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UOG secures grant for innovative coral restoration

Coral restoration efforts on Guam received a funding boost of $856,000 for the next three years. The funds were awarded to the University of Guam on Nov. 18 by the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation through its National Coastal Resilience Fund and will be matched with $596,000 raised by the university, bringing the total to $1.4 million.

The University of Guam project was one of 44 projects awarded nationally among 176 proposals.

“This award is a significant amount — the largest amount so far for coral restoration in this region, to my knowledge,” said Laurie J. Raymundo, interim director of the UOG Marine Laboratory who will serve as principal investigator and researcher on the grant.

The project will involve Raymundo and her graduate students, led by Ph.D. student Whitney Hoot, propagating types of staghorn corals that survived the mass coral bleaching and mortality events in the last five years. They will outplant cultured corals onto reef flats in Tumon, Piti, and Cocos/Achang while developing best restoration practices, including determining optimum planting density, maximizing genetic diversity, and examining environmental influences that impact the process.

David Combosch, an assistant professor of population genetics at the Marine Lab, will be genotyping all of Guam’s cultured populations of staghorns to examine differences in heat resilience and disease susceptibility. The group will attempt to cross breed gametes of these different populations, as well as plant populations of mixed genotypes, to facilitate successful interbreeding and development of genetically diverse populations.

“Throughout the course of this grant, I hope to develop a solid core of people who are trained to do this work on Guam and to develop some tested and reliable methods for propagating and outplanting specific species,” Raymundo said. “The grant has promised 4.15 hectares of planted coral substrate over the course of three years.”

The National Coastal Resilience Fund grant slate for 2019 will invest $29.3 million nationwide into innovative approaches that strengthen natural infrastructure to protect coastal communities, enhance fish and wildlife habitat, and allow communities to recover more quickly from hazardous weather events.

Funds will be administered by the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation in partnership with the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration. The Research Corporation of the University of Guam will manage the grant for the university.

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University of Guam graduate student Andrew McInnis attaches a staghorn coral fragment to a deployed coral tree last December in the Piti Bomb Holes marine preserve.