

## ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies Media Release

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### CORALS NOT DOOMED – ‘IF WE DO THE RIGHT THING’

The world’s coral reefs are not doomed – provided governments and communities take the urgent and necessary actions to preserve them.

That’s the message from eminent Australian marine scientist and recipient of this year’s Darwin Medal Professor Terry Hughes in his keynote address to the 11<sup>th</sup> International Coral Reef Symposium, being held at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA from June 7-11.

Prof. Hughes is the Director of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, based at James Cook University, Townsville, Australia.

“The global coral reef crisis is really a crisis of governance. Many of the measures put in place are failing, not because of biology, but because of lack of support from local people and governments,” he says.

“For example many no-take marine reserves have been set up round the world by non-government organisations – but nearly all of them are proving unsuccessful because they ignore the needs of the local population and have failed to win their backing.”

Professor Hughes called on coral reef researchers worldwide to work harder at the societal and economic aspects of protecting the oceans and their living resources. Good biology alone is not enough. “The reefs are not doomed if we all do the right thing,” he asserts.

On land, environmental science now accepts that people are a part of the ecosystem and that sustainable solutions have to include them and their needs. At sea, he warns, the tendency is still to try to solve the problem by excluding people entirely from marine resources.

“If you take the Coral Triangle bounded by Indonesia, Borneo and Papua New Guinea, there are around 200 million people who depend on it for their livelihoods. You cannot ignore the needs of these people in devising ways to protect their marine diversity.”

Prof. Hughes argues that traditional conservation is backward-looking, often seeking to restore the pristine wilderness of yesterday. It treats people and nature as separate, and wishes that the world could be static. This is incompatible with the reality of a surging human population and its demand for protein, as well as the constant evolution and change in natural systems.

“You cannot simply remove the needs of hundreds of millions of people from the equation. You have to design your conservation measures so that they also address things like ecosystem

services which the ocean provides to humans, and sustainable livelihoods for people who depend on the sea, as well as protecting biodiversity.”

He says many no-take reserves were also poorly designed because they ignored the need to also look after the surround areas where fishing was still allowed. “These areas may be less species-rich than the protected zone, but they play a vital role in connecting protected areas together, and have to be managed in concert with them.”

Professor Hughes warns that the world is entering a transitional period in which humanity can choose whether to cross, or to avoid, tipping-points from which there is no recovery – at least within human time-spans.

“We need to adopt a forward-looking approach, to actively navigate to the "place" we want to be in terms of our environment, land and sea,” he says. “This means accepting that we have changed some things permanently, and that we can choose to manage a new state – or to allow the resource to continue to decline to point from which it may not recover.”

Such a tipping point may be evident in the coral reef systems of the Caribbean which largely collapsed and have now failed to recover, mainly because the corals can no longer regenerate fast enough to cope with overfishing, hurricanes and other impacts, he says. The reefs are overgrown with weed and the coral broodstock so reduced it cannot compensate for new impact losses.

At ICRS this year Professor Hughes will receive the International Society for Reef Studies’ highest honour, the Darwin Medal, for his outstanding contribution to marine and coral science and to the growing appreciation of the importance of the resilience of natural systems, a scientific view in which he was a leading player.

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[www.coralcoe.org.au](http://www.coralcoe.org.au)

International Coral Reef Symposium:

[http://www.nova.edu/ncri/11icrs/media\\_newsroom.html](http://www.nova.edu/ncri/11icrs/media_newsroom.html)