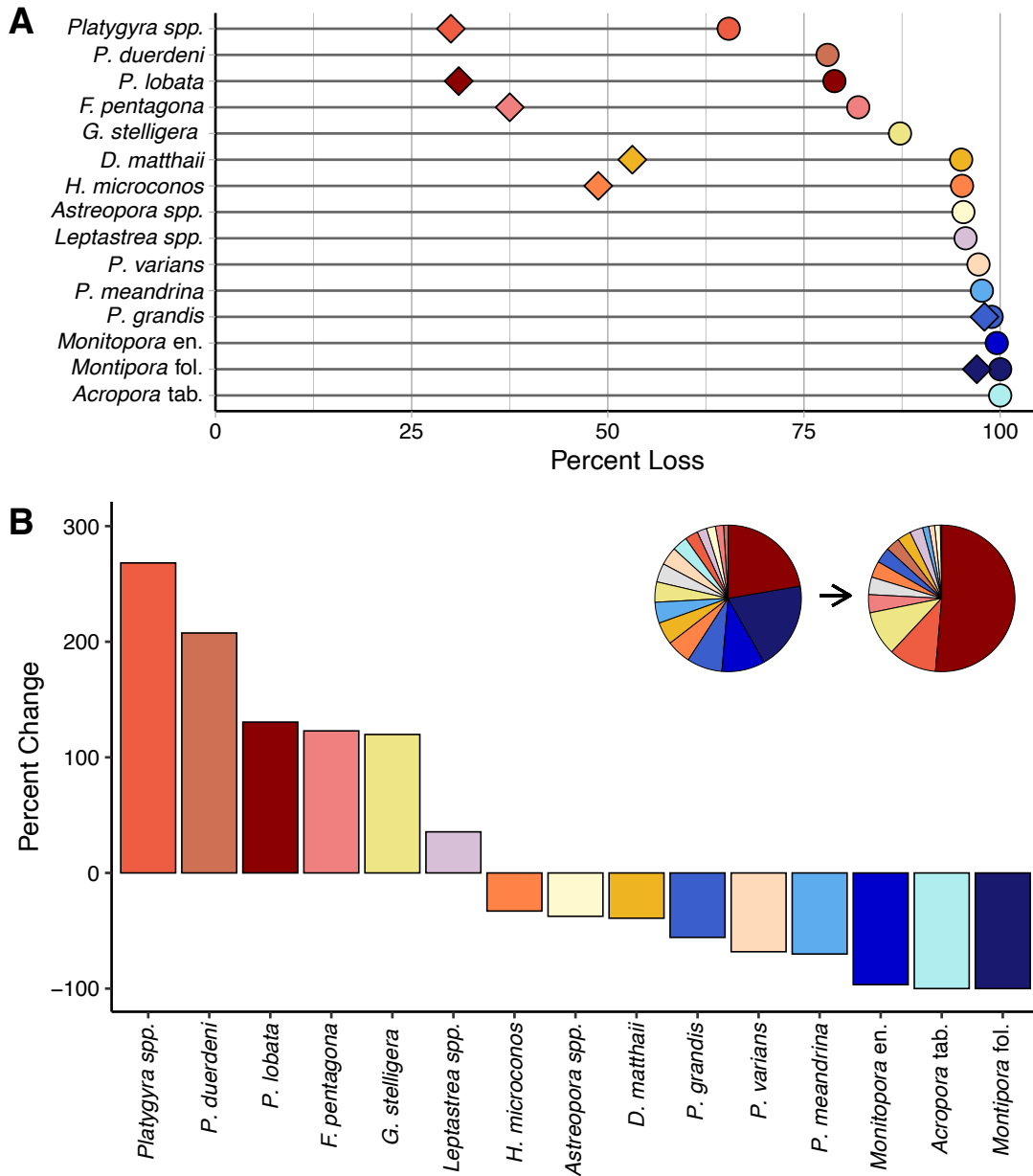
274 Chronic local disturbance can exacerbate heatwave impacts on individual coral species

276 In contrast to the observed changes at the community level, at the species level we found a clear
 278 signal of the negative influence of chronic local disturbance on coral survival through prolonged
 heat stress (Fig. 5; fig. S9). Examining a representative sample of the same seven coral species
 across sites showed a significant negative relationship between local disturbance and coral

280 survival ($z = -3.79$, $P < 0.001$; Fig. 5A, table S5). This signal became clearer when distinguishing
between life history strategies, with survival of the stress-tolerant coral species strongly
282 negatively related to local disturbance (Fig. 5, B, D and F) while that of the competitive coral
species showed no relationship with disturbance, namely because these colonies were so
284 sensitive to the heat stress that few of them survived (Fig. 5, C, E, and F; 2.0% survival for
Pocillopora grandis; 2.97% for *Montipora aequituberculata*). Individually, each stress-tolerant
286 coral species exhibited an inverse relationship between survival and local disturbance, with the
massive corals *Platygyra ryukyuensis* and *Porites lobata* exhibiting the steepest relationships (an
288 estimated 95% and 80% survival at very low sites, and 4% and 29% survival at very high sites
for the two species, respectively) and *Hydnophora microconos* the shallowest (58% survival at
290 very low sites to 28% survival at very high sites) (Fig. 5F, Fig. S9, S10, Table S5). Survivorship
of the two competitive species each showed weakly positive, but non-significant, relationships
292 with local disturbance, with mortality at all sites exceeding 97.5% (Fig. 5F, Fig. S9, S10).
Bleaching prevalence early in the heatwave was not related to the ultimate survival of any coral
294 species ($P > 0.69$) (Figs. S11, 12).

296 **Emergent winners and losers**

Given strong interspecific differences in survival, certain coral species emerged from this
298 unprecedented heatwave as winners, while others were clear losers (Fig. 6). All of the
competitive coral species were losers, having each lost over 97.5% of their cover (Fig. 6A). In
300 contrast, the winners were all stress-tolerant coral species that underwent smaller losses in cover
(65.4% to 87.2% for the five biggest ‘winners’) and thus increased considerably in their relative
302 proportion of coral cover (Fig. 6). Notably, the massive coral *Porites* spp., which was already the



304 **Fig. 6. Interspecific variation in prolonged heat stress impacts on corals.** (A) Overall change
 306 in percent cover of individual coral taxa (circles) for the 15 taxa comprising the greatest
 proportion of benthic cover prior to the heatwave, ordered from least to greatest cover loss;
 308 overall percent colony mortality for the seven individually tracked coral species is overlaid
 (diamonds). (B) Percent change in proportion of overall coral cover, from before to after the
 310 heatwave, ordered left to right from species that underwent the greatest proportional gains
 ('winners') to the greatest proportional loss ('losers'). Inset pie charts show species composition
 312 of the overall coral assemblage before (left) and after (right) the heatwave (grey = rare species).
 See table S6 for taxonomic and other details.

314

most common coral prior to the heatwave, underwent more than a two-fold relative increase,
316 such that over half of the atoll's remaining coral community is now comprised of this one slow-
growing, stress-tolerant species (Fig. 6B). Although two other corals—*Platygyra* spp. and
318 *Pavona duerdeni*—had even greater proportional gains, because they were initially relatively
rare, they still comprised only a small proportion of the coral community at the end of the
320 heatwave (10.6% and 3.1%, respectively; Fig. 6B). Finally, substantially lower rates of colony
mortality than coral cover loss for the five individually tracked stress-tolerant species reflects the
322 fact that while many colonies sustained partial mortality during the heatwave, a portion of the
colony was still alive at the end of it (Fig. 6A).

324

DISCUSSION

326 Despite the urgent need to leverage all available solutions for enhancing coral reef resilience to
thermal stress in the face of escalating climate change, it has been unclear if protecting reefs
328 from underlying local anthropogenic disturbance helps or hinders in this regard. Our study sheds
new light on this debate. Tracking whole coral communities and individual species exposed to
330 consistent thermal stress, but different levels of underlying local anthropogenic disturbance,
clarified that the relationship between local anthropogenic disturbance and climate resilience
332 varies qualitatively across biological scales. At the community level, we found that reefs exposed
to high levels of chronic local anthropogenic disturbance fared better through a prolonged
334 heatwave than those shielded from local disturbance, an outcome driven by differences in the
coral community composition amongst sites. In contrast, when comparing survival rates within
336 individual coral species, the predominant relationship for those species that were not eradicated
by the heatwave was one of declining survivorship as local disturbance increased. These findings

338 have implications for managing and restoring coral reefs as climate change-driven marine
heatwaves continue to intensify.

340

Winners and losers in prolonged heatwaves

342 Overall, we documented mass coral mortality (89% hard coral cover loss) arising from a
heatwave that persisted for a remarkable ten months unabated. At its peak, heat stress
344 accumulated to 25 °C-weeks (degree heating weeks), a level that had not previously been
anticipated to occur on any reef until mid-century (26). Its occurrence 35 years earlier than
346 predicted underscores how rapidly climate change is advancing (1, 2, 9). Although corals
typically exhibit high interspecific variability in their sensitivity to thermal stress (33), a
348 heatwave this extreme might have been expected to overwhelm the tolerance of even the most
resilient species, resulting in high mortality rates across the board. Instead, we found that
350 interspecific coral cover losses still varied widely, from the complete loss of tabular *Acropora*
and foliose *Montipora* to a loss of only 65% in the stress-tolerant mounding coral *Platygyra* spp.
352 Mortality rates for the individual colonies we tracked were also highly variable across species,
but with lower mortality rates for the stress-tolerant species because many of the colonies of
354 these species had surviving corallites, thus potentially paving the way for their recovery. Only on
nearby tiny Jarvis Island was thermal stress more extreme (maximum 31.58 °C-weeks) during
356 this heatwave (44, 45). There, reefs underwent an estimated >98% decline in hard coral cover,
with severe losses of *Montipora* spp. (100%), *Pocillopora* spp. (>90%), and *Pavona* spp. (~85%)
358 recorded in the surveyed areas (45, 46). Together, these results illustrate that extremely
prolonged heatwaves will still have ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, such that these events will cause not
360 only dramatic coral losses but also substantial changes in community composition.

Influence of local anthropogenic disturbance on coral survival

362 In species-specific models of the influence of exposure to chronic local anthropogenic
disturbance on coral resilience to thermal stress, we detected an inverse relationship for those
364 species with ‘stress-tolerant’ life histories. Survivorship of all stress-tolerant species was at least
twice as high at sites sheltered from local stressors compared to those with the highest exposure,
366 and over 10 times as high for that with the strongest inverse relationship, *Platygyra ryukyuensis*.
Increased coral sensitivity to thermal stress is, we expect, most likely attributable to the
368 diminished water quality at the most highly disturbed sites. On Kiritimati, raw sewage and
pollution inputs have resulted in increased turbidity and sedimentation (Fig. S3) and greater
370 concentrations of bacteria, virus-like particles, and potential pathogens in the water column at
these sites (47, 48). Previous studies have shown that low water quality can change the coral
372 microbiome (49–51), and microbiome analyses of subsets of our tracked corals prior to the
heatwave showed increased bacterial diversity at highly disturbed sites (52). Such changes can
374 have knock-on effects for coral physiology and survivorship even in the absence of warming
(53), which may then be exacerbated during heatwave events. Poor water quality, as with other
376 environmental stressors, can also lead to changes in coral–algal symbioses (54–56), which may
then influence coral resilience to subsequent thermal stress. Indeed, an analysis of our tracked
378 *Platygyra ryukyuensis* colonies revealed that distinct *Symbiodiniaceae* genera across the
disturbance gradient were linked to coral survival during heat stress (57). Although the
380 mechanism underlying the relationship between coral survival and local disturbance remains
unclear for the other stress-tolerant corals we tracked—and may differ across species—we
382 suggest that it likely results from distinct coral microbiomes, and their associated physiological
traits, found across the disturbance gradient. We attribute the failure to detect an effect of local

384 disturbance on coral resilience to thermal stress in our two competitive coral species to their
extremely high mortality. A recent study of a less severe heatwave, on Moorea, French
386 Polynesia, showed that bleaching severity was significantly increased by local nitrogen pollution
in the competitive coral genera *Acropora* and *Montipora* (58). Overall, these results suggest that
388 impairment of coral resilience to thermal stress by local stressors may be a general phenomenon,
and at least deserves increased research and management attention.

390
Strikingly, however, these species-level results stand in contrast to our own community-level
392 results, and previous studies, which have suggested that local disturbance enhances coral reef
resilience to thermal stress. Over a decade ago, Côte and Darling (59) argued that this would be
394 the case for coral reefs exposed to, and altered by, local stressors, because the most sensitive
coral species would already have been eliminated, leaving behind a more stress-tolerant
396 community. That is, if organisms exhibit co-tolerance to stressors (or, conversely, co-sensitivity)
such that they respond similarly to them, then the combined effects of the stressors may be
398 antagonistic, resulting in a response that is less than the sum of their individual effects (14, 39,
60). Although such a response is not a given, with multiple stressors also sometimes eliciting
400 synergistic or additive responses, it appears not uncommon on reefs exposed to local stressors
and global climate change. Darling et al. (19) found that while the stress-tolerant corals that
402 dominated fished reefs in Kenya prior to the 1998 El Niño were barely impacted by the
bleaching event, reefs in no-take reserves had more diverse coral assemblages, including many
404 corals with competitive life-history traits that exhibited co-sensitivity to fishing and bleaching,
and incurred heavy losses. More recently, Cannon et al. (61) showed that central Pacific reefs in
406 the Gilbert Islands that were exposed to higher levels of chronic local pressure were dominated

by a coral species tolerant of nutrient loading and turbidity and were subsequently less impacted
408 during a bleaching event than nearby reefs with fewer local pressures. At Kiritimati's highest
disturbance sites, we found that of the competitive coral species, *Acropora* were completely
410 absent, and while some encrusting *Montipora* persisted, only a few colonies of the foliose form
(common in less disturbed sites) were recorded. Thus, the 'positive' effect of local disturbance
412 reflects different community compositions and the variable thermal sensitivities of the coral
species that dominate disturbed reef communities, rather than there being a mechanism by which
414 local disturbance itself enhances coral resilience to thermal stress.

416 More difficult to reconcile with either our species- or community-level findings are studies
reporting that coral responses occur irrespective of local protection, influenced only by the reef's
418 exposure to thermal stress (18). In surveys of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park during the
2016 marine heatwave, for example, Hughes et al. (20) documented severe bleaching on reefs in
420 each of the park's types of management zones, and concluded that local management of water
quality and fishing pressure had little to no influence on coral resistance to extreme heat.

422 Similarly, a study in one of Indonesia's oldest marine parks during the same heatwave found that
management zone made no difference to coral losses (62). More recently, Baumann et al.'s (63)
424 global meta-analysis tested the relationship between human influence and coral resilience and
concluded that reefs isolated from human pressures are not more resilient to climate change,
426 noting that even the world's most remote reefs bear the impacts of intense marine heatwaves. We
concur that at broad spatial scales, exposure to thermal stress will be highly variable across the
428 considered reefs, and this may well be the primary determinant of reef impacts; remote reefs are
not immune to high thermal stress exposure levels. Such an emphasis on current and future

430 thermal stress exposures has proven useful when considering future thermal refugia for coral
reefs, as in the ‘50 Reefs’ conservation prioritization (64, 65). At finer spatial scales, however,
432 where thermal stress exposure is the same (or very similar) across reefs, a corollary of the
conclusion that coral responses are (or appear to be) the same irrespective of protection is that
434 coral sensitivities and response capacities to thermal stress must be the same across the
protection levels. We can envision only a few means by which these conditions could be met: 1)
436 corals are exposed to similar conditions inside and outside the protected area, such that the
communities do not differ. This is likely to be the case in some areas where MPAs either have
438 inadequate enforcement or have not been established long enough for coral recovery to have
occurred within the MPA; 2) exposures to thermal stress across protection levels were not
440 actually equal; 3) failure to detect different impacts due to insufficient power, or measuring
bleaching at only a single time point such that the full ecological impacts of the event were not
442 quantified; or 4) the coral communities differed because of the stressor, but the coral species in
the different areas had equal sensitivities and response capacities to heat stress. Scenarios one to
444 three do not imply that local disturbance has no effect on coral resilience to thermal stress, and
the high interspecific variability in thermal tolerance makes the latter scenario unlikely.

446
Considering our results together across scales suggests that, although local anthropogenic
448 disturbance can result in the loss of sensitive coral species such that the remaining community is
more tolerant to subsequent thermal stress, when comparing ‘apples with apples’—that is, the
450 same species across different levels of local anthropogenic disturbance—there is clear evidence
that local disturbance can impair survival. Thus, while there is compelling recent evidence that
452 coral reef recovery following bleaching events may not be aided by reef protection (18), our

study suggests that previous conflicting results pertaining to coral community resilience to
454 thermal stress can be resolved through consideration of biological scale.

456 **Coral bleaching does not foretell demographic impacts of prolonged heatwaves**

Our repeated reef surveys during an extended bleaching event also provide an empirical test of
458 the relationship between coral bleaching and mortality. Given the many challenges associated
with conducting *in-situ* assessments of coral bleaching events—including the need to marshal
460 resources quickly when heatwaves arise, the limited reef area that can be assessed by divers, and
the complexities of accessing remote reefs—rapid reef surveys at a single time point during a
462 heatwave are often used to assess ecological impacts. But whereas bleaching incidence may be a
reliable indicator of diminished coral fitness (given that it can lead to decreased coral growth and
464 reproduction), the capacity of corals to recover from bleaching means that it may not accurately
foretell coral mortality, and hence the demographic impacts of heatwaves. Indeed, we found no
466 relationship between bleaching prevalence and subsequent mortality levels in any of our tagged
coral species. Instead, we found that the species with the highest bleaching incidence early in the
468 event (*Platygyra ryukyuensis* and *Favites pentagona*) had amongst the lowest mortality, while a
species with very low bleaching incidence (*Pocillopora grandis*) suffered near complete
470 mortality (Figs. 6A, S11, S12); results were similar for our benthic community data. Mismatches
between bleaching and mortality could arise if certain coral species can resist the onset of
472 bleaching more than others, but then only persist in a bleached state for a short period (40, 66).
Such mismatches will be more likely in the prolonged heatwaves that are predicted to become
474 more common under climate change (40, 67), thus highlighting the need for increased sampling
during these events to accurately gauge demographic impacts. As the capacity to use satellite-

476 derived data to accurately monitor coral bleaching increases, these sources could help to
overcome this challenge.

478

Coral reef recovery from prolonged heatwaves unlikely under climate change

480 We posit that coral reef recovery from prolonged heatwaves is increasingly unlikely, because of
long ecosystem recovery times and the diminishing interval between successive heatwaves under
482 climate change (68, 69). On Kiritimati, our sampling up until three years after the end of the
heatwave (2019, prior to the onset of COVID-19) revealed new juvenile corals and regrowth of
484 colonies that had experienced partial mortality, which together resulted in some increase in
overall coral cover but still left the ecosystem a long way from full recovery. Long-term studies
486 of coral reefs from the Indian and Pacific Oceans following the major 1998 El Niño found that
recovery of hard coral cover typically took more than a decade and involved substantial turnover
488 of community composition, with ‘recovered’ reefs tending to have lower coral diversity and be
dominated by fast-growing corals (70–73). Recovered reefs in Moorea, for example, are now
490 dominated by ‘fields’ of weedy *Pocillopora*, while recovering reefs in the Seychelles became
dominated by fast-growing, branching *Acropora* corals (74). Reef recovery following mass
492 bleaching events is also not guaranteed. Following the 1998 El Niño, over 40% of surveyed reefs
in the Seychelles underwent regime shifts to fleshy macroalgae (73). Those that were on a
494 recovery trajectory, which had high coral cover prior to the 1998 El Niño, still had not fully
recovered by 2014, and although full recovery was projected to be complete within 17 to 29
496 years (74), progress was nullified by Seychelles’ 2016 bleaching event (75). Such outcomes are
increasingly likely with climate change (68). Thus, as with many reefs, full recovery of
498 Kiritimati’s reefs now seems unlikely.

Persistence of coral reefs throughout the 21st century will be dictated almost entirely by the
500 extent to which greenhouse gas emissions are reduced (67). Our study shows that prolonged
heatwaves under climate change will not only significantly reduce coral cover but also transform
502 coral community composition. Diminishing intervals between recurrent heatwaves will leave
most reefs with insufficient time to recover (68). Emissions reductions that only limit warming to
504 2°C are projected to result in the loss of virtually all coral reefs (99%), whereas if warming is
limited to 1.5°C, losses could be limited to between 70% and 90% (67, 76). Under such dire
506 conditions, strategies additional to GHG emissions reductions that can reliably enhance coral
resistance to, or recovery from, marine heatwaves should be broadly deployed. Yet, the efficacy
508 and scalability of the potential options remains uncertain. Our study provides evidence that coral
species' resilience to thermal stress is enhanced as local anthropogenic stressors are reduced.
510 These findings imply that alleviating local stressors—such as by improving water quality, which
is likely one of the most tractable options for reef managers—could not only benefit natural coral
512 reefs but also aid coral restoration efforts, improving the odds of success for the individual coral
species that are out-planted on reefs. With much still to learn about the interactions between
514 multiple stressors on coral reefs, we encourage researchers to explicitly incorporate local
stressors into future studies of marine heatwave impacts on coral reefs. In addition to urgent
516 reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, evidence-based local management actions that are both
scalable and durable are urgently needed as a means of increasing the odds of persistence for
518 these imperiled ecosystems under climate change.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

520 Literature survey

We conducted a systematic review of the primary literature to quantify the extent to which field
522 studies assessing the impacts of recent marine heatwaves (i.e., 2014 to 2021) on corals quantified
underlying local anthropogenic disturbance at their study site and tested for an effect of them on
524 coral outcomes through the heat stress event. On 9 September 2021, we conducted a search for
papers published between 2015 and 2021 using all databases on the Web of Science, with the
526 following search terms: (“coral*”) AND (“mortal*” OR “bleach*” OR “cover*” OR “health*”) AND (“El Niño” OR “El Nino” OR “ENSO” OR “heat*” OR “thermal stress” OR
528 (“temperature” AND “anomal*”) OR “bleaching event”). We evaluated each of the n = 721
papers returned from this search, reviewing the titles, abstracts, and method sections, to first
530 determine if the paper examined corals during a heatwave between 2014 and the present day; we
excluded papers describing lab-based studies or heatwaves prior to 2014. Additionally, we added
532 n = 10 papers that were not returned from this search but were known to quantify the effects of a
heatwave between 2014 and the present day. The remaining n = 184 papers that met our criteria
534 were classified based upon if the study included an anthropogenic disturbance (searching for
“anthropogenic”, “human”, “disturbance”, “stressor”, “cumulative effects” or “protection”) and
536 if the study analyzed or made conclusions about the effect of anthropogenic disturbances. We
also noted the type of disturbance (e.g., fishing, pollution), if the study included sites without
538 disturbance as a control, the coral sampling method (e.g., randomized quadrats, etc.), as well as
the frequency of sampling before, during, and after the heatwave event.

540

Study site

542 Situated in the central equatorial Pacific Ocean at the center of the Niño 3.4 region (a designation
used to quantify El Niño presence and strength) (77), Kiritimati (Christmas Island) is the world's
544 largest atoll by landmass (388 km², 150 km in perimeter). Coral reefs are exposed to vastly
different levels of chronic local human disturbance depending on their location around the atoll
546 (Fig. 1A). Human impacts—including pollution from sewage outflow and an oil company, major
infrastructure (i.e., a pier), and fishing pressure on the forereef—are densely concentrated on the
548 northwest coast, where the two main villages are located and the majority of the population
resides (Fig. 1A, table S1). In contrast, reefs on the atoll's north, east, and south coasts are
550 minimally impacted (Figs. 1, S2; detailed in Supplementary Materials) (78, 79).

We quantified the intensity of chronic local human disturbance at each forereef site
552 (described below in Field Methods), as in (57, 80), using two spatial data sources: 1) the number
of people residing within 2 km of each site, as a proxy for localized impacts, based upon the
554 Government of Kiribati's 2015 population census data for each village on Kiritimati (81); 2)
subsistence fishing pressure, quantified through detailed semi-structured interviews conducted
556 with heads of household in each of the atoll's villages in 2013 (82) and represented using a
kernel density function as a measure of its intensity at each site. We combined these data with
558 equal weight to create a quantitative metric of chronic local human disturbance at each site (table
S1). This metric correlated strongly with sedimentation, turbidity, and bacterial loads, three other
560 indicators of disturbance (see Supplementary Methods, Fig. S2). For visualization purposes, and
to contrast reefs exposed to local disturbance extremes, we also classified each site as one of five
562 distinct disturbance levels (very low, low, medium, high, and very high) based upon clear
breakpoints in our continuous disturbance metric (Fig. 1A, table S1) (57, 80). These terms should

564 be regarded as being relative to other levels of disturbance around the atoll, rather than absolute
levels of human disturbance.

566 In addition to local human disturbance, we also quantified site-specific oceanographic
parameters to assess their influence on benthic community composition around the atoll (detailed
568 in Supplementary Methods). We extracted remotely-sensed data for maximum net primary
productivity and wave energy from the open-source data product Marine Socio-Environmental
570 Covariates (MSEC (83)) and defined site exposure (i.e., windward versus leeward) based on the
dominant wind direction (southeasterly (84)).

572

Field methods

574 To examine how heat stress interacts with chronic local human disturbance, we conducted
benthic surveys at nineteen forereef sites on the atoll during nine expeditions between 2013 and
576 2017: four prior to the onset of thermal stress (July 2013, August 2014, January and May 2015),
three during the El Niño-induced heat stress (July and November 2015, March/April 2016), and
578 two after the event (November 2016, July 2017). The surveyed reefs at each site are all at 10–12
m depth on sloping, fringing reefs, with no back reef or significant reef crest formations, and
580 adjacent sites are all more than 1 km apart (with one exception) (85). On average, we surveyed
10.4 ± 4.9 sites per expedition, for a total of 94 surveys (table S7); logistical and weather
582 constraints associated with working in such a remote location prevented surveying all sites in
each time point (table S7).

584 To survey sites, we photographed the benthos underneath a 1 m² gridded quadrat (mean =
28.1 ± 4.1 quadrats per site) at randomly selected positions adjacent to a sixty meter transect that
586 had been placed along the 10–12 m isobath (n = 2,637 photos total; table S7). Photographs were

taken with a Canon Powershot digital camera (G15 and G16 models with an Ikelite housing and
588 wide-angle lens dome) that was white-balanced at depth on each dive. We analyzed all benthic
photos using CoralNet, an open-source online software for benthic image analysis (86), by
590 projecting 100 random points onto each image and manually identifying the substrate beneath
each point (n = 259,359 total) from our custom label set (n = 103 identification tags), which
592 consisted of coral (table S6) and non-coral animals, algae, bacteria, and abiotic substrates, such
as sand and sediment. Recognizing that some corals cannot be definitively identified to the
594 species level by morphology alone, we have identified some corals to the genus level only. For
each coral taxon, we confirmed that the morphotype was consistent across all sites. We also
596 included separate labels for bleaching and non-bleaching coral tissue (e.g., ‘bleaching *Porites*’,
‘*Porites*’), thus allowing us to determine the proportion of points per site in each expedition that
598 were bleaching for each coral taxon. We quantified each site’s benthic community composition
in each surveyed time point by dividing the total number of points for each substrate type by the
600 total number of annotated points from all quadrats (detailed in Supplementary Methods).

Additionally, we tagged and photographed 834 individual coral colonies from seven
602 species at thirteen of our nineteen monitoring sites (Fig. 1A) and tracked their fate over the
course of the El Niño event. We selected three common corals as our focal species (*Porites*
604 *lobata*, *Pocillopora grandis*, *Montipora aequituberculata*) because they were found at all sites
and include different life history strategies, with the first classified as being a ‘stress-tolerant’
606 coral, a group that is defined by slow growing, massive species and the capacity to tolerate
chronically stressful and variable environments, and the latter two considered to be ‘competitive’
608 corals, a group typified by large, branching and plating species with fast growth and the capacity
to dominate communities (19, 87–89) (table S6). We aimed to tag twelve colonies of each of

610 these three species per site. We also tagged up to six colonies per site of each of four less
common species (*Favites pentagona*, *Dipsastraea* spp. (primarily *D. matthaii*), *Platygyra*
612 *ryukyuensis*, *Hydnophora microconos*), each of which has a stress-tolerant life history strategy
(88) (table S6). Tagged coral colonies were located along the same transects as the benthic
614 photoquadrats. Colonies were first tagged and photographed during the August 2014 expedition,
prior to the onset of heat stress. For each coral, we photographed the entire colony parallel to the
616 colony surface with a ruler next to it for scale; macro shots were taken of the colony surface to
aid in identification where necessary. In each subsequent expedition (except November 2015),
618 we re-photographed each colony that could be relocated and also tagged and photographed
additional colonies.

620 We assigned each coral colony a bleaching status for each time point in which it was
photographed using the following visual criteria: 1) no bleaching or paling; 2) some light
622 bleaching but less than 5 cm across the largest patch and less than 50% of colony pale; 3)
bleaching in patches >5 cm or more than 50% of colony pale; 4) severe or complete bleaching
624 (>80%) or the entire colony pale. For binomial treatments of bleaching, we considered categories
1 and 2 to be “healthy” and categories 3 and 4 to be “bleached”. Thus, colonies were assigned to
626 “bleached” if they had at least one patch of their surface that was bleached and greater than 5 cm
across or if more than 50% of the surface of the coral was faded.

628 In total, we were able to determine the survivorship status of 474 of the tagged colonies
(average of $n = 36.5$ colonies per site; range = 9 to 56; Table S7); the remaining colonies could
630 not be relocated after the heatwave. Corals were recorded as surviving the heatwave if they were
found alive at any time point following the event, and as not surviving it if they were found dead
632 upon first inspection post-heatwave. This occurred at the end of the heatwave (March/April

2016) for most colonies, and in the two subsequent expeditions for corals located at sites that we
634 had either been unable to fully sample (i.e., one dive instead of two to three to search for all
corals) or sample at all (due to unfavorable weather conditions or logistical constraints) in
636 March/April 2016.

638 **Temperature and thermal stress**

We quantified temperature on Kiritimati during the 2015–2016 El Niño event using both
640 remotely sensed data extracted from NOAA’s Coral Temp product (42), as well as high precision
in situ temperature loggers (Sea-Bird Scientific SBE 56; $\pm 0.001^\circ\text{C}$ precision). *In situ* loggers
642 were deployed at sites around the atoll (minimum of one logger deployed per disturbance level; n
= 17 sites, including $n = 12$ of the sites surveyed in this manuscript) between 2011 and 2016, all
644 at ~ 10 m depth (range 8–12 m) on the forereef (fig. S1). For both data sources, we quantified
temperature for all available sites around the atoll as in Claar et al. (90) and averaged across sites
646 to produce a measure of island-wide temperature.

To assess the potential influence of baseline temperatures on coral communities around
648 the atoll prior to the 2015–2016 El Niño, we also extracted the maximum monthly mean
temperature (91) for each site from NOAA Coral Reef Watch’s (CRW) monthly mean sea
650 surface temperature climatology, which are produced at a 5-km spatial resolution
(<ftp://ftp.star.nesdis.noaa.gov/pub/sod/mecb/crw/data/5km/v3.1/climatology/nc/>).

652 We quantified thermal stress on Kiritimati during the 2015–2016 El Niño as degree
heating weeks (DHW; $^\circ\text{C}$ -weeks), the metric most commonly employed to assess coral bleaching
654 risk. Corals are sensitive to temperatures more than 1°C above their long-term maximum
monthly mean (MMM) sea surface temperature (SST), known as the bleaching threshold. DHW

656 is a measure of accumulated thermal stress, which is defined as the rolling sum of temperatures
above the bleaching threshold during the preceding twelve weeks (92, 93). Significant coral
658 bleaching is expected to occur once cumulative thermal stress has exceeded 4 °C-weeks (NOAA
CRW Bleaching Alert Level 1), with widespread bleaching and some mortality typically
660 expected at > 8 °C-weeks (NOAA CRW Bleaching Alert Level 2) (43).

DHW values for Kiritimati were extracted from the U.S. NOAA CRW's 5-km DHW
662 product (NOAA CRW Daily Global 5-km Satellite Coral Bleaching Heat Stress Degree Heating
Week Version 3.1) (93) for January 2011–December 2016 (90), for each of the nineteen study
664 sites, and used to calculate an island-wide mean (Table S3). Comparisons of these satellite-
derived thermal stress values to *in situ* estimates in a previous study (90) yielded consistent
666 results. Herein, we present the satellite-derived DHW data and analyses employing these data for
comparability with other coral bleaching studies. Additionally, to compare the thermal stress
668 experienced on Kiritimati during this heatwave to earlier events, we extracted DHW values (as
above) from 1985 to 2018 (Fig. S4).

670

Statistical analyses

672 Analyses were conducted in R 4.0.4. interfaced with Rstudio 1.4.1106.

We fit a series of generalized linear mixed-effects models (GLMMs) with the benthic
674 community composition data, in which the overall proportion of hard coral cover (i.e., the
response variable) was modelled with a beta error distribution and a logit link, using the
676 *glmmTMB* package (94). First, to examine influences on coral cover prior to the 2015–2016 El
Niño, we modelled overall hard coral cover as a function of chronic local disturbance
678 (continuous) and three environmental variables: maximum net primary productivity (NPP; mg C

m⁻² day⁻¹), sea surface temperature, and site exposure (windward vs. sheltered). Second, to assess
680 the influence of prolonged heat stress on coral communities, and if chronic local human
disturbance modulates heat stress impacts, we modelled overall hard coral cover as a function of
682 heatwave period (before vs. after), maximum heat stress experienced during the El Niño (i.e.,
maximum site-level DHW), chronic local disturbance, and a two-way interaction between
684 heatwave period and disturbance. Third, we examined if the impact of the heatwave on coral
cover was modulated by the pre-El Niño coral community composition. To do so, we defined a
686 ‘dominant coral life history’ covariate for each site by classifying each coral species according to
its life history strategy (following (88), table S6), then classifying each site as ‘stress-tolerant
688 dominated’ (if > 60% of the corals at that site had this life history strategy), ‘competitive
dominated’ (if > 60% of the corals at that site had this life history strategy), or ‘mixed’ (if there
690 was no dominant life history type). We included this covariate as a fixed effect in a model of
overall hard coral cover, with a two-way interaction between it and heatwave period (before vs.
692 after); maximum site-level DHW was also included as a fixed effect. Fourth, to directly quantify
the impacts of heat stress on corals with distinct life history types, we fit separate models for the
694 cover of stress-tolerant corals and the cover of competitive corals. In these models, coral cover
was modelled as a function of heatwave period, chronic local disturbance (including the two-way
696 interaction with heatwave period), and maximum site-level DHW. We fit two different versions
of these life history models: one where the cover of each life history type was calculated as the
698 proportion of overall benthic cover and one where it was calculated as the proportion of total
hard coral cover. In all models, continuous explanatory variables were standardized using the
700 ‘rescale’ function in the *arm* package, and site was included as a random effect to account for the
non-independence of data collected at the same site over time. Expedition was also included as a

702 random effect in all models (with site and expedition modelled as crossed random effects),
except for the competitive coral cover model, as its inclusion in this model led to convergence
704 issues. To test the sensitivity of the competitive model to this change, we ran all the other models
without expedition as well and found that this did not result in any significant changes to the
706 model results. See Supplementary Methods for additional details.

We also employed a multivariate approach to examine differences in hard coral
708 community composition across the disturbance gradient, both before and after the heatwave, by
conducting multivariate ordinations and statistical analyses using the *vegan* package (95). A site-
710 by-species matrix was created for the entire hard coral community using measures of percent
cover. We performed multivariate ordinations (principal coordinates analysis; PCoA) using the
712 ‘betadisper’ function to visualize differences in the coral communities amongst the three most
disparate (very low, medium, very high) levels of local human disturbance and across heat stress
714 periods. We then tested for significant differences in coral community structure using
permutational multivariate analysis of variance tests (PERMANOVA; ‘adonis’ function) with
716 999 permutations and Bray–Curtis distances. Heat stress, human disturbance, and their
interaction were included as fixed effects, while site was incorporated as a blocking factor using
718 the strata term in ‘adonis’.

We used our longitudinal tagged coral dataset to directly examine the impact of
720 prolonged heat stress on the survival of individual coral colonies. In all cases, coral survival was
modelled using generalized linear models (GLMs), with a binomial distribution and logit link, in
722 the *stats* package. We modelled the survival of stress-tolerant and competitive corals separately,
with coral species, chronic local disturbance, maximum site-level DHW, maximum net primary
724 productivity, and site exposure (windward vs. sheltered) included as fixed effects in each model,

plus a two-way interaction between coral species and local disturbance. We present the results of
726 these models, and visualizations of these models without species included (to show the
relationship between coral survival of each life history strategy and disturbance; Fig. 5, B, and
728 C), as well as an overall model (all species, with a species-by-disturbance interaction, to show
the relationship between survival of all seven coral species with disturbance; Fig. 5F). To
730 visualize the overall pattern, we also modelled and displayed all corals together without life
history or species in the model (Fig. 5A), but with the other covariates. All continuous
732 explanatory variables were standardized using the ‘rescale’ function in the *arm* package. For
each of these model subsets (e.g. overall model, stress-tolerant model, competitive model, etc.),
734 we ran models with all possible combinations of variables. We then used AIC to determine the
top model for each model subset. In all cases, the model with disturbance (and the two-way life
736 history or species interactions, where included) but without any of the environmental variables
had the lowest AIC. Additionally, in all cases, for the models within 4 Δ AIC of the model with
738 the lowest AIC, disturbance (and the two-way life history or species interactions, where
included) was significant, but other variables were not. We initially also included ‘site’ as a
740 random effect, but in all cases this worsened the model fit.

Finally, to assess if bleaching is an accurate metric of heatwave outcomes for corals, we
742 a) used the benthic photoquadrat data to test if the extent of bleaching at a site early in the
heatwave (July 2015) was a predictor of the final overall coral cover loss at each site, and b) used
744 the tagged coral colony data to test if corals that exhibited bleaching early in the heatwave had
lower survival through the event. First, using the photoquadrat data, we calculated the proportion
746 of hard corals that were bleached in July 2015 at each site ($n = 13$ sites, as not all sites were
surveyed in July 2015; fig. S7) as well as the loss of coral cover. The proportion of coral cover

748 lost at each site was calculated by averaging coral cover values across field seasons within each
heatwave period, then using the following formula:

750 (1) Loss of coral cover =
$$\frac{\text{Mean coral cover 'before'} - \text{Mean coral cover 'after'}}{\text{Mean coral cover 'before'}}$$

We modelled the loss of coral cover as a function of three continuous variables—proportion of
752 bleached corals, local disturbance, and maximum heat stress (°C-weeks)—using GLMMs with a
beta error distribution and logit link. Separate models were fit for the overall hard coral
754 community and for both competitive and stress-tolerant corals. Next, using the tagged coral
colony data, we modelled coral survival using GLMs with a binomial distribution and a logit
756 link. Bleaching status, coral species, disturbance, and exposure were included as fixed effects,
along with a two-way interaction between coral species and bleaching status. We first treated
758 bleaching as a binary state (as detailed above and reported in the results) and tested the
sensitivity of our results to this assumption by also modelling the four different bleaching
760 categories (see Supplementary Materials). We conducted all of these models both for the overall
tagged coral dataset, and then for the stress-tolerant and competitive coral species separately.
762 Bleaching results did not differ across any of these different model forms.

764

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1060

Acknowledgements

1062 We gratefully acknowledge our collaborators and friends on Kiritimati who facilitated this
1064 research, R. Bebe, P. Tofinga, T. Kirata, T. Alefaio, V. Hnanguie, F. Tiata, J. Teem, and L.
1066 Teem; L. Szostek, M. Watson, S. McNally, K. Cox, T. Stovel, J. Mortimer, J. Burns, K. Bruce
for help collecting the field data; N. O'Brien, L. Szostek, R. Hansen, E. Giannantonio and A.
Kozachuk for assistance with benthic image processing.

1068

Funding:

National Science Foundation (NSF) RAPID grant OCE-1446402 (JKB, KMC)
1070 Rufford Maurice Laing Foundation (JKB)
Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) Discovery
1072 Grant (JKB)
Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) EWR Steacie
1074 Memorial Fellowship (JKB)
Canadian Foundation for Innovation (CFI) Leaders Opportunity Fund (JKB)
1076 British Columbia Knowledge Development Fund (JKB)
University of Victoria (JKB, DCC)
1078 University of Victoria Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives (JKB, DCC)
David and Lucile Packard Foundation (JKB)
1080 The Pew Charitable Trusts, Pew Fellowship in Marine Conservation (JKB)
Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) Vanier Canada
1082 Graduate Scholarship (DCC)
Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada Canada (NSERC)
1084 Graduate Scholarships (JMTM, DM)
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Climate and Global Change
1086 Postdoctoral Fellowship Program, administered by UCAR's Cooperative Programs for
the Advancement of Earth System Science (CPAESS) award NA18NWS4620043B
1088 (DCC)
American Academy of Underwater Sciences (DCC)
1090 International Society for Reef Studies (DCC)
National Geographic Young Explorers Grant ((DCC)
1092 Women Divers Hall of Fame (DCC)
Sea-Bird Electronics equipment grant (DCC)
1094 Divers Alert Network (DCC).

- 1096 **Author Contributions:**
 Conceptualization: JKB
- 1098 Data collection: JKB, DCC, KLT, JMI, KMC, DGM
 Data processing: DGM
- 1100 Data analysis: KLT, JMTM, DCC, JKB
 Writing—original draft: JKB
- 1102 Writing—review & editing: JKB, DCC, KLT, JMTM, DGM, KMC, JMI
- 1104 **Competing Interests:** Authors declare that they have no competing interests.
- 1106 **Data and materials availability:** Data reported in this paper are provided on Zenodo;
 code to reproduce the analyses and figures is provided on GitHub
1108 [<https://github.com/baumlab> with repository made public upon after acceptance].