



**Towards modelling the future risk of cyclone wave damage
to the world's coral reefs**

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Keywords:	coral reef, tropical cyclone, hurricane, typhoon, climate change, disturbance
Abstract:	<p>Tropical cyclones generate extreme waves that can damage coral reef communities. Recovery typically requires up to a decade, driving the trajectory of coral community structure. Coral reefs have evolved over millennia with cyclones. Increasingly, however, processes of recovery are interrupted and compromised by additional pressures (thermal stress, pollution, diseases, predators). Understanding how cyclones interact with other pressures to threaten coral reefs underpins spatial prioritisation of conservation and management interventions. Models that simulate coral responses to cumulative pressures often assume that the worst cyclone wave damage occurs within ~100 km of the track.</p> <p>However, we show major coral loss at exposed sites up to 800 km from a cyclone that was both strong (high sustained wind speeds $\geq 33 \text{ m s}^{-1}$) and big (widespread circulation $> \sim 300 \text{ km}$), using numerical wave models and field data from northwest Australia. We then calculate the return time of big and strong cyclones, big cyclones of any strength, and strong cyclones of any size, for each of 150 coral reef ecoregions using a global dataset of past cyclones from 1985 to 2015. For the coral ecoregions that regularly were exposed to cyclones during that time, we find that 75% of them were exposed to at least one cyclone that was both big and strong. Return intervals of big and strong cyclones are already less than 5 years for 13 ecoregions, primarily in the cyclone-prone NW Pacific, and less than 10 years for an additional 14 ecoregions.</p>

	<p>We identify ecoregions likely at higher risk in future given projected changes in cyclone activity. Robust quantification of the spatial distribution of likely cyclone wave damage is vital not only for understanding past coral response to pressures, but also for predicting how this may change as the climate continues to warm and the relative frequency of the strongest cyclones rises</p>

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29 Keywords: coral reef; tropical cyclone; hurricane; typhoon; disturbance; climate change

31 Statement of authorship: MP, JG, RL and BR conceived the original idea for the study with
32 input from all authors. ED analysed and interpreted broad-scale wind and wave models for
33 cyclone Lua. RL analysed and interpreted fine-scale wave transformation over Scott Reef.
34 JG and MD contributed and interpreted field data for Scott Reef. BR and AH contributed
35 field data for the shoals and Scott Reef. MP calculated cyclone return times for coral
36 ecoregions, with key input from BR. MP constructed the figures and tables and wrote the
37 manuscript with input from all authors.

41 Abstract

42

43 Tropical cyclones generate extreme waves that can damage coral reef communities.

44 Recovery typically requires up to a decade, driving the trajectory of coral community

45 structure. Coral reefs have evolved over millennia with cyclones. Increasingly, however,

46 processes of recovery are interrupted and compromised by additional pressures (thermal

47 stress, pollution, diseases, predators). Understanding how cyclones interact with other

48 pressures to threaten coral reefs underpins spatial prioritisation of conservation and

49 management interventions. Models that simulate coral responses to cumulative pressures

50 often assume that the worst cyclone wave damage occurs within ~ 100 km of the track.

51 However, we show major coral loss at exposed sites up to 800 km from a cyclone that was

52 both strong (high sustained wind speeds $\geq 33 \text{ m s}^{-1}$) and big (widespread circulation $> \sim 300$

53 km), using numerical wave models and field data from northwest Australia. We then

54 calculate the return time of big and strong cyclones, big cyclones of any strength, and strong

55 cyclones of any size, for each of 150 coral reef ecoregions using a global dataset of past

56 cyclones from 1985 to 2015. For the coral ecoregions that regularly were exposed to

57 cyclones during that time, we find that 75% of them were exposed to at least one cyclone

58 that was both big and strong. Return intervals of big and strong cyclones are already less

59 than 5 years for 13 ecoregions, primarily in the cyclone-prone NW Pacific, and less than 10

60 years for an additional 14 ecoregions. We identify ecoregions likely at higher risk in future

61 given projected changes in cyclone activity. Robust quantification of the spatial distribution

62 of likely cyclone wave damage is vital not only for understanding past coral response to

63 pressures, but also for predicting how this may change as the climate continues to warm

64 and the relative frequency of the strongest cyclones rises.

65

66 Introduction

67 Coral reef communities around the world are under increasing threat from a range of
68 stressors, with up to one-third of species estimated to be at risk of extinction (Carpenter et
69 al. 2008). Many studies have shown that the incidence of stressors of various types vary
70 spatially across the world's coral reefs (e.g., thermal stress – Hooijdonk et al. 2013; coral
71 disease - Maynard et al. 2015; tropical cyclones – Carrigan and Puotinen 2011; human
72 activities – Halpern et al. 2008). Further studies have shown that spatial variation in stressor
73 exposure can inform where to focus management efforts to conserve reefs by focusing
74 conservation effort at reefs least likely to be disturbed frequently (e.g., Game et al. 2008,
75 Beyer et al. 2018, Darling et al. 2019). Tropical cyclones (hurricanes, typhoons) can be a
76 major factor degrading ecological condition of reefs (Great Barrier Reef - De'ath et al. 2012;
77 Caribbean - Gardner et al. 2005; Western Australia - Zinke et al. 2018). However, it is the
78 combination of cyclones with rising exposure to other stressors – most notably thermal
79 stress (Hughes et al. 2017, Hughes et al. 2018) - that is the most significant emerging threat
80 to reefs globally. Unravelling these relative contributions in a way that offers solutions for
81 management can be difficult (Cote et al. 2016). Nonetheless, knowledge of where and how
82 often cyclones damage coral communities on reefs has been vital for understanding past
83 patterns of coral response to pressures (GBR – De'ath et al. 2012, Mellin et al. 2019,
84 Ceccarelli et al., 2019; Western Australia – Zinke et al. 2018, Gilmour et al. 2019; Indo-Pacific
85 – Darling et al. 2019), and can be used to estimate reef resilience into the future.

86

87 Extended periods of elevated wave energy and breaking waves generated by tropical
88 cyclones can physically damage coral communities, ranging in severity from broken coral
89 tips to removal of entire sections of the reef structure. Such damage has been widely
90 documented in field surveys (Guam – Ogg & Koslow 1978; Jamaica – Woodley et al. 1981;
91 French Polynesia- Harmelin-Vivien & Laboute 1986; US Virgin Islands – Rogers et al. 1989;
92 Great Barrier Reef (GBR) – Done 1992; Hawaii – Dollar & Tribble 1993; Mexico – Lirman et
93 al. 2001; Netherlands Antilles – Bries et al. 2004; Florida Keys – Gleason et al. 2007). Coral
94 vulnerability to wave damage depends on coral size and growth form, which are highly
95 variable at very local scales (Madin & Connelly 2006). Exposure of corals to damaging waves
96 also depends on their position on a reef, relative to the incoming wave direction and other
97 reefs and islands (Young & Hardy 1993). The resulting patchiness in damage occurs even
98 from strong cyclones (Caribbean –Woodley et al. 1981, GBR – Fabricius et al. 2008, Beeden
99 et al. 2015, NW Pacific – Reyes et al. 2015). Remnant coral populations can provide a key
100 source of local recruitment to stimulate recovery after a cyclone, and many reefs have
101 recovered quickly (southern GBR - Halford et al. 2004; central GBR – Lukoschek et al., 2013,
102 Beeden et al., 2015; Scott Reef, Western Australia – Gilmour et al., 2019). However, a
103 return to the former coral cover does not guarantee recovery of the prior composition of
104 coral and fish communities (Bellwood et al. 2012). This is particularly likely if the structural
105 complexity of the reef remains low even as coral cover increases (Emslie et al. 2014).
106 Further, the combination of repeated impacts from subsequent cyclones and/or other
107 pressures can reduce the structural complexity of a reef to such a low level that the
108 community can no longer be thought of as hard coral dominated. If a loss of hard coral
109 dominance is permanent, the change to the community is termed a phase shift, with
110 associated changes in fish and other organisms from those that are known to inhabit hard

111 coral dominated reefs (Cheal et al. 2010, Mumby et al. 2014). Hard corals are often
112 replaced by macro-algae on degraded reefs (e.g., Caribbean - Hughes 1994; GBR - Done et
113 al. 2007, Diaz-Pulido et al. 2009), but they can also be dominated by other biota like soft
114 corals (Fine et al. 2019) or sponges (Norstrom et al. 2009). Thus, a consequence of hard
115 coral losses from multiple impacts over time is reduced reef resilience (Hughes et al. 2003),
116 particularly if coral cover drops below a threshold level needed to sustain a reef as hard
117 coral dominated (Perry et al. 2013).

118

119 At regional scales, the effect of any one cyclone on coral reef communities depends on its
120 strength (measured as maximum wind speed in m/s), duration (hours for which extreme
121 conditions persist near reefs), spatial extent (size, measured as distance from the track to
122 where wind speed drops to gale force – 17 m/s), and translation speed (speed of forward
123 motion of the cyclone, measured in m/s). The likelihood of severe damage is maximised
124 when a cyclone is strong (maximum wind speeds ≥ 33 m/s), long lasting (gale force winds
125 persist long enough near reefs to build seas capable of causing severe damage to most
126 communities– for at least 12 hours), big (size ≥ 300 km) and tracks slowly (translation
127 speed ≤ 5 m/s) past many reefs.

128

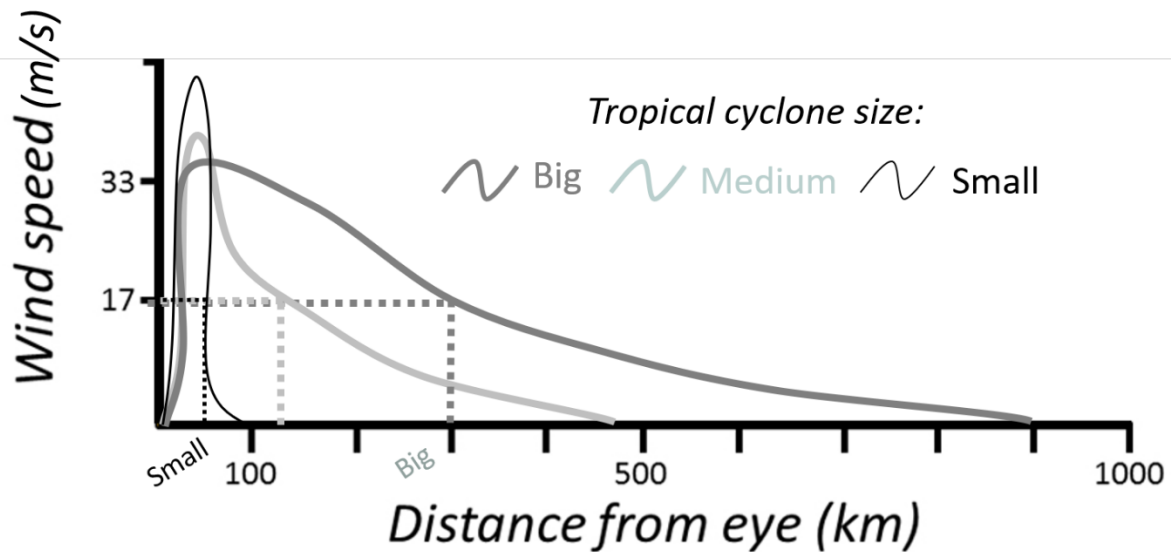
129 However, the importance of cyclone size to its destructive potential is rarely incorporated
130 into models of cyclone damage risk to coral reefs, which often assume that the key
131 determinant of such risk is cyclone strength (e.g., Cheal et al. 2018) and that severe damage
132 from any strong cyclone is limited to within ~ 100 km of the track (Manzello et al. 2007,
133 Wolff et al. 2016) or less (i.e., Done 1992, Gardener et al. 2005, Edwards et al. 2011). This

134 approximation is based on early cyclone damage field surveys (e.g. Woodley et al. 1981,
135 Done 1992). It can be a reasonable assumption for strong, medium-sized cyclones, but not
136 for strong cyclones that are either small or big, and/or very fast or very slow moving
137 (Puotinen et al. 2016), for which size and speed can have a major impact on the magnitude
138 and spatial extent of the damaging waves that are generated (Drost et al. 2017).
139 Importantly, strong cyclones range dramatically in size (Chavas et al. 2015) from <100 km
140 (cyclone Tracy – northern Australia) to over 2200 km (Typhoon Tip, NW Pacific) (Knaff et al.
141 2014), and move at a range of speeds. This variability makes generalisations on expected
142 damage to reefs based on intensity alone problematic. Further, the size, strength and
143 translation speed of a given cyclone can vary considerably along its track. These issues can
144 be avoided by reconstructing the spatial distribution of cyclone –generated winds and
145 waves with models using publicly available meteorological data recorded for cyclones (see
146 methods).

147

148 Typically, cyclone wind speeds decrease exponentially with distance away from a peak close
149 to the boundary of the calm region at the centre of the cyclone (Wang et al. 2011). Thus,
150 wind speeds often decrease to below gale force within ~50 km of the centre for small and
151 ~100 km for medium sized (Fig. 1) cyclones.

152



153

154

155 **Fig. 1.** Schematic diagram showing a typical distance from the cyclone centre over which
 156 maximum sustained wind speed declines to gale force for tropical cyclones that are small,
 157 medium and big in size. Winds speeds of 17 m s^{-1} and 33 m s^{-1} are gale force and hurricane
 158 force, respectively. For small cyclones, wind speeds decline to gale force over much shorter
 159 distances than for medium cyclones (within 50 versus 150 km), whereas a similar decline
 160 occurs over much larger distances for big cyclones.

161

162 Wave generation is driven by a combination of wind speed, duration and the area of water
 163 over which winds blow uninterrupted (fetch - Young 2003). Consequently, even the
 164 strongest cyclones with the highest wind speeds may cause little damage to coral reefs if the
 165 cyclones are small in size. This effect is amplified when small cyclones also move very
 166 quickly (i.e. category 5 hurricane Andrew, Caribbean – Flora et al. 1994; category 5 cyclone
 167 Larry, GBR – Puotinen et al. 2016). In contrast, big and strong cyclones can damage reefs
 168 over a larger area because strong winds extend much further from the cyclone track (Young

169 2003) (Fig. 1-C), generating rough seas over a greater area (i.e Drost et al. 2017). Also
170 critical is the duration of high winds in a given location, as the time required to transform
171 wind energy into wave energy increases as the wind speed drops. Finally, wave formation
172 from a given wind speed is influenced by where the cyclone tracks and is most likely to
173 reach its full potential when cyclones move slowly over deep water (Drost et al. 2017).
174 Thus, a big and strong cyclone can result in damage to coral reefs across vast areas (i.e.,
175 cyclone Yasi - Beeden et al. 2015).

176

177

178 In 2012, cyclone Lua provided a unique opportunity to test the effects of big and strong
179 cyclones on emergent coral reefs and submerged shoals on Australia's northwest shelf. Lua
180 was a strong and big cyclone that moved very slowly over the open ocean across the
181 continental shelf. Here, we use numerical wave modelling and field data of changes to coral
182 communities, surveyed before and after Lua, to test whether the 100 km distance threshold
183 commonly used to define the spatial extent of cyclone damage is appropriate. We test our
184 results against published accounts of other strong cyclones where comprehensive field data
185 exists from around the world. We then calculate the return interval (number of years) of big
186 and strong cyclones, big cyclones of any strength, and strong cyclones of any size, for 150
187 coral ecoregions (Veron et al. 2016) using a global dataset of past cyclones (Knapp et al.
188 2010) from 1985 to 2015. Finally, we discuss our findings within the context of how ignoring
189 size when assessing cyclone risk poses a threat to the way in which we adaptively manage
190 the world's coral reef ecosystems now and under future climates.

191

192

193 **Methods and materials**

194

195 *Benthic field surveys*

196 Benthic field data was collected by the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) at Scott
197 Reef (Fig. 2-A) and Barracouta East, Vulcan and Goeree Shoals (the shoals – Fig. 2-B) before
198 (Scott Reef – Oct 2010, the shoals – 2011) and after (Scott Reef – Oct 2012, the shoals –
199 2013) Lua tracked through Australia’s northwest shelf region in March 2012 (Fig. 2). Scott
200 Reef was surveyed using on SCUBA along permanent transects in October 2010 and October
201 2012 at four locations: SL3, SL4, SL1, and SS1 (Fig. 3). Changes in percentage cover
202 following cyclones depend on community composition. For a given wave energy,
203 communities dominated by fragile corals will have larger reductions in cover than those
204 dominated by robust corals. Similarly, for a given coral group, the relative reduction in cover
205 following disturbances will be inaccurate if the group is rare (<5% cover). To account for
206 these biases, we compare wave damage among communities at Scott Reef by focusing on
207 two common (>10% cover) coral groups with contrasting susceptibilities (Supplementary
208 Material); *Acropora* have a branching growth form and are among the most susceptible to
209 wave damage whereas the massive *Porites* are among the most robust corals (e.g. Madin
210 and Connelly 2006). Images were analysed using point sampling technique and benthic
211 groups identified to the lowest taxonomic resolution achievable by each observer (Jonker et
212 al. 2008).

213

214 East Barracouta, Vulcan and Goeree shoals were surveyed in 2011 and 2013 using a
215 combination of towed video (Heyward et al. 2010) and still camera transects at depths from
216 20 to 60 m (Heyward et al. 2013). Images were also analysed using point sampling

217 technique and benthic groups identified to the lowest taxonomic resolution achievable by
218 each observer (Jonker et al. 2008). The resulting data was then aggregated to estimate the
219 percentage cover of: hard corals, massive corals (including but not limited to *Porites spp*),
220 and *Acropora spp* (branching corals) corals for each shoal as a whole. As at Scott Reef,
221 these coral groups were chosen because they were abundant and had contrasting
222 susceptibilities to wave damage.

223

224

225 *Cyclone Lua numerical modelling*

226

227 As per Drost et al. 2017, data from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology were used to drive
228 a parametric tropical cyclone wind model (McConochie et al. 2004) to evaluate the tropical
229 cyclone wind field during Lua (every 15 minutes from UTC 13 March 2012 0000 to 20 March
230 2012 0000). Modelled wind speeds were blended with synoptic regional-scale wind data
231 from the Climate Forecast System Reanalysis (CSFR – Wang et al. 2011) provided by the
232 National Center for Environmental Prediction (NCEP) every hour to embed the cyclone
233 vortex within its regional context.

234

235 The modelled wind speeds and directions were used to force the SWAN numerical wave
236 model (Simulating Waves Nearshore - Booij et al. 1997) to evaluate the evolution of the
237 surface wave fields across north-western Australia during Lua. See the Supplementary
238 material for further detail. Hourly time series of characteristic wave parameters (H_s , T_p ,
239 wave direction) were extracted from the SWAN data for the nearest location in deep water
240 (~200 m depth) west of the field survey locations (Scott Reef; Barracouta East, Vulcan and

241 Goeree shoals). Significant wave height (H_s) is the mean wave height of the one-third
242 highest waves, and often used as an indicator of sea state (Denny 1988). Wave period (T_p) is
243 the time taken in seconds for a single wave to travel a distance equal to the length of
244 the wave and is useful for distinguishing between locally generated wind-driven sea ($T_p < 10$
245 s) and swell ($T_p \leq 10$ s). We also compared the magnitude and duration of waves
246 approaching Scott Reef and the shoals to other high energy events over the time period
247 between biological surveys (Scott Reef – 18 Oct 2010 to 1 Nov 2012; the Shoals – 10 Apr
248 2011 to 17 Apr 2013) using NOAA WaveWatch III global hindcast (spatial resolution - 0.5° ,
249 temporal resolution - 3 hours; (Tolman 2009) downloaded at:
250 <http://polar.ncep.noaa.gov/waves/index2.shtml>).

251

252 Waves transform in shallow waters through wave breaking, refraction and diffraction as
253 they interact with the reef bathymetry. Considerable wave energy can dissipate at the
254 leading edge of a reef with respect to incoming waves, creating a wave shadow on the lee
255 side of a reef (Young & Hardy 1993, Madin & Connelly 2006). Thus, the shallow water
256 transformation of cyclone waves approaching Scott Reef was modelled to obtain more
257 realistic estimates of the finer-scale spatial variability in wave heights as indicated by H_s to
258 explain differences in observed damage between the sites. To model this fine-scale wave
259 variability within and adjacent to Scott Reef (Fig. 3), a second SWAN wave model was used
260 with a 50 m grid resolution, based on bathymetry derived from a merged multibeam and
261 LIDAR bathymetry product, as described in the supplementary material. This high-
262 resolution SWAN model was forced at its open boundaries using output (H_s , T_p , wave
263 direction) from the regional SWAN, and simulated the wave conditions for a day centred on
264 peak wave event on 16 March.

265 We did not model wave transformation across the shoals for two reasons. First, we
266 estimated coral cover for each shoal as a whole instead of at each of a series of sites.
267 Second, wave transformation over the shoals was likely negligible given their submergence
268 in depths ranging from 20 to 80 m.

269

270

271 *Interpreting likely exposure to damaging seas*

272

273 The wave height of a given sea state is characterised based on H_s using the internationally
274 recognised Douglas Sea Scale, ranging from calm (degree 0, $H_s = 0$ m) to phenomenal
275 (degree 9, $H_s = 14+$ m). On this scale, sea conditions are termed 'very rough' when $H_s = 4$ m.
276 A 'very rough' sea state is at least one-third more energetic than calm conditions and has
277 been shown to move entire reef blocks onto the reef flat (Goto et al. 2009). Thus, we use H_s
278 = 4 m as the threshold to define the spatial boundary of the cyclone footprint. See
279 Supplementary material for more detail.

280

281

282 *Global implications of big and strong cyclones for coral reefs*

283

284 We consider a cyclone to be big when the distance from the calm centre to winds of gale
285 force (17 m/s - radius to gales) is 300 km or more (see supplementary material). The radius
286 to gales of a cyclone is commonly recorded in freely available global databases like Knapp et
287 al. (2010). We rate a cyclone as strong when its maximum sustained wind speed is 33 m s^{-1}

288 or greater- this equates to a 'severe tropical cyclone' on the Australian cyclone ranking
289 scheme or 'H1' or above on the Saffir-Simpson scale (Table S1).

290

291 To approximate how frequently coral reefs around the world have been exposed to big and
292 strong cyclones and to assess how this varies at a regional scale, we mapped six-hourly
293 positions of all cyclones that tracked within 30°N and 30°S over the period 1985-2015 (see
294 Supplementary material). We calculated the number of years expected between
295 subsequent occurrences (return intervals) of cyclones within each of the world's 150
296 ecoregions where corals and coral reefs are known to exist, as provided by Veron et al.
297 (2016) and described in Veron et al. (2015). Within a given ecoregion and its reefs, damage
298 from any given cyclone will be patchy due to local scale factors, so this represents damage
299 potential only. We used the 500 m scale United Nations Environment Program mapping of
300 global coral reefs (UNEP 2010) to calculate the % of global coral reef area found in each
301 ecoregion. To put the frequency of big and strong cyclones into context, we repeated the
302 analyses for: i) all strong cyclones of all sizes and for ii) big cyclones of all intensities.

303

304 We define exposure for an ecoregion as being crossed by a cyclone every 5 years or less as
305 'very frequent', and every 10 years or less as 'frequent', to reflect typical periods required
306 for full recovery of coral communities from cyclone damage (see Supplementary material,
307 Figure 4 in Puotinen et al. 2016). We further define exposure to cyclones as 'occasional'
308 when return intervals are more than 10 and less than 35 years, and as 'very rare' when
309 return intervals are 35 years or more or cannot be calculated because no such cyclones
310 occurred over the recent past (1985-2016).

311

312 We then use the available literature to assess how current cyclone return times at
313 ecoregions may change under future climates given what is known from global climate
314 models.

315

316

317 **Results**

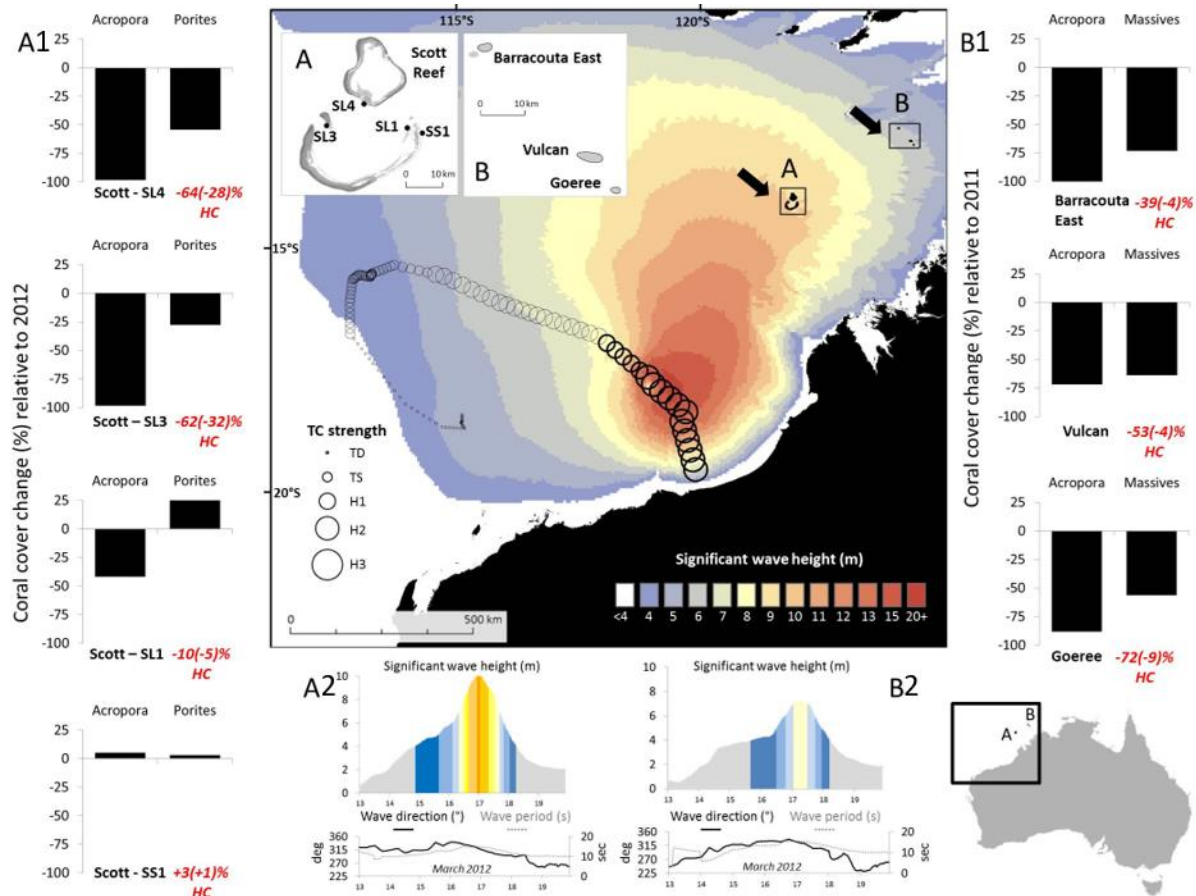
318 *Exposure of Australia's north-west shelf to damaging waves from cyclone Lua*

319

320 Lua tracked across Australia's North West Shelf from 13-19 March 2012 and reached peak
321 strength (maximum 10-minute sustained wind speeds 47 m s^{-1}) while it was big (radius to
322 gale force winds up to 333 km: bold black circles on Fig. 2) and located over deep water.

323 Initially, Lua moved very slowly, but then picked up speed once it intensified. Consequently,
324 a substantial area of extreme winds persisted for nearly a day (17 hours) with virtually
325 unlimited fetch over deep water to the left of the track. This led to the development of a
326 vast area of damaging local wind-sea conditions extending nearly 1,000 km from the storm
327 centre (Fig 2), and swells propagating ahead of Lua which only decayed very slowly (Drost et
328 al. 2017, see Fig S4 for how this progressed over time). The spatial extent of damaging seas
329 ($H_s \geq 4\text{m}$) predicted by the numerical model corresponds reasonably well to that predicted
330 using the simpler 4MW model described in Puotinen et al. (2016). However, 4MW
331 underpredicted heavy seas located to the far north-east of the study area likely because it
332 neglects the possibility of swell.

333



334

335

336 **Fig. 2.** Extreme conditions generated by big and strong cyclone Lua in March 2012 and their

337 impacts on coral communities along Australia's north-west shelf. The main map shows the

338 maximum significant wave height (H_s) generated by Lua of ≥ 4 m as modelled by SWAN. The

339 black unfilled circles show one-hourly positions of Lua's eye, with the circle width indicating

340 intensity on the Saffir-Simpson scale. Circles are outlined in bold for eye positions with a

341 larger than typical size (radius to gale force winds ≥ 300 km). Black boxes on the map

342 indicate the location of study sites at: A – Scott Reef and B – Barracoutta East, Vulcan and

343 Goeree shoals (the shoals). Bold arrows show the dominant incoming wave direction at the

344 time when sea state was sufficiently energetic to severely damage corals (H_s ≥ 4 m). Graphs

345 to the left of the main map (A1 – Scott Reef) and to the right of the main map (B1 – the

346 shoals) show the relative change in cover following Lua) for hard corals typically vulnerable

347 to wave energy (*Acropora*) versus those typically resistant to wave energy (A1 – massive
348 Porites, B1 – all massive corals). The relative change in total coral cover following Lua is
349 shown in red, with the absolute change in brackets. See Fig S2 for more detail. Plots below
350 the main map show hourly values for H_s (top) and wave direction / period (bottom) from
351 13-19 March 2012 for: A2 – Scott Reef and B2 – the shoals.

352

353 We observed severe damage at study sites at Scott Reef (Fig 2A1) and the shoals (Fig 2B1),
354 500km and 800km away from the closest position of Lua's track (Table S2, S3). Our
355 reconstructed wave data show that Lua generated sufficiently prolonged and energetic
356 wave action to severely damage the study sites ($H_s \geq 4\text{m}$). Damaging waves persisted for
357 ~2.5 days at the shoals (Fig. 2-B2, bottom) and for 3.5 days at Scott Reef (Fig. 2-A2, bottom),
358 where H_s exceeded 8 m for one-third of that time.

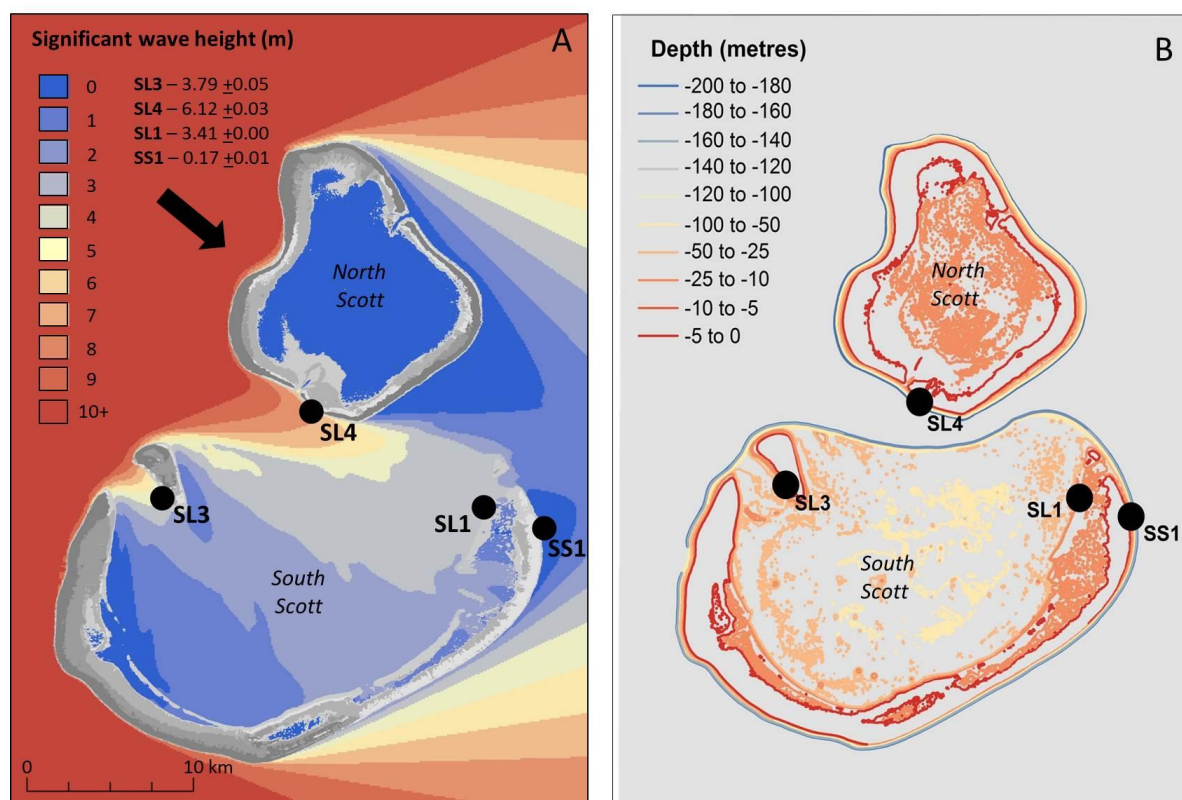
359

360 Field data before and after Lua demonstrates large reductions in hard coral cover. At Scott
361 Reef (Fig. 2-A1, Fig. S2-A, Fig. S4-A, Table S2), hard coral cover was dramatically reduced at
362 the most exposed westerly sites (SL3- 62% to 32%; SL4 – 64% to 28%), with smaller
363 reductions (10% to 5%) in cover of the more fragile corals (*Acropora spp.*) at the less
364 exposed (SL1) site, contrasting with the small increase (41.5% to 42.0%) at the most
365 sheltered site (SS1) on the leeward side of south Scott Reef. At the most exposed sites,
366 coral cover dropped by nearly 100% for *Acropora* colonies (SL4, 3.7% to 0.07%; SL3, 12.6% to
367 0.2%; Fig. S2-B, Table S2), and dropped by up to 50% for massive *Porites* colonies (SL4,
368 11.7% to 6.5%; Fig. S2-C, Table S2). Similarly, at the submerged shoals (Fig. 2-B1, Table S3),
369 there were considerable losses of hard coral cover in depths of ~18m (Barracouta East:
370 11.3% to 6.9%), ~20m (Vulcan: 7.7% to 3.6%) and ~25m (Goeree: 12.7% to 3.5%). At

371 Barracouta East, all (100%) of *Acropora spp.* colonies were lost (12.8% to 0%), while most
372 were lost at Vulcan (9.9% to 2.2%) and Goeree (39.7% to 5.9%). Robust massive corals were
373 initially more abundant than *Acropora* corals at all three shoals, and their cover dropped
374 considerably (Barracouta East, 25.3% to 6.8%; Vulcan, 28.6% to 10.4%; Goeree, 11.4% to
375 5%).

376

377 Despite the vast extent of Lua's predicted zone of damaging waves (Fig. 2) and the
378 magnitude and duration of the waves that were generated, some corals at Scott Reef
379 remained undamaged due to local sheltering by the reef (site SS1, Scott Reef – Fig. 2-A1, Fig.
380 S1-A, Table S2). We provide a physical basis for this expected patchiness by demonstrating,
381 with high resolution modelling of wave transformation across Scott Reef, that wave heights
382 dropped dramatically as waves encountered the shallow reef topography (Fig. 3). H_s was
383 estimated to exceed 10 m west of Scott Reef, but quickly dropped (Fig. 3-A) as wave energy
384 almost completely dissipated with transit through shallow reef areas (Fig. 3-B). This created
385 a gradient of decreasing wave exposure that matches the observed variation in hard coral
386 cover loss (Fig. S1, Table S2).



387
 388 **Fig. 3.** Transformation of wave energy across Scott Reef from north-west to south-east at
 389 UTC 16 March 2012, 2100, as modelled by SWAN (A). Colours indicate significant wave
 390 heights from near 0 (dark blue) to 10+ m (red). The large arrow shows the incoming peak
 391 wave direction (315 degrees, north-west) during the time of maximum wave conditions.
 392 The hard-line reef crest is shaded dark grey. Depth contours (B) are shown by coloured
 393 lines, ranging from the deepest in darkest blue (-200 to -180 metres) to the shallowest in
 394 red (-5 to 0 metres).

395

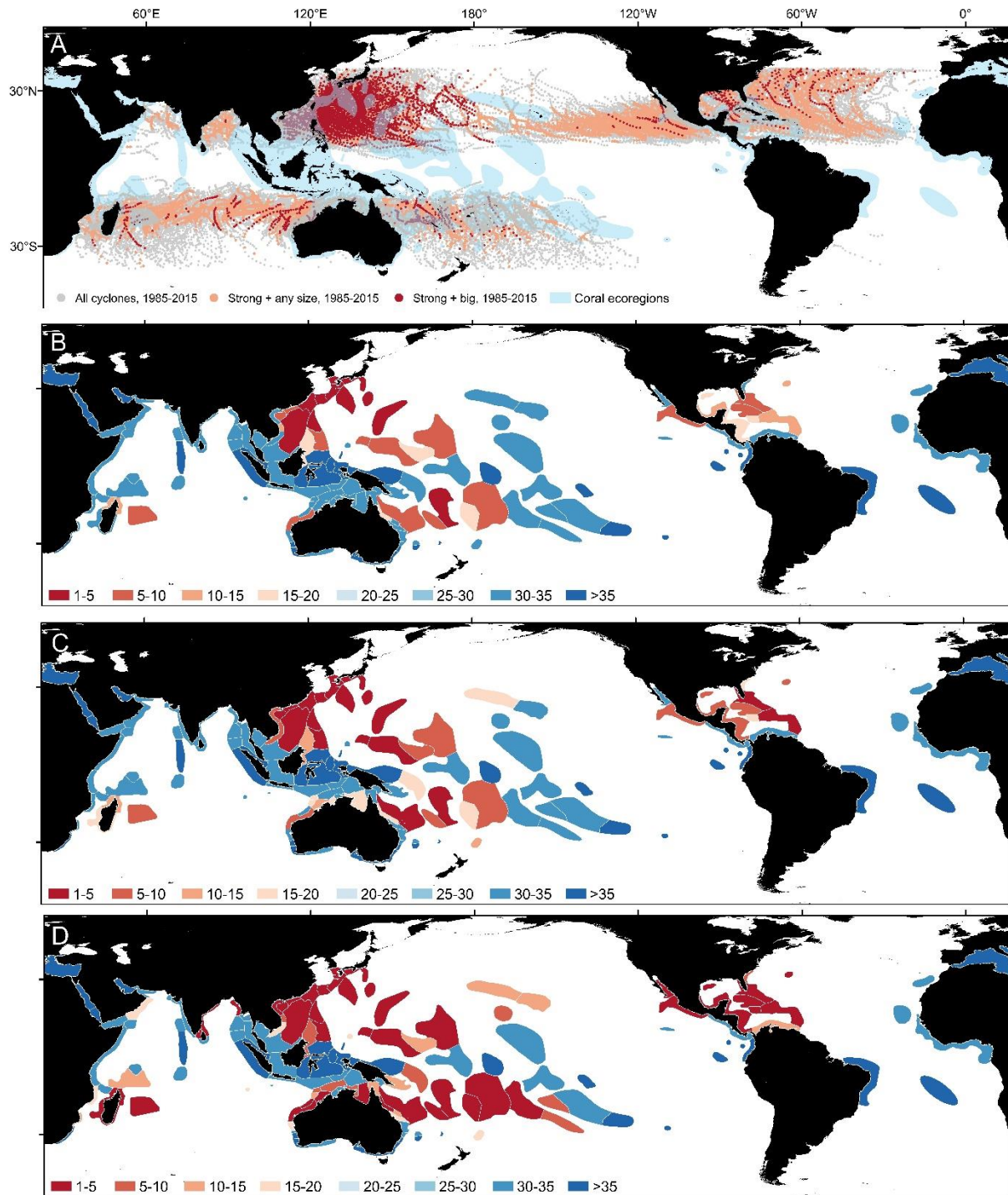
396

397 *Global implications for coral reefs*

398

399 Our global analysis shows that cyclones regularly track near most of the world's coral reefs,
400 except reefs in the equatorial belt (8 degrees N or S latitude) and the South Atlantic Ocean
401 (Fig. 4-A). Indeed, 71% of the world's total reef area is located within ecoregions that are at
402 least occasionally (every 10 to 31.5 years) crossed by strong cyclones, 56% by big cyclones,
403 and 54% by big and strong cyclones (non-blue colours in Fig. 5-A, 5-B, 5-C). The wave
404 conditions experienced by any particular reef within cyclone-exposed ecoregions depends
405 on local scale factors, including fetch generation time, fetch distance and bathymetry. The
406 degree of exposure of any given coral colony to those waves depends on reef
407 geomorphology, shelf position and depth (see Fig S1). Of the world's 150 ecoregions,
408 those of the NW Pacific are currently the most frequently exposed to cyclones (grey dots -
409 Fig. 4-A, Fig. 1 in Carrigan & Puotinen 2011), particularly cyclones that are big and strong
410 (red dots - Fig. 4-A, Table 1 (Chavas et al. 2015; Knaff et al. 2014).

411



412

413 **Fig. 4.** Global distribution of cyclone return times (in years) within coral reef ecoregions.

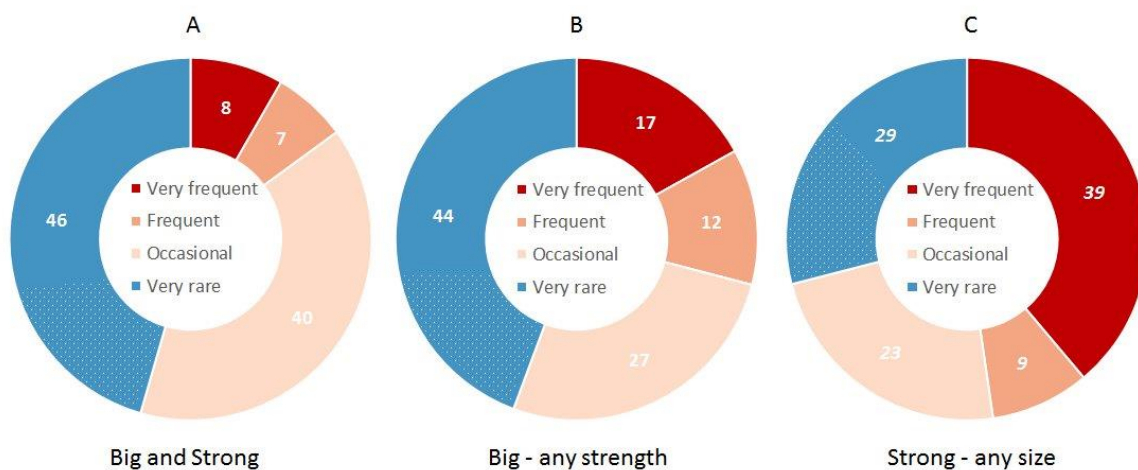
414 Panel A compares the prevalence of the 6 hourly recorded positions of all global TCs (grey

415 dots) from 1985-2015 with TCs that are strong (maximum wind speed ≥ 33 m/s - pink dots)416 and those that big (radius to gales ≥ 300 km) + strong (red dots). Coral ecoregions are shown

417 with transparent shading that appears blue when no cyclones are present and grey when

418 cyclones are present. Panels B, C and D show the expected number of years between
 419 cyclone occurrences for each ecoregion based on the time period 1985-2015, from the most
 420 frequent (1 to 5 years - darkest red) to the least frequent (more than 35 years - darkest
 421 blue) for: big and strong cyclones (B), big cyclones of any strength (C), and strong cyclones of
 422 any size (D). The total number of cyclone observations in ecoregions from 1985-2015 were:
 423 all sizes and strengths, 17,590; big and strong, 2,126; big of any strength, 3,372; strong of
 424 any size, 6,116.

425
 426
 427 Big and strong cyclones frequently (every 5 years or less) transit approximately 9% of coral
 428 ecoregions, particularly those in the north-west Pacific but also in the central south Pacific
 429 around Vanuatu (dark red areas in Fig. 4-B, Table 1, Table S4). These ecoregions encompass
 430 8% of the world's coral reef area (Fig. 5-A).



431
 432 **Fig. 5.** Percentage of the world's coral reef area with potential exposure to cyclones that
 433 are 'very frequent' (red - ≤ 5 years), 'frequent' (dark orange – 5-10 years), 'occasional'
 434 (light orange – 10-31.5 years) and 'very rare' (blue - >31.5 years) based on the time series
 435 1985-2015, for cyclones that are: big and strong (A), big of any strength (B), and strong of

436 any size (C). Cyclones are classed as 'big' when the radius to gales ≥ 300 km, and as 'strong'

437 when maximum sustained wind speed ≥ 33 m s⁻¹. The white dotted areas within the 'very

438 rare' (blue) segment show the % of coral reef area within 8 degrees north and south of the

439 Equator and unlikely to experience cyclones. Note that each reef's exposure to cyclones

440 within the ecoregion will be patchy due to local scale factors. The total number of cyclone

441 observations in ecoregions from 1985-2015 were: all sizes and strengths – 17,590; big and

442 strong – 2,126; big of any strength – 3,372; strong of any size – 6,116.

443

444

445 A further 9% of ecoregions and 7% of world reef area (Fig. 5-A) are frequently (every 5 to 10

446 years – dark orange areas in Fig. 4-B) crossed by big and strong cyclones, particularly the

447 Caribbean (i.e., Bahamas and Florida Keys, Cuba and Cayman Islands), parts of the south-

448 west Pacific (i.e., Coral Sea, New Caledonia, Samoa, Tuvalu and Tonga), parts of the north-

449 west Pacific (Marshall Islands, Micronesia, areas adjacent to ecoregions very frequently

450 exposed), the Mascarene Islands near Madagascar, and Ningaloo Reef in western Australia

451 (Table 1).

452

453 **Table 1.** Return intervals (years) in coral ecoregions for i) big and strong cyclones (B+S), ii)

454 all big cyclones (B), and iii) all strong cyclones (S) based on 1985-2015. For cells with a dash

455 (-), no cyclone crossed the ecoregion from 1985-2015. A cyclone was classed as 'big' if

456 radius to gale force winds ≥ 300 km, and 'strong' if maximum sustained wind speed ≥ 33 m s⁻¹.

457 ¹. Cells are shaded to match Figs 4 and 5, such that: dark red = very frequent (return time ≤ 5

458 years), dark orange = frequent (return time >5 and ≤ 10 years), light orange = occasional

459 (return time >10 years and ≤ 31.5 years) and blue = rare (return time > 31.5 years). Grey

460 shading on the last column shows ecoregions where the percentage of the world's coral reef
 461 area located therein is $\geq 1\%$. Ecoregions are sorted in alphabetical order. A full sized
 462 version of this table is provided in the Supplementary Material (Table S5).
 463

ERG	Ecoregion	Return time			% world	ERG	Ecoregion	Return time			% world	ERG	Ecoregion	Return time			% world	ERG	Ecoregion	Return time			% world
		B+S	B	S				B+S	B	S				B+S	B	S				B+S	B	S	
ERG029	Andaman Islands	-	-	32	0.55	ERG012	Eastern coast South Africa	-	-	<.01	ERG086	Lord Howe Island, east Australia	-	-	0.01	ERG089	Recherche Archipelago, south-west Australia	-	-	<.01			
ERG028	Andaman Sea	-	-	0.32	ERG123	Eastern Hawaii	-	-	11	0.46	ERG036	Makassar Strait, Indonesia	-	-	1.6	ERG095	Rowley Shoals, west Australia	31.5	32	2.8	0.08		
ERG101	Arafura Sea	-	-	32	0.3	ERG087	Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs, eastern Australia	-	32	0.05	ERG020	Maldive Islands	-	-	2.04	ERG112	Samoa, Tuvalu and Tonga	6.7	6.7	2	1.74		
ERG100	Arnhem Land, north Australia	31.5	11	6.7	0.21	ERG111	Fiji	16	11	2.9	2.55	ERG065	Marianas	2.4	2.3	2	0.17	ERG096	Scott Reef, west Australia	31.5	16	11	0.11
ERG098	Ashmore Reef, north-west Australia	31.5	11	8.3	0.17	ERG134	Flower Garden Banks, Gulf of Mexico	16	8.3	4.9	<.01	ERG119	Marquesas Islands, French Polynesia	-	-	<.01	ERG093	Shark Bay, west Australia	-	-	0.11		
ERG114	Austral Islands, French Polynesia	-	32	5.7	0.14	ERG133	Galapagos Islands	-	-	0.08	ERG071	Marshall Islands	6.7	5.7	4.9	1.41	ERG061	Shikoku, Japan	3.6	3.1	2.5	<.01	
ERG141	Bahamas and Florida Keys	5.7	4.4	2.9	2.57	ERG090	Geographe Bay, south-west Australian coast	-	-	0.02	ERG018	Mascarene Islands	8.3	6.7	1.9	0.41	ERG115	Society Islands, French Polynesia	-	-	8.3	0.38	
ERG038	Banda Sea and Molucca Islands	-	-	-	3.24	ERG072	Gilbert Islands, west Kiribati	-	-	0.99	ERG013	Mayotte and Comoros	-	-	0.44	ERG007	Socotra Archipelago	-	32	-	<.01		
ERG135	Bay of Campeche, Yucatan, Gulf of Mexico	10.8	8.3	3.6	0.25	ERG128	Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, Pacific coast	-	-	32	<.01	ERG150	Mediterranean	-	-	<.01	ERG083	Solitary Islands, eastern Australia	-	-	<.01		
ERG136	Belize and west Caribbean	16	8.3	2.6	2.51	ERG003	Gulf of Aden	-	-	0.11	ERG075	Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea	31.5	32	11	2.81	ERG074	Solomon Islands and Bougainville	31.5	16	6.7	2.59	
ERG143	Bermuda	10.8	8.3	4	0.36	ERG125	Gulf of California	-	-	2.9	0.01	ERG082	Moreton Bay, eastern Australia	-	-	0.03	ERG023	South and west India coast	-	-	32	0.12	
ERG042	Birds Head Peninsula, Papua	-	-	-	0.72	ERG104	Gulf of Carpentaria, northern Australia	-	11	4.9	0.04	ERG137	Netherlands Antilles and south Caribbean	-	-	11	0.65	ERG048	South China Sea	2.1	1.9	1.7	1.81
ERG073	Bismarck Sea, New Guinea	-	-	-	2.06	ERG146	Gulf of Guinea to Sierra Leone	-	-	<.01	ERG107	New Caledonia	8.3	5.7	2.8	2.38	ERG034	South Java	-	-	-	0.06	
ERG144	Brazil	-	-	-	0.42	ERG022	Gulf of Kutch, India	-	-	32	0.11	ERG030	Nicobar Islands	-	-	0.15	ERG017	South Madagascar	31.5	16	2.6	0.71	
ERG148	Canary Islands	-	32	-	<.01	ERG027	Gulf of Martaban, Myanmar	-	-	32	0.01	ERG094	Ningaloo Reef and coastal north-west Australia	6.7	5.7	1.8	0.36	ERG011	South Mozambique coast	-	-	0.03	
ERG147	Cape Verde Islands	-	-	32	<.01	ERG005	Gulf of Oman	-	-	32	0.13	ERG088	Norfolk Island	-	-	<.01	ERG002	South Red Sea	-	-	-	1.51	
ERG069	Caroline Islands, Micronesia	6.7	4.9	3.6	1.48	ERG076	Gulf of Papua, Papua New Guinea	-	-	0.2	ERG001	North and central Red Sea	-	-	3.36	ERG057	South Ryukyu Islands, Japan	1.9	1.8	1.7	0.25		
ERG044	Celebes Sea	-	-	-	0.48	ERG050	Gulf of Thailand	-	-	32	0.19	ERG039	North Arafura Sea Islands	-	-	1.12	ERG024	South Sri Lanka	-	-	-	<.01	
ERG041	Cenderawasih Bay, Papua	-	-	-	0.86	ERG037	Gulf of Tomini, Indonesia	-	-	0.3	ERG142	North Florida to North Carolina	-	11	5.7	<.01	ERG051	South Vietnam	31.5	8.3	11	0.09	
ERG078	Central and northern Great Barrier Reef	16	11	4	4.48	ERG054	Hainan, South China Sea	5.7	3.3	2.5	0.15	ERG060	North Kyushu and South Korea	3.6	2.5	2.6	<.01	ERG085	South-east Australia	-	-	-	<.01
ERG145	Central Atlantic	-	-	-	<.01	ERG043	Halmahera, Indonesia	-	-	0.64	ERG016	North Madagascar	10.8	11	3.3	0.85	ERG059	South-east Kyushu, Japan	2.8	2.4	2.2	0.02	
ERG084	Central New South Wales, south-eastern Australia	-	-	-	<.01	ERG067	Heien Reef	-	-	0.05	ERG010	North Mozambique coast	-	-	11	0.8	ERG046	South-east Philippines	5.7	4	3.3	3.25	
ERG052	Central Vietnam	10.8	6.7	6.7	0.03	ERG138	Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and Lesser Antilles	10.8	4.9	2.2	1.66	ERG026	North Myanmar and Bangladesh	-	-	4.4	0.28	ERG081	Southern Great Barrier Reef	-	-	-	0.71
ERG019	Chagos Archipelago	-	-	-	1.06	ERG055	Hong Kong	5.7	3.1	2.6	0.02	ERG047	North Philippines	2.2	2	1.8	1.69	ERG015	Southern Seychelles	-	-	-	0.61
ERG105	Christmas Island, Indian Ocean	-	-	-	0.01	ERG062	Honshu, Japan	2	1.9	1.7	<.01	ERG058	North Ryukyu Islands, Japan	2	2	1.8	0.57	ERG032	Strait of Malacca	-	-	-	0.65
ERG127	Clipperton Atoll, eastern Pacific	-	-	-	<.01	ERG092	Houtman Abrolhos Islands, west Australia	-	32	-	0.21	ERG025	North Sri Lanka and east India	-	32	4.4	0.16	ERG045	Sulu Sea	16	11	6.7	5.24
ERG040	Coastal south-west Papua	-	-	-	0.09	ERG131	Isla de Malpelo, Colombia	-	-	<.01	ERG053	North Vietnam	31.5	6.7	3.6	0.05	ERG049	Sunda Shelf, south-east Asia	-	-	-	0.81	
ERG132	Cocos Island, Costa Rica	-	-	-	0.01	ERG139	Jamaica	16	11	4.4	0.32	ERG014	Northern Seychelles	-	-	0.15	ERG056	Taiwan and coastal China	1.9	1.8	1.6	0.29	
ERG106	Cocos Keeling Atolls, Indian Ocean	-	32	16	0.06	ERG033	Java Sea	-	-	0.97	ERG004	North-west Arabian Sea	-	-	11	0.12	ERG102	Timor Sea	-	32	8.3	0.05	
ERG130	Colombia, Ecuador and Chile, Pacific coast	-	-	-	0.01	ERG121	Johnston Atoll, north central Pacific	-	-	5.7	0.04	ERG122	North-west Hawaii	31.5	11	11	1.39	ERG077	Torres Strait and far northern Great Barrier Reef	-	-	11	6.42
ERG113	Cook Islands, south-west Pacific	-	32	3.3	0.16	ERG103	Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, north-west Australia	-	11	32	0.02	ERG063	Ogasawara Islands, Japan	2.4	2.2	1.9	<.01	ERG108	Vanuatu	4.4	4	2	1.09
ERG079	Coral Sea	5.7	3.3	2	1.73	ERG009	Kenya and Tanzania coast	-	-	1.41	ERG064	Okinotorishima, Japan	1.7	1.6	1.6	0.01	ERG031	West Sumatra	-	-	-	1.43	
ERG129	Costa Rica and Panama, Pacific coast	-	-	-	0.16	ERG109	Kermadec Islands, south Pacific	-	11	16	<.01	ERG066	Palau	31.5	32	11	0.33	ERG126	Western Mexico and Revillagigedo Islands	8.3	5.7	1.6	<.01
ERG140	Cuba and Cayman Islands	8.3	5.7	3.3	2.29	ERG097	Kimberley Coast, north-west Australia	31.5	11	4.4	0.52	ERG006	Persian Gulf	-	-	0.56	ERG116	Western Tuamotu Archipelago, central Pacific	-	-	32	2	
ERG099	Darwin, north Australia	-	-	32	0.31	ERG021	Lakshadweep Islands	-	-	0.39	ERG110	Phoenix Islands, central Kiribati	-	-	0.06	ERG068	Yap Islands, Micronesia	6.7	4.4	4	0.18		
ERG091	Direction Bank, south-west Australian coast	-	-	-	<.01	ERG035	Lesser Sunda Islands and Savu Sea	-	-	32	1.3	ERG117	Pitcairn and south-east Tuamotu Archipelago	-	-	0.03							
ERG008	East Somali coast	-	32	-	0.14	ERG120	Line Islands, north-east Kiribati	-	32	32	0.16	ERG070	Pohnpei and Kosrae, Micronesia	16	8.3	11	0.26						
ERG124	Easter Island, south central Pacific	-	-	-	<.01	ERG118	Line Islands, south-east Kiribati	-	-	32	0.09	ERG080	Pompey and Swain Reefs, south-east Great Barrier Reef	31.5	16	11	3.05						

464

465

466

467

468 Of the ecoregions that are rarely (return time > 31.5 years) crossed by big and strong
469 cyclones (Figs. 4-A; 5-A), ten are frequently (return time 5-10 years) or very frequently
470 (return time ≤ 5 years) crossed by strong cyclones of any size (Figs. 4-B; 5-B). This means
471 their likelihood of being crossed by big and strong cyclones will rise if big cyclones become
472 more prevalent near them in future. These include many of the ecoregions in north and
473 north-west tropical Australia (1.43% of world coral reef area: Ningaloo Reef; Rowley Shoals;
474 Kimberley coast; Ashmore Reef; Arnhem Land; Timor Sea; Gulf of Carpentaria) and near
475 Madagascar (1.97% of world coral reef area: North Madagascar; South Madagascar;
476 Mascarene Islands – Table 1). Conversely, ecoregions where big cyclones currently occur
477 frequently (return time 5-10 years), but strong cyclones occur only occasionally (return time
478 10-31.5 years), may be crossed by more big and strong cyclones in the future as the relative
479 proportion of cyclones that are strong rises. These areas include: South Vietnam; Pohnpei
480 and Kosrae, Micronesia; and to a lesser degree the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf near north-west
481 Australia (Table 1).

482

483

484 **Discussion**

485 Our models show that peak significant wave heights during cyclone Lua reached 12 and 10
486 standard deviations above the mean between field surveys at Scott Reef and the shoals,
487 respectively (Fig. S3). Accordingly, coral losses at the most exposed sites at Scott Reef
488 when Lua was over 500 km away (Fig. 2-A) were worse than those caused by the devastating
489 1998 mass bleaching event that reduced mean (\pm SE) hard coral cover across the reef

490 system from 47.6% (± 4.3) to 9.9% (± 2.2) (Gilmour et al. 2013). Comparing this to published
491 data from field surveys of the GBR, we find that severe damage from Lua extended 20 times
492 further than it did for strong cyclones Larry (2006), Ingrid (2014, Fabricius et al. 2008) and
493 Ita (2015) – all of which were stronger at peak intensity than Lua but much smaller in size
494 (Puotinen et al. 2016). For small strong cyclones, a 100 km threshold would overestimate
495 the spatial extent of severe damage by up to 50% (severe damage was limited to within
496 about 50-60 km of the track). A cyclone's size is thus as important to its potential
497 destructiveness as its strength, a fact long recognised by meteorologists (Powell and
498 Reinhold 2007, Knaff et al. 2014, Holland et al. 2019). Also important is how fast a cyclone
499 moves. Yasi, one of the most powerful cyclones affecting north-east Australia since records
500 began, was similar in size to Lua and reached a peak strength that was higher than Lua by
501 almost 10 m/s. Yet Yasi generated severe damage over an area (Beeden et al. 2015) that
502 was only 30% as extensive as Lua (Fig. 2). The key difference was in how quickly the
503 cyclones moved when at peak size and peak intensity. Lua moved very slowly over relatively
504 deep water when at peak intensity and peak size before accelerating towards the coast
505 (Drost et al. 2017). In contrast, Yasi reached peak intensity and peak size when moving
506 relatively quickly over the shallow waters of the GBR Lagoon (Beeden et al. 2015). Through
507 these comparisons, we show that assuming severe coral damage for all strong cyclones
508 occurs within a 100 km distance threshold can both underestimate (for strong and big
509 cyclones) and overestimate (for strong and small cyclones) the extent of damage. Using a
510 100km damage threshold for strong cyclones from 1985-2015 on a global basis would thus
511 underestimate the extent of damage 35% of the time (when cyclones were strong and big)
512 and overestimate damage 29% of the time (when cyclones were strong and small). Put
513 simply, using a 100km distance threshold for coral damage would be on target for only 36%

514 of strong cyclone positions from 1985-2015. Underestimating the effects of cyclones can
515 have important consequences for modelling long term trends in coral reef ecosystems even
516 for ecoregions where big and strong cyclones occur only occasionally, such as the Central
517 and northern Great Barrier Reef. For example, the combined effect of strong cyclone
518 Hamish (2009) and big and strong cyclone Yasi (2011) contributed significantly to a 50%
519 decline in coral cover (De'ath et al. 2012) in the ecoregion, despite big and strong cyclones
520 expected to revisit the area only occasionally (every 16 years – Table 1).

521

522 The diversity of coral species varies considerably across the globe, with the highest global
523 diversity in the Indo-Pacific region termed the 'Coral Triangle', followed by the Red Sea and
524 northern Madagascar (Veron et al. 2015). Pressures also vary spatially across the world's
525 coral reefs, which can inform where to focus management efforts to conserve reefs (e.g.
526 Game et al. 2008, Beyer et al. 2018, Darling et al. 2019). For example, coral reefs in the
527 southern GBR, parts of Sulawesi, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Cuba have been
528 identified as 'temporary refugia' from thermal stress based on models of future thermal
529 stress (van Hooidonk et al. 2015, 2016). Within these potential refugia from heat stress,
530 reefs frequently exposed to cyclones may be less beneficial as refugia – such as the Cuba
531 and Cayman Islands ecoregion that is exposed to strong cyclones every 3.3 years and big
532 and strong cyclones every 8.3 years, and where reefs have a lower species diversity (Veron
533 et al. 2015). In contrast, the Southern Great Barrier Reef ecoregion is currently only
534 intermittently exposed to strong cyclones and has not experienced a big cyclone since 1985
535 (Fig. 4, Table 1). Further, much of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea are rarely exposed to
536 cyclones (Fig. 4, Table 1), and also host high global diversity (Veron et al. 2015). The value
537 of analyses that map the spatial and temporal distribution of pressures to inform

538 conservation depends on the robustness of the estimates. Our study shows that for
539 cyclones, inferring impacts requires quantification of how strength and size vary along their
540 track, via numerical modelling (e.g. Drost et al. 2017) or empirical methods (e.g. Puotinen et
541 al. 2016). While numerical modelling is often not feasible due to lack of requisite data and
542 computational load, empirical methods are already widely used by risk analysts around the
543 world (Peduzzi et al. 2012). Applying simple distance thresholds alone, even when
544 considering cyclone strength (Puotinen 2004, Edwards et al. 2011, Ban et al. 2015), would
545 underestimate the spatial extent of damage for over one-third of the relevant strong
546 cyclones at the global scale. Spatial datasets of the likelihood of damaging waves generated
547 by reconstructing past cyclone winds and waves have already been used to develop a more
548 rigorous understanding of coral response to disturbance regimes (Western Australia -
549 Gilmour et al. 2018; Great Barrier Reef - Puotinen et al. 2016, Mellin et al. 2018, Ceccarelli et
550 al. 2019, Vercelloni et al. 2020). This regional assessment of the likelihood of damaging
551 waves from past cyclones should be extended to include the rest of world's reefs where
552 cyclones regularly occur.

553

554 Future return times of big and strong cyclones within a given ecoregion depends on how the
555 spatial positioning of cyclone tracks (and how the strength and size and translation speed of
556 each cyclone varies along its track) shifts as the climate warms. Many studies have used
557 global climate models to simulate how cyclone activity, particularly intensity, will change.
558 Despite continuing uncertainty, there is general agreement that a greater proportion of the
559 cyclones that form in future will be strong (Knutson et al. 2010, Walsh et al. 2016, Camargo
560 and Wing 2016, Bacmeister et al. 2018). The overall numbers may not change (Walsh et al.
561 2015, Camargo and Wing 2016 – but noting Bhatia et al. 2018) because the frequency of

562 cyclones of all intensities may stay the same or drop, as an increase in inhibiting factors such
563 as wind shear make it harder for cyclones to form (Kang & Elser 2015). Little work has been
564 done to predict how cyclone size may change in future climates, though Chavas et al. (2015)
565 suggest a link between cyclone size and higher relative Sea Surface Temperatures (SST)
566 which may lead to simulations of cyclone sizes under warming scenarios using downscaled
567 SST data. Indeed, recent reviews call for more work in this area (Walsh et al. 2016, Parker et
568 al. 2018). Nonetheless, even if big cyclones do not become more prevalent in future, the
569 chance of a cyclone being both big and strong at the same time should rise because a
570 greater proportion of cyclones will be strong.

571

572 Knowing which reefs are increasingly impacted by cyclone disturbances is vitally important
573 for developing conservation strategies, yet even less work has been done to examine how
574 the spatial distribution and movement of cyclones may change in future (Parker et al. 2018).
575 Some evidence suggests that where cyclones reach their peak strength has already moved
576 poleward (Kossin et al. 2016), ranging from 7 (\pm 98) km per decade in the North Atlantic
577 basin to 67 (\pm 55) km per decade in the South Indian basin (Kossin et al. 2014). If this trend
578 continues, return intervals for strong cyclones of any size may shorten in some ecoregions
579 as cyclones become more prevalent in the higher latitudes where they are currently
580 relatively infrequent. Some examples (Fig. 4-C) include ecoregions near southern parts of
581 Australia (Shark Bay, West Australia; Pompey and Swain Reefs, south-east Great Barrier
582 Reef; Southern Great Barrier Reef), near south-east Africa (South Mozambique coast;
583 Eastern coast South Africa) and near Hawaii (North-west Hawaii; Eastern Hawaii – Table 1).
584 Of these, the South Mozambique coast is a secondary global diversity hotspot (Veron et al.
585 2015). Most ecoregions where big cyclones currently cross frequently or very frequently

586 (Fig. 4-B) already experience the crossing of strong cyclones very frequently (Fig. 4-C, Table
587 1). However, for five ecoregions in the south Pacific (Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, north-west
588 Australia; Scott Reef, West Australia; Pompey and Swain Reefs, south-east Great Barrier
589 Reef; Kermadec Islands, South Pacific and at North-west Hawaii - Table 1), a greater
590 incidence of strong cyclones may also increase the likelihood of big and strong cyclones (Fig.
591 4-B, C).

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594 Changes in cyclone impacts within ecoregions will be superimposed on rising stress from
595 human activities and climate change, most notably more frequent exposure to higher levels
596 of thermal stress (Henson 2017, Hughes et al. 2017, Hoegh-Guldberg 2017). As the climate
597 continues to warm, the occurrence of stretches of uninterrupted recovery time become
598 shorter, as already documented for the GBR. For example, back to back mass bleaching
599 events in 2016 and 2017 devastated large areas of the GBR (Hughes et al. 2017), which
600 undoubtedly interrupted the recovery of corals previously affected by a spate of recent
601 strong cyclones in the northern parts of the region (Nathan – 2015, Ita – 2014) and central
602 (Yasi – 2011, Hamish – 2009). Clearly there is little we can do to reduce the incidence or
603 severity of cyclones near reefs. However, understanding where and how often cyclone
604 wave action is likely to affect the world's coral reefs is essential to inform conservation
605 efforts to help them survive the escalating pressures that threaten their continued
606 existence. In this paper, we identified ecoregions potentially at greater future risk from
607 cyclone wave damage (e.g., southern, north-west, northern Australia; Hawaii; south-east
608 Africa) based on current return times of cyclones combined with global predictions of how
609 the distribution and intensity of cyclones may change as the climate warms. This should be

610 modelled in more depth by reconstructing cyclone winds and waves across coral reef
611 regions regularly visited by cyclones using future cyclone tracks generated from a range of
612 global climate models. The resultant estimates of future risk to reefs from damaging
613 cyclone waves (with confidence intervals) would be a key step towards answering the 'call
614 to action' for ecologists to develop robust methods for monitoring and modelling cyclone
615 impacts on both land and marine based ecosystems (Pruitt et al. 2019).

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