

# Pacific Reef Assessment and Monitoring Program

## Benthic REA monitoring summary: Northwestern Hawaiian Islands 2016

### About this summary

The purpose of this document is to provide a brief summary of the most recent survey efforts conducted in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) by the Coral Reef Ecosystem Program (CREP) of the NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center as part of the Pacific Reef Assessment and Monitoring Program (Pacific RAMP). A more detailed assessment of coral populations, reef community structure, and the potential impacts of the 2014-2015 bleaching events in the NWHI will be summarized in future publications.

### Sampling effort

- Coral reef ecological monitoring surveys in the NWHI were conducted from August 29 to September 30.
- Surveys were conducted at 81 sites across four islands and atolls: French Frigate Shoals, Lisianski, Kure, and Pearl and Hermes.
- Coral demography, partial mortality, and condition were surveyed using belt transects; benthic community structure will be assessed using photoquadrats.

### Overview of data collected

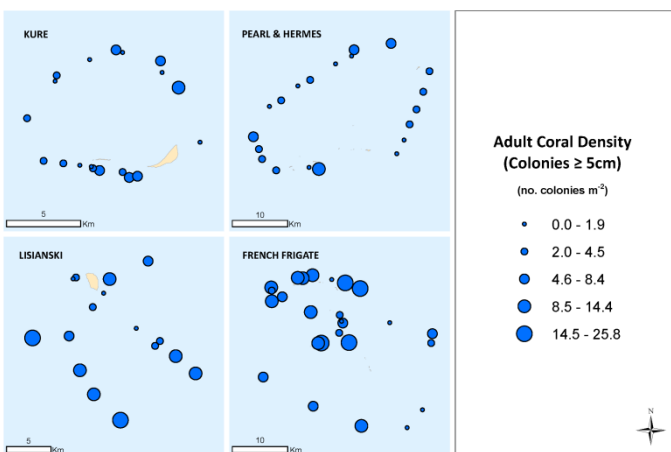


Figure 1. Mean density of all adult coral colonies (Scleractinia,  $\geq 5$  cm) at survey sites.

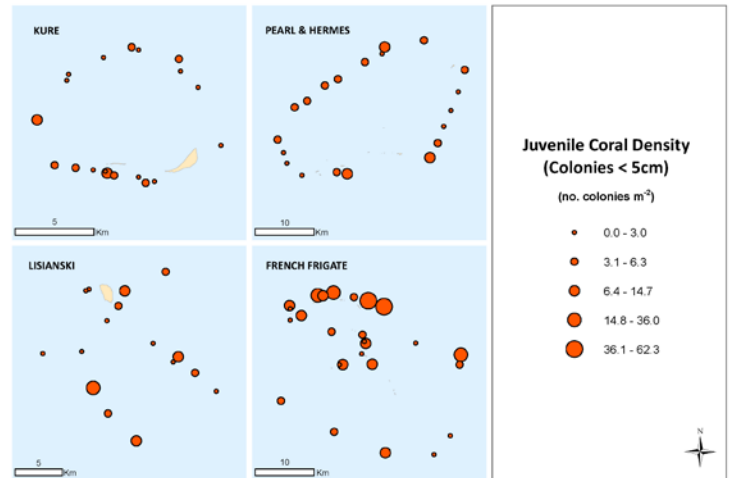


Figure 2. Mean density of all juvenile coral colonies (Scleractinia,  $< 5$  cm) at survey sites.

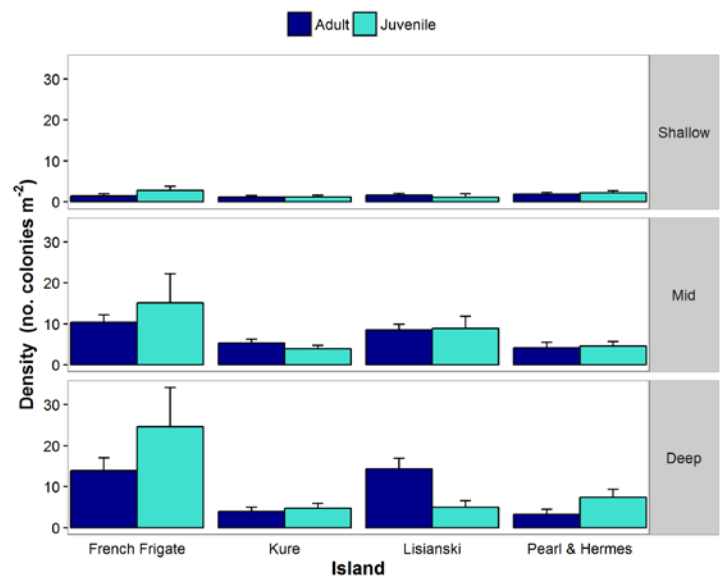


Figure 3. Mean density of adult (dark) and juvenile (light) coral colonies ( $\pm$  SE) grouped by island, fore reef, and within three depth categories: shallow (0–6 m), mid-depth (> 6–18 m), and deep (> 18–30 m).

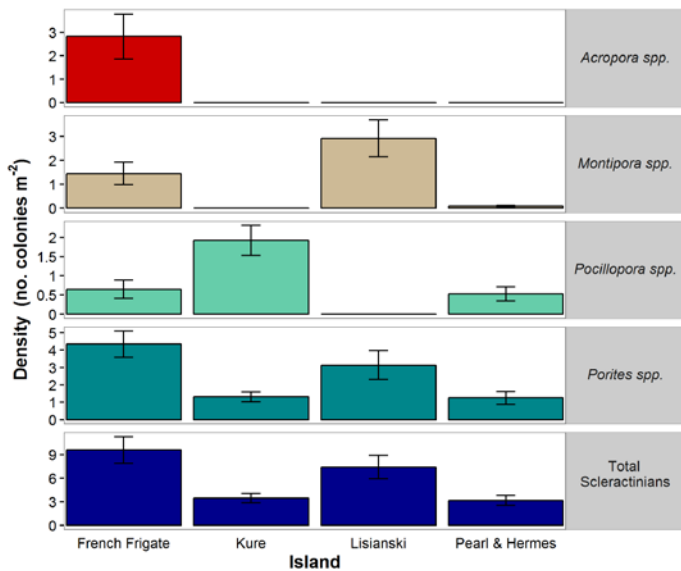


Figure 4. Mean island-wide density of adult colonies ( $\pm$  SE) for all scleractinians and the four most abundant genera: *Acropora*, *Montipora*, *Pocillopora*, and *Porites* (fore reef only).

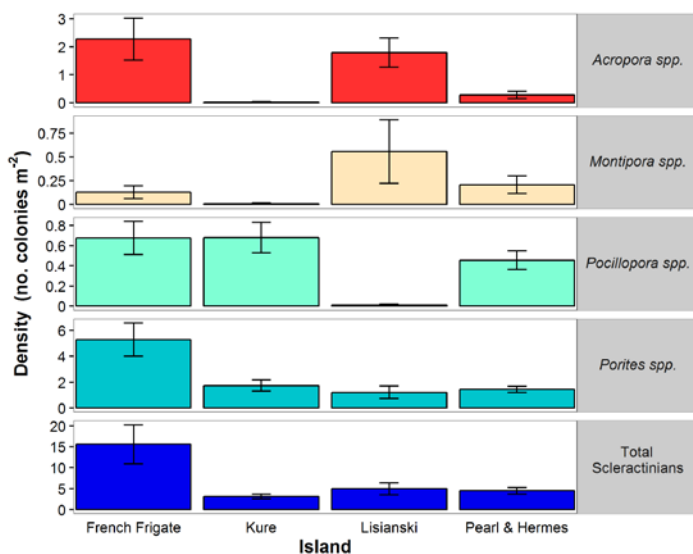


Figure 5. Mean island-wide density of juvenile coral colonies ( $\pm$  SE) for all scleractinians and the four most abundant genera: *Acropora*, *Montipora*, *Pocillopora*, and *Porites* (fore reef only).

**Disease, Bleaching, COTS, and Threatened species –**  
 The percent of adult colonies exhibiting signs of bleaching, disease, or Crown Of Thorns Sea star (COTS) predation lesions ranged from 1.04% to 10.6%, 0.7% to 1.6%, and 0% to 0.2% respectively (Table 1). ‘Disease’ was defined as the combination of all identified diseases and lesions. ‘Bleaching’ included all levels of bleaching extent and severity. COTS lesions were defined as recent coral mortality (i.e., tissue loss) attributed to COTS predation.

Table 1. Percent of adult coral colonies that exhibited bleaching, disease, and Crown Of Thorns Sea star (COTS) predation lesions in the NWHI.

Island	N	% bleaching	% disease	% COTS
French Frigate	26	3.84	2.40	0.00
Kure	19	7.41	2.50	0.08
Lisianski	16	7.12	3.87	0.00
Pearl & Hermes	20	1.71	1.80	1.37

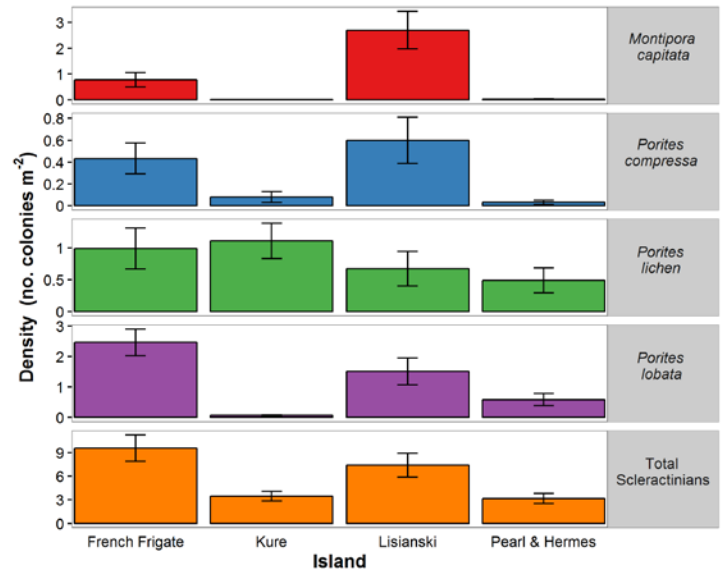


Figure 6. Mean island-wide density of adult colonies ( $\pm$  SE) for the four most abundant species and all scleractinians (fore reef only).

### Survey sampling design

A two-stage stratified random sampling design was employed to survey coral reefs within the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Archipelago. The stratification scheme sampled all hard bottom habitat, within two reef zones (fore reef and lagoon) where present, and across three depth categories (shallow (0–6 m), mid-depth (>6–18 m) and deep (>18–30 m)). In addition to fore reef, surveys at French Frigate Shoals were allocated to lagoon habitats using available depth categories. Figures 4 – 6 depict means from only fore reef sites at French Frigate Shoals for comparison with the three other islands. Allocation of sampling effort was proportional to total strata area. Sites (geographic coordinates) were randomly selected within each stratum.

## Survey methods

Surveys at each site were conducted within two, 18 m belt transects. Adult coral colonies ( $\geq 5$  cm) were surveyed within 10 m<sup>2</sup> on each transect (Figure 7). Colonies were identified to the lowest taxonomic level possible (species or genus), measured (maximum diameter to the nearest cm), and morphology was noted. In addition, partial mortality and condition of each colony was assessed. Partial colony mortality was quantified as the percent of dead tissue (classified as 'old dead' or 'recent dead'), and the cause of mortality was assessed if possible. Conditions affecting each colony (i.e., disease and bleaching) were noted, along with the extent (percent of colony affected) and severity (ranging from moderate to acute).

## REA METHODS

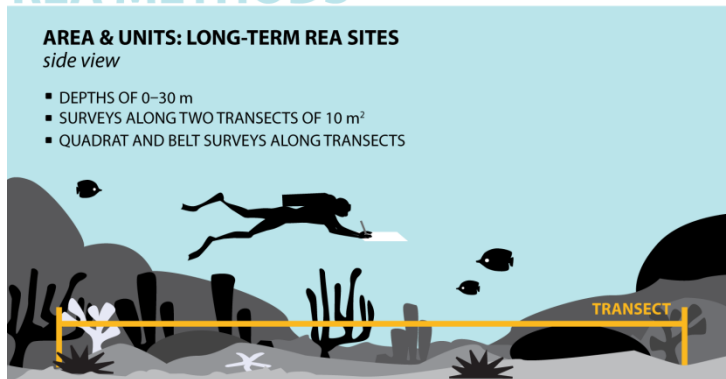


Figure 7. Schematic of the method used to conduct demographic surveys of coral populations and benthic community structure at the Rapid Ecological Assessment (REA) sites.

Juvenile coral colonies ( $< 5$  cm) were surveyed within 3 m<sup>2</sup> on each transect. Juvenile colonies were identified in the field by a distinct tissue and skeletal boundary that distinguished them from fragments of larger adult colonies. Each juvenile colony was identified to the lowest taxonomic level possible (genus or species) and measured (both the maximum and perpendicular diameter to the nearest 2 mm).

The present summary focuses only on colony density and initial estimates of bleaching, disease, and COTS predation prevalence. The island scale estimates presented here are generated from site-level means and are not weighted by strata area. Our data also include population, island and strata estimates of coral size structure, frequency of occurrence, colony abundance (means and totals), mean proportion of partial mortality, and condition (e.g. disease and bleaching) occurrence

and prevalence. Estimates for strata are generated from site means. Final island-scale estimates (means and totals) will be calculated using weighted strata means. These statistical survey design estimates of the full suite of coral population and community metrics will be included in future publications.

## About the monitoring program

Pacific RAMP forms a key part of the National Coral Reef Monitoring Program of NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program (CRCP), providing integrated, consistent, and comparable data across US Pacific islands and atolls. The CRCP monitoring efforts have 3 principal aims:

- Document the status of reef species of ecological and economic importance
- Track and assess changes in reef populations and communities in response to environmental stressors or human activities
- Evaluate the effectiveness of specific management strategies and identify actions for future and adaptive responses

In addition to the coral population and benthic community surveys outlined here, Pacific RAMP efforts include interdisciplinary monitoring of oceanographic conditions, fish population and assemblages, invertebrate diversity and abundance, coral reef habitat assessments and mapping, and studies of the effects of climate change and ocean acidification. Data are available upon request.

## For more information

Coral Reef Conservation Program:

<http://coralreef.noaa.gov>

Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center:

<http://www.pifsc.noaa.gov>

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CREP publications:

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CREP benthic team:

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