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**TISSUE THICKNESS AS A TOOL  
TO MONITOR THE STRESS  
RESPONSE OF MASSIVE  
*PORITES* CORALS TO  
TURBIDITY IMPACT ON LIHIR  
ISLAND, PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

Thesis submitted by

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**October 2004**

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the School of Tropical Environment Studies and Geography  
James Cook University, Australia

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This Ph.D project would never have taken off without the outstanding help and support of Dr Christopher Cuff, who initially made me aware of this project and approached my sponsors. He also organised funding for my first two years' student fees, which were paid by BHP mining company. Additionally, he was always there to assist with any questions/problems/dramas and I could never have completed it without his ongoing help. Thanks so much for never giving up on me!

Thanks to my supervisors: Dr Dave Barnes for discovering the importance of tissue thickness and for initiating this project and enabling my association with AIMS and Dr Scott Smithers for finding internet cafes in remote locations to send me ruthless editing comments (and particularly for insisting on flowcharts). Many thanks to Dr Janice Lough at AIMS for support, technical and editing help. Monty Devereux, the most outstanding AIMS technician, thanks for everything you have helped me with in the last five years. Many thanks to the mechanics at AIMS for creating my hand-held drill, the plastic boxes, the stainless steel tags and the large cores. Thanks also to the CRC Reef, particularly Dr Simon Woodley for managing the contract between Lihir Management Company, JCU and AIMS. Thanks also to Prof Helene Marsh for assisting with the fee waiver for the last 3 semesters. Thanks to Adrian Flynn at ENESR Consulting for the continual sharing of information and for presenting our joint paper at the ICRS. My most humble thanks go to Steve Delean who was the only person who was able to explain statistics in a way that made sense. Your help with the sampling design and analysis was invaluable. Thanks also to Dr Yvette Everingham and the CRC Reef for additional stats advice. Many thanks for the inspiring discussions with Dr Severine Thomas, Dr Peter Ridd, Dr Ken Anthony, Peter Kew and James True.

Most importantly, my many heartfelt thanks to Dr Geoff Day from Lihir Management Company (LMC) Environment Department for initiating this project and being its main financial backer. The logistical and financial support of LMC was immense and surprisingly uncomplicated. This can largely be attributed to Geoff's unflinching interest in furthering scientific research and his personal efforts in helping this project in any possible way. I also worked with some of the most amazing people on Lihir Island, particularly Basil Bulkua of the Environment Department who never lost his composure no matter how much hassle I caused (exporting corals three separate times comes particularly to mind!). Basil, thanks for everything and particularly all our great debriefings. Many local workers were

involved in the field work of this project: Karol, Robin, Luke, John, Tony, Peter, Michael, Martha, Ruth, Gabriel, Vivianne, Doreen and Augie, *ol poroman bilong mi, tank yu tru*. James Kepui, thanks for the great and lasting friendship and our shared love of Desmond Morris. Joe Suar, the most outstanding diver and the person who single-handedly solved any problems with sampling procedures, I owe so much to you. Having your assistance under- and above the water was never anything but a joy and you taught me so much. You and Karol were the best team to go sampling with. I will never forget the wonderful time I had in PNG, the fieldwork for this project could not have been more rewarding and enjoyable. Thanks also to my great field assistants (in order of appearance) Monty, Chris, Olivia and Sally.

For the most incredible emotional support through what often seemed an endless nightmare, my greatest love and thanks go to Pam, Ben, Jo, Kris and Linda, as well as my family and friends in Austria, Australia and New Zealand. I wish my Oma, Opa and Papa could have been around to share this moment of pride and relief with me. But more than anything, I am so happy to have completed this pigheaded pursuit of my life-long goal for my Mama, who has sacrificed so much to enable me to have big dreams and become anything I want. *Ich hab dich so lieb, Mama. Danke.*

*Death is not an option.*

## ABSTRACT

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In massive *Porites* colonies, living tissue invests only a thin layer on the outer perimeter of the skeleton, normally around 25-50% of an annual growth increment in healthy colonies. The depth to which skeleton is occupied by tissue is referred to as 'tissue thickness'. Tissue thickness has been argued to be a sensitive bioindicator that may be potentially used to monitor changes in coral health *prior* to collapse and mortality. The primary goal of this study was to assess the response of tissue thickness in massive *Porites* colonies at Lihir Island (3<sup>0</sup>5'S 152<sup>0</sup>38'E) to an anthropogenically increased turbidity regime associated with mining activities. In order to achieve this goal it was also necessary to identify possible sources of natural variability in tissue thickness, both spatial and temporal, and to quantify their influence. Possible sources of tissue thickness variability identified through both literature review and observation included: i) changes in thickness through the lunar month as a function of skeletal growth patterns; ii) change in thickness due to differences in local environmental conditions; iii) change in tissue thickness with differences in colony size and shape. Where possible, the influence of all of these factors was examined in both shallow (<11 m) and deep (>14 m) habitats, across sites around Lihir Island and between years (sampling took place in 2001, 2002, and 2003).

Tissue thickness in massive *Porites* changes over a lunar month as part of skeletal growth processes. This study looked for ways in which allowance could be made and procedures devised for sampling at different times of

the lunar month. Tissue thickness decreased, on average, by 20% on the day after the full moon. Tissue thickness increased, on average, by 0.3  $\mu\text{m}$  per day during the lunar month. These patterns of variation were consistently observed between study sites, at different depths, and in different sampling years. The only exception appeared to be when tissue thickness became critically thin (below 2.2 mm), which was only found at a site heavily affected by turbidity. Hence, growth processes in massive *Porites* were reduced or halted when limited energy reserves were available under stressful conditions. Monthly tissue uplift in the same colonies was resumed when an increase in tissue thickness above the minimum threshold of 2.2 mm was achieved. The consistency of tissue variations throughout the lunar month in all but these very few extremely stressed individuals allowed measurements taken from individuals at different times of the lunar month to be easily adjusted for comparison.

In the second study, changes in tissue thickness in response to increased turbidity were examined by measuring tissue thickness in massive *Porites* colonies along an anthropogenic turbidity gradient in 2001, 2002 and 2003. Tissue thickness was significantly less where turbidity levels reached 15-30  $\text{mg l}^{-1}$ . This was the maximum turbidity encountered near coral reefs in this study. Tissue thickness was not significantly reduced by lower turbidity levels, but it was always less in colonies in deeper water than in colonies in shallow water. Some variability of tissue thickness was also observed between study sites and years. However, neither spatial nor temporal variability masked the general pattern of decreasing tissue thickness with increasing turbidity.

The final study examined differences in tissue thickness with colony size and shape and looked at environmentally-induced changes in tissue thickness in colonies with different morphologies. Massive *Porites* corals on Lihir Island were found to occur in six distinct growth forms, namely rounded, round-encrusting, pyramidal, pyramid-encrusting, encrusting and vertical encrusting. Some of these shapes could be described quantitatively by height/circumference ratios. However, the angle of substrata slope was found to be a better indicator for changes in shapes with study sites and water depth. Allowing for changes in tissue thickness with depth, colony morphology did not affect tissue thickness. Hence, colony morphology was not a significant factor in sampling for tissue thickness. Similar-sized colonies were selected for sampling. The effects of colony size on tissue thickness were tested and colony size could also be excluded as a factor which significantly affected tissue thickness.

Patterns of change in tissue thickness in *Porites* colonies at Lihir Island indicated that mining activities had affected, and were affecting, corals and coral communities over a much more restricted area than predicted by the mine's environmental impact statement. Tissue thickness patterns corresponded closely with indices of live coral cover and turbidity measurements. Tissue thickness was found to be a simple and reliable bioindicator for turbidity stress on corals on Lihir Island. Changes in tissue thickness indicate when corals are being adversely affected by anthropogenic activities. This gives tissue thickness a huge advantage over other monitoring techniques, because these mostly detect change after it has occurred - and not while it is occurring.

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*Für meine Großeltern, die ich über alles liebe und immer vermissen werde.  
Oma und Opa, ich hab's geschafft!*