

The Elkhorn Coral *Acropora palmata* is coming back to the Belize Barrier Reef

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Fig. 1 Dead, chiton-bored *Acropora palmata* encrusted with crustose coralline algae, shallow fore reef, Carrie Bow Cay

The extensive regional loss of the Caribbean coral *Acropora palmata* over the past 25 years promoted its designation in 2006 as a ‘threatened species’ by the US National Marine Fisheries Service under the Endangered Species Act (Federal Register 2006). The major cause for the loss of this coral species has been white-band disease, which is related to a bacterial agent that only attacks the genus *Acropora* (e.g., Gladfelter 1982; Peters et al. 1983; Aronson and Precht 2001).

Like many other Caribbean coral reefs, the Belize Barrier Reef has been progressively losing *A. palmata* since the early 1980s. Today the shallow fore reef off Carrie Bow Cay is characterized by dead standing and collapsed branches of *A. palmata* extensively bored by chitons and clionid sponges, and encrusted by crustose coralline algae (Fig. 1).

Recent observations at this site have revealed that new healthy colonies of *A. palmata* are overgrowing these bored and encrusted branches (Fig. 2a, b). At the southern limit of the Carrie Bow Cay shallow fore reef, numerous large colonies of *A. palmata* are flourishing, with no indication of white-band disease, indicating the return of this important reef-building coral.

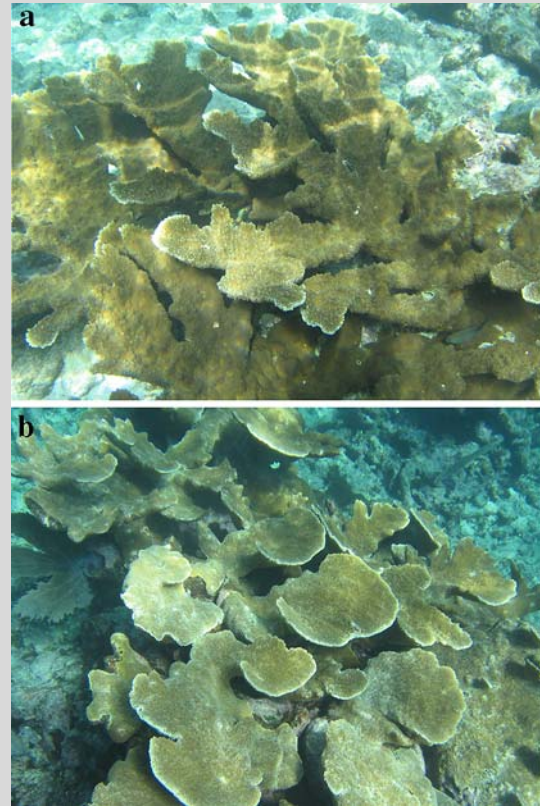


Fig. 2 Thriving colonies of *Acropora palmata* on the southern end of the shallow fore reef, Carrie Bow Cay, March 2007

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Reef sites

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