

Terence Hughes, awardee in the Ecology and Conservation Biology category (12th edition)

It is a great honour to be named a Frontiers of Knowledge laureate, and to share this award with two of my heroes - renowned marine biologists, Carlos Duarte and Daniel Pauly. Our research recognizes that People, even those of us who live in cities, depend on ecosystems for food, water, energy and for other services that nature provides to societies. Preserving increasingly-threatened ecosystems, while at the same time promoting human well-being, represents a truly Grand Challenge.

I'd like to congratulate and thank the BBVA for establishing its Foundation and the visionary Frontiers of Knowledge Awards, and I thank also the distinguished members of the selection committee for the category of Ecology and Conservation Biology. As well, I'd like to gratefully acknowledge all of my colleagues and students in Australia and elsewhere, and above all my wife, MaryJo and our children, for their longstanding encouragement and support.

Throughout my career, I have been privileged to study tropical coral reefs. Reefs are critically important to about 400 million people in tropical countries who depend on them for their food security and their livelihoods.

But marine ecosystems everywhere are threatened by over-harvesting, pollution and increasingly by anthropogenic climate change. The insidious thing about global climate change is that it transcends national boundaries, affecting even the most remote, most pristine and best managed reefs, throughout the tropics.

At the beginning of my career, the phenomenon of large-scale coral bleaching was unheard of. Later, in 1998, then the hottest year on record, we saw the first global coral bleaching event, affecting 70% of the world's coral reefs.

Mass bleaching is a stress response by overheated corals, where they lose their colour and many of them die. Importantly, Global heating is not a distant risk that might affect coral reefs in the future – it's already harming them, right now.

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Receiving a BBVA Frontier in Knowledge Award is a major achievement because it acknowledges, empowers and legitimizes our research, which especially in the realm of climate change – which is often contested by vested interests.

Returning coral reef systems to their former glory is no longer possible. Our objective now is to deliver the research needed to inform and support reef governance - to navigate the transition to new emerging coral reef ecosystems that can maintain biodiversity, biological functions and support human well-being.

It is not too late - The window of opportunity to save reefs is still open, but it's also closing rapidly. We all have to act now to curb future warming in order to secure a future for coral reefs and for the people who depend on them

I sincerely thank the BBVA Foundation for empowering this message.

THANK YOU.