

Reef Futures 2024: A Catalyst for Global Coral Restoration Efforts

Playa Paraiso, Mexico – Reef Futures 2024 has just wrapped on a powerful note of determination and collaboration. Bringing together over 820 participants from 64 countries, this five-day event, organized by the Coral Restoration Consortium (CRC) and hosted by Iberostar Group, focused on cooperation, innovation, and resilience, and celebrated a shared commitment to saving Earth's coral reefs.

“Reef Futures exemplifies the very spirit of the Coral Restoration Consortium. It's not just about sharing knowledge—it's about building the relationships and feedback loops that drive meaningful collaboration. At Reef Futures, people weren't just exchanging ideas; they were refining them together, laying the groundwork for the future of coral restoration as a truly global and cooperative effort. This event is where the field comes to grow,” said Tali Vardi, CRC Executive Director.

Despite the catastrophic impacts of the Fourth Global Bleaching Event and the challenges of the past two years, Reef Futures 2024 was marked by an electric atmosphere of optimism and action. The symposium brought together restoration practitioners, researchers, community leaders, managers, engineers, private sector partners, and others to share knowledge, celebrate successes, and confront challenges head-on.

“It was inspiring to see a collaboration like this, fueled by optimism and solutions-focused energy. We were delighted to host this symposium and serve as a home-away-from-home for the reef restoration community” remarked Erika Harms, Global Sustainability Director at Iberostar Group. *“Through the scholarship program, which facilitated attendance from 100 participants from across the globe, Reef Futures also ensured that the voices of those most impacted by coral reef decline were at the heart of the conversation.”*

The symposium featured nearly 440 oral presentations, over 25 films in the inaugural “Reefs to Reels” film showcase, and more than 100 scientific posters. Attendees explored a wide array of topics, including the transformative potential of artificial intelligence, large-scale restoration strategies, gene banking, coral spawning collaborations, cryopreservation, and assisted evolution. Key themes emphasized scaling restoration efforts to combat climate change, private sector investment in nature-based solutions, and the critical role of storytelling in building public support and driving policy change.

Jonathan Brown, NOAA Fisheries' Marine Habitat Resource Specialist, reflected, *“Amidst sustained elevated ocean temperatures, disease, and continued mortality of corals, the odds of safeguarding reefs appear grim. Yet, the global collective of practitioners at Reef Futures did not despair. Guided by seasoned experts, driven by enthusiastic young professionals, and armed with innovative technologies, the future of coral reefs is full of hope.”*

Two rousing plenary sessions combined scientific insights with emotional resonance. A standout talk by Rose Huizenga, founder of Coral Catch, highlighted how amplifying the leadership of women in coral restoration in Indonesia is driving meaningful change. Her presentation showcased how passion, ingenuity, and equitable partnerships can catalyze significant movements even with limited funding.

Rose's story reinforced a recurring message from the symposium: the vital importance of centering the voices, leadership, and lived experiences of strategically undervalued groups, including women and Indigenous communities. Dr. R. Scott Winters, CEO of Coral Restoration Foundation and CRC Board of Directors Chair, remarked, *“It is clear that the contributions of historically marginalized stakeholders are fundamental to the success of coral restoration. By integrating their expertise and knowledge systems, we*

ensure that restoration efforts reflect diverse cultural contexts and priorities, redefining conservation as an inclusive endeavour rooted in mutual respect and justice.”

Reef Futures 2024 underscored the necessity of collaboration across communities, disciplines, and sectors. Coral reefs, which sustain over a billion people, face mounting threats from climate change and human activity. However, as Reef Futures Director Tom Moore highlighted, *“The field has evolved from an experimental concept to an expanding industry. Reef Futures 2024 showed that the path forward for coral reefs is built on cooperation, innovation, and the extraordinary dedication of those committed to saving these ecosystems.”*

Dr. Phanor Montoya Maya, Restoration Program Manager at Coral Restoration Foundation and founder of Corales de Paz, summed up the event’s impact: *“Reef Futures restored more than my motivation—it restored my belief that what we’re doing is having an impact. Despite the challenges, this symposium reminded me that our work is vital. Together, we’re not just restoring reefs; we’re restoring hope.”*

About Reef Futures

Reef Futures is the only global symposium dedicated exclusively to coral reef restoration. It provides a unique platform for practitioners, scientists, and advocates to share knowledge and advance the field..

Reef Futures 2024 was organized by the Coral Restoration Consortium, hosted locally by Iberostar Group, and sponsored by NEOM, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Coral Restoration Foundation, Reef Restoration and Adaptation Program, MARS, The Nature Conservancy, The Florida Aquarium, Felsten Fishman Family Foundation, Coral Vita, Revive & Restore, UCSC Center for Coastal Climate Resilience, MAPFRE, Builders Initiative, GIZ, Mote Scientific Foundation, International Coral Reef Society, and Plant a Million Corals Foundation.

For more information about Reef Futures and the Coral Restoration Consortium, visit www.reeffutures.com and www.crc.world