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Scarborough - Environmental Monitoring Program

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Coral Community Assessment Post-Activity Report

Scarborough Execute Environmental Monitoring Program

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WOODSIDE ENERGY LIMITED CORAL COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT POST-ACTIVITY REPORT SA0006RH0000006 / R240145

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Executive Summary

The proposed Scarborough development is located approximately 375 km west of the Dampier Archipelago, located in the Greater Scarborough gas fields and operated by Woodside Energy Ltd (Woodside). The proposed development targets the resource through the construction and operation of a floating production facility and multiple wells, tied back to Woodsides onshore gas processing facilities in Dampier by a 430 km trunkline.

O2 Marine has been contracted by Woodside to undertake environmental monitoring associated with trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities required for nearshore trunkline installation. Water quality was monitored under a Tiered Monitoring and Management Framework (TMMF) to inform management actions and prevent impacts to significant benthic communities and habitats (BCH). No exceedances of water quality management triggers were measured during the monitoring period at any Impact or Influence sites and therefore, impacts were not predicted to occur to coral as required by EPO 6- $1(1)$.

This report presents survey data, results of the post-activity assessment of coral communities on the completion of trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities and performs an evaluation against the Environmental Protection Outcome (EPO) 6-1(1) in accordance with the Dredging and Spoil Disposal Management Plan (DSDMP), which relates to detection of a net reduction of live coral cover at any coral impact monitoring location attributable to the proposal.

Eighteen siteswere re-surveyed using a Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) and orthomosaicswere created from the imagery captured. Five fixed replicate digital transects of 10 m length established for the coral assessment were extracted from each orthomosaic and 30 images were extracted from each transect. Each image was analysed using ReefCloud software with 30 overlapping random points to score coral to genus level and provide estimates of coral cover and composition at each site. Summary statistics for bleached coral cover and diversity and structure were calculated for each site. The incidence of observed coral health measures including disease, sediment, predation, damage, mucus and juvenile corals were also recorded per image. An assessment against EPO 6-1(1) was undertaken in accordance with the statistical methodology in the DSDMP. *Net Coral Loss* was calculated for each Impact site as the difference in average change in coral cover within transects minus the mean change in coral cover calculated from Reference sites*.*

The coral community assessment determined that EPO 6-1(1) has been achieved and no management actions are required based on the outcomes of this post-activity coral community assessment report. A net reduction in live coral cover attributable to trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities was not recorded at any coral Impact monitoring site (CONI, CONI2 and COBN). Coral cover remained relatively stable, varying by <5%, with the exception of ANG2 (-8%) and MIDI (+13%). Community composition was comparable between surveys, dominated by either Poritidae or Acroporidae, with moderate to high diversity across the communities. Variation in coral communities can be attributed to natural variation. Changes in coral cover at ANG2 indicate minor mortality (with correlating turf algae growth) following bleaching recorded in the pre-activity survey, while MIDI results indicate variation attributable to intermittent seasonal macroalgal growth. These results validate findings of no recorded water quality exceedances at any Impact or Influence sites during trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities implemented as part of the TMMF to protect coral communities.

1. Introduction

1.1. Project Background

The Scarborough gas resource, located in Commonwealth waters approximately 375 km west of the Burrup Peninsula, forms part of the Greater Scarborough gas fields. The Scarborough gas resource will be developed by Woodside Energy Limited (Woodside) as the Operator. The offshore development (Scarborough Project) targets the Scarborough and North Scarborough gas fields, through constructing multiple subsea gas wells, tied back to a semi-submersible floating production unit (FPU) moored in approximately 900 m ofwater in the Scarborough field. The offshore facilities are proposed to be connected to an onshore facility through a trunkline of approximately 430 km in length. Woodside plans to operate the Scarborough trunkline to transfer dry gas from the FPU to onshore gas processing facilities, coming ashore at the existing Pluto LNG plant. Construction of the trunkline in State waters requires trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities, managed under the Scarborough Project Dredging and Spoil Disposal Management Plan (DSDMP; Woodside 2023). The DSDMP outlines how trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities will be managed and complies with the Scarborough Nearshore Component Ministerial Statement No. 1172, including relevant conditions and Environmental Protection Outcomes.

The DSDMP identifies benthic habitats and communities (BCH) as a Key Environmental Factor, specifically coral cover as the most sensitive ecological receptor. A Tiered Monitoring and Management Framework (TMMF) is described in the DSDMP to achieve Environmental Protection Outcome (EPO) 6-1(1):

No detectable net reduction of live coral cover at any of the coral Impact monitoring locations attributable to the proposal is being, or has been, achieved.

The TMMF is informed by water quality to manage trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities (trenching, spoil disposal, borrowground dredging and backfill activities) to prevent impacts to sensitive BCH receptors. As part of the TMMF, a coral community assessment program is outlined for the purpose of validating whether EPO 6-1(1) has been met.

O2 Marine has been contracted by Woodside to undertake the coral community assessment to support the application of the TMMF as described in the DSDMP.

1.2. Activities and Management Framework

1.2.1. Scarborough Project Activity Description

Trenching along the trunkline route in State waters and disposal of dredge spoil at one of the existing Spoil Grounds 2B and/or A/B occurred between 21 July 2023 and 31 August 2023 using a combination of a trailing suction hopper dredge (TSHD) and backhoe dredge and associated split hopper barges. Trenching along the trunkline route in Commonwealth waters and associated spoil disposal at either Spoil Ground 2B or 5A was undertaken between 24 November and 20 December 2023, using a TSHD. Offshore dredging of the borrow ground and backfill activities along the trunkline route were completed between 24 December 2023 and 25 January 2024 using a TSHD.

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1.2.2. Water Quality Monitoring

Using the TMMF, the objective of the water quality management program was to provide data to inform the management oftrenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities, and associated water quality, to a level where impacts are not predicted to occur to sensitive benthic receptors, to achieve Environmental Protection Outcome (EPO) 6-1(1).

The water quality monitoring program was operational between 5 May 2023 and 6 March 2024, equating to approximately 10 months of water quality monitoring data captured prior to, during and post trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities. Nineteen sites provided telemetered data for benthic light photosynthetic active radiation (PAR) expressed as a daily light integral (DLI; mol photons m⁻²), turbidity, water temperature and depth. No exceedances of a management trigger (Tier 1, 2 or 3) were recorded throughout the water quality monitoring program. Therefore, impacts were not predicted to occur to coral, reactive monitoring of coral communities was not actioned during the trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities and water quality was considered to be managed during activities to meet EPO 6-1(1). Subsequently, no management actions are required based on the outcomes of this postactivity coral community assessment report. The results of the water quality monitoring program is presented in O2 Marine (2024a).

1.3. Objectives

This report presents a post-activity coral community assessment, conducted on the completion of trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities, undertaken for the Scarborough Project. The objectives of this report as stated in Section 11.3.1 of the DSDMP is to "provide data that determine whether the coral EPO specified in condition 6-1(1) is being or has been achieved" (Woodside 2023).

2. Methodology

The methodology described in the following section aligns with the coral community assessment prescribed in Section 11.3 of the approved DSDMP.

2.1. Monitoring Sites

Eighteen coral community monitoring sites were re-surveyed with site details presented in [Table 1](#page-11-1) and locations shown i[n Figure 1.](#page-12-0)

The sites are distributed across two of the three ecological zones established in the Dampier Archipelago [\(Figure 1\)](#page-12-0). Ecological zones are defined in Section 5.5.2 of the DSDMP and are based on the sensitivity of benthic receptors as follows:

- Zone A the trunkline area between the shoreline and KP8, adjacent macroalgae and mangrove habitats within Mermaid Sound, and generally all mangrove, marsh, and seagrass habitats between Nickol Bay and Point Samson. Water quality within Zone A is more turbid and coral communities comprise more sediment-tolerant or resilient species (Blakeway and Radford, 2005).
- Zone B the trunkline area between KP8 and KP25, adjacent coral and macroalgae habitats within Mermaid Sound, and generally all coral, macroalgae and mixed community habitats between Dolphin Island and Bezout Island, including Madeleine Shoals.

2.1.1. Site Classifications

The DSDMP divided sites into three classifications based on modelling predictions of the plume generated from proposed trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities for the purpose of monitoring and management of potential impacts as follows:

- Impact sites: monitoring sites where plume modelling shows the Zone of Moderate Impact (ZoMI) intersects with significant coral habitat. These sites are key for the assessment against EPO 6-1(1) and will be used to determine whether there is project-attributable change to live coral cover.
- Influence sites: monitoring sites where modelling shows the Zone of Influence (ZoI) intersects with significant coral habitat. A conservative approach of categorising Influence sites as those that occur near the ZoI boundary (within 200 m). These sites may be reclassified as either Impact sites or Reference sites during the post activity assessment, dependant on whether water quality monitoring records a Project attributable exceedance of the Tier 2 management trigger orthe site is not influenced by the dredge generated plume, respectively.
- Reference sites: representative monitoring sites which modelling predicts will occur beyond the ZoI and are not predicted to be impacted or influenced by the sediment plume.

Outcomes of the water quality monitoring program indicated no exceedance of any Tier 1, Tier 2 or Tier 3 management triggers attributable to the Project(O2 Marine 2024a). Therefore, modelled Influence sites (ANG2, HAUY, NWIT, SWIT, SUP2) have been reclassified as Reference sites for the purpose of this assessment.

2.2. Timing

The post-activity survey was conducted between 20 March and 31 March 2024, within three months cessation of trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities as required by the DSDMP.

Variable metocean conditions were experienced during the post-activity survey, with strong winds and spring tides resulting in strong currents. Visibility was reduced at a number of sites from increased turbidity associated with the recent passing Severe Tropical Cyclone Neville.

Table 1: Coral community assessment sites and function

 1 Reclassified site classifications following outcomes of the water quality monitoring program (O2 Marine 2024a). Note Influence sites have been reclassified as Reference sites for the post activity assessment as water quality monitoring results demonstrated that each Influence site was not influenced by the dredge generated plume.

Figure 1: Location of sites for coral community assessment and site classification.

2.3. Survey Methods

2.3.1. Remotely Operated Vehicle Survey

Prior to deployment of the Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV), site boundaries were established by overlaying site boundaries onto the ROV navigation software and placing floats in the corners of the designated area to provide a visual mark of the boundary. To maximise overlap with the pre-activity survey, each site boundary was a minimum of 12 m x 12 m. Where possible, a larger area was surveyed, such as LEGD (20 m x 24 m).

An Oceanbotics SRV-8X was used for the post-activity survey, fitted with a SeaTrac ultra-short base line (USBL) system, including multibeam sonar for improved positioning. The ROV was fitted with three cameras, including an additional downward facing high resolution camera to provide a wider area of coverage. The intervalometer on the cameras was used to take photos every one second throughout deployment. To enable measurements to be performed on the final orthomosaics, a scale bar was placed on each site and was included in the photos.

On deployment of the ROV, the USBL navigation system was used to transit to the site boundary. The ROV transited across repeated parallel lines within the site boundary and coverage assessed using live positioning of the ROV. On completion of the planned survey lines, the ROV then returned to any areas identified as not covered and captured additional imagery. The ROV flew targeting a speed of approximately 0.7 knots at an altitude of approximately 1 m. Under low visibility conditions, the ROV flew closer to the substrate and the height determined from the live video feed of the ROV.

The objective was to survey the entirety of the area enclosed within the boundary, however, challenges arising from environmental conditions, such as strong currents and reduced visibility, coupled with positioning related limitations in shallow water, occasionally prevented complete coverage of the survey site. Nevertheless, the spatial area surveyed at each site was sufficiently large to cover the five replicate 10 m transects established in the pre-activity survey (O2 Marine 2024b).

2.3.1.1. Field Quality Control

Due to the volume of imagery, an alignment of data capture was conducted after the field survey day. An 'alignment' is the first phase of an orthomosaic creation and provides an indication of the photo coverage across the site. If any gaps or areas of insufficient coverage were detected, the ROV was redeployed on a subsequent field day to capture additional photos and achieve comprehensive coverage suitable for analysis.

2.3.2. Photogrammetry

Orthomosaics for each site were created using the photogrammetric software Agisoft Metashape. The orthomosaics created for each site are provided in [Appendix A.](#page-37-0)

Feature matching was used to align the post-activity orthomosaic to the pre-activity orthomosaic. Five 10 m transects established in the pre-activity survey were then identified and extracted from the post-activity orthomosaic [\(Figure 2\)](#page-14-1).

Figure 2: ANG2 orthomosaic with five digital transects established in the pre-activity survey. White patches indicate areas where photogrammetry software was unable to combine images, or data was unavailable.

Thirty (30) overlapping digital quadrats (approximately 0.5 m x 0.7 m) per transect were extracted from the orthomosaic [\(Figure 3\)](#page-14-2). The individual quadrats were then analysed using ReefCloud (ReefCloud, 2024).

Figure 3: Example of a repeat quadrat surveyed at ANG2.

2.4. Image Analysis

To determine the cover of benthic habitats, quadrats were analysed using the online coral analysis program, [ReefCloud](https://reefcloud.ai/how-it-works) (ReefCloud 2024a). ReefCloud is a resource for benthic image analysis which deploys deep neural networks to allow fully and semi-automated classification of points per image (González-Rivero et al. 2020). Thirty points were randomly overlaid on each image and artificial intelligence machine annotations were generated to classify the benthic habitat beneath. These automated annotations were then verified by a marine scientist for accuracy.

Benthic organisms and physical seabed features below each point were classified based on a list of 166 classifications shown in [Appendix B.](#page-55-0) Hard corals were identified to genus level where possible, while other benthic flora and fauna were classified into broader groups. The classification list for scoring included a bleached coral option for each hard coral identification.

Observations of coral stressors (i.e., disease, sedimentation, mucus production, predation, damage) and juvenile colonies (approximately <15 cm diameter) were recorded as the number of colonies per image.

2.4.1. Image Analysis Quality Control

Automated annotations produced by ReefCloud were verified by a team of marine scientists and adjusted where necessary as a semi-automated process. The verified image analysis dataset created in the pre-activity survey was utilised as a training program to enhance consistency between surveys and scorers. Additionally, a curated coral identification guide specific to the Dampier Archipelago was developed and utilised.

To avoid inter-scoring bias, a subset of classifications from each annotator were reviewed and verified by a coral taxonomy expert with significant experience in Dampier Archipelago corals and point scoring analyses.

Taxonomic classifications were confirmed using:

- Taxonomic guides (Richards 2018, Kelley 2022; and online sources; primarily Veron et al. 2016)
- A curated reference collection of images assigned a taxonomic classification.
- The experience of the annotators and regular quality checks by a coral taxonomy expert.

ReefCloud model validation achieved an accuracy score of 0.68 (68%), and an F1 score of 0.65. Accuracy is the percentage of all auto-classified annotations that align with human verification. The F1 score accounts for data distribution and combines precision and recall metrics. The F1 score is more useful when classes are imbalanced (i.e., rare or cryptic classes or groups). Generally, the higher the accuracy and F1 scores, the better the artificial intelligence model can classify observations. The potential for annotator subjectivity in scoring is significantly reduced where close to 70% of all points have been classified correctly using the artificial intelligence model (ReefCloud 2024b).

2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in the [R statistical package](https://www.r-project.org/) (R version 4.4.1) using [RStudio,](https://posit.co/) utilising the semiautomated annotated points. Percent cover data was calculated as the relative proportion of a benthic category from all classifiable points per transect.

2.5.1. Coral Community Assessment

Benthic cover analysis presents results separated into four functional groups at the highest level: Coral, Flora (algae, seagrass), Other benthic invertebrates (soft corals, octocorals, invertebrates) and Abiotic (substrate, dead coral). Unless otherwise specified, coral cover and communities refers to hard coral. Soft corals captured in 'Other benthic invertebrates' or described specifically. The mean and standard deviation (SD) for each site were derived from the transect sums. Bleached corals with white colour were assumed to be alive when calculating coral cover. This is because corals can survive without zooxanthellae for a period after bleaching (Marshall & Schuttenberg, 2006). Recently dead coral was distinguished from bleached coral through colonisation of algae and colour changing to a green-brown appearance.

Coral categories were aggregated to family level for community composition analysis due to low representation of many genera across the archipelago. The composition of the coral community is presented as the mean of coral families within a site relative to total coral cover. Families were listed in decreasing order of composition across all sites and seven families that comprised up to 92% of overall composition are shown in outputs, while the remaining 18 families (8%) were consolidated into an 'Other' coral category. The composition of bleached coral was also presented at a family level calculated as site means of coral families within a site relative to bleached coral cover. Bleaching was categorised in accordance with the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) bleaching classification levels: Major (>30% - 60%), Moderate (>10% - 30%), Minor (>0% – 10%; AIMS 2022).

The coral communities within sites were characterized by five (5) diversity indices, calculated at genus level: 'Richness', 'Margalef's richness index', 'Shannon's diversity index', 'Shannon's evenness index', and 'Simpson's dominance index'. Diversity indices are mathematical measures of the diversity and richness of taxa that provide more information about community composition than raw abundance.

'Richness' (S) is the number of categories (in this case, coral genera) present at each sampling unit. Margalef's richness index (*d*) is a measure of the number of taxa present for a given total number of individuals. It was one of the first attempts to compensate for the effects of sample size on richness indices by dividing the number of species in a sample by the natural log of the number of organisms collected:

$$
d = \frac{S-1}{\log_b(N)}
$$

where *S* is the number of taxa, *N* is the total number of measurements and *b* is the base of the logarithm (typically natural base). Values of Margalef's index range from zero (0) to eight (8) and higher values indicate a higher diversity of species.

Shannon's diversity index (*H'*; Shannon's H) is the most commonly used diversity index, which accounts for both abundance and evenness of the species present. It is defined as:

$$
H' = -\sum_{i=1}^{S} p_i log_b(p_i)
$$

where *pⁱ* is the proportional abundance of species *i* and *b* is the base of the logarithm (typically natural base). Pielou's evenness index ϵ expresses how evenly the individuals (observations) are distributed among the different species (or other taxonomic levels). Evenness is scaled on a value between zero (0) and one (1), with one (1) representing the case where all taxa are present in equal numbers:

$$
E = \frac{H'}{ln(S)}
$$

where H' is the Shannon diversity index and S is the species richness.

Dominance (*D*; 1-Simpson index), expresses the degree to which the number of members one or more categories is/are more numerous than those in the other categories. Index values range from zero (0), where all categories are equally present, to one (1), where one category dominates the community completely:

$$
D=1-\sum_{i=1}^S p_i^2
$$

Observations of juvenile corals, coral health and stressors such as disease, predation and mucus were recorded for all colonies within transects across each site.

2.5.2. Assessment Against EPO 6-1(1)

An assessment against EPO6-1(1) was undertaken to align with the procedure described in Section 11.3.5.1 of the DSDMP.

In summary, change in hard coral cover (△CC) was calculated per transect (△*CC transect*) by subtracting the post-activity coral cover from pre-activity coral cover. Mean \triangle CC was then calculated for each site by averaging △*Coral cover transect*. △CC was assessed at each Reference site to determine suitability for inclusion in the Reference site pool required for the assessment. Net Coral Loss was determined for each Impact site as the △ *Coral Cover Impact site* minus the mean estimate of average coral cover across Reference sites (△ *Coral Cover Reference sites*):

Net Coral Loss Impact Site = \triangle *Coral Cover Impact site* – *(average* \triangle *Coral Cover Reference sites)*

If negative, net coral loss at the Impact site was less than that recorded across Reference sites and thus does not constitute Net Loss. If positive, *Net Coral Loss* at the Impact site is greater than that recorded across Reference sites. In the latter case, a one-sided F-test (Variable 1: sum of squares of △CC Reference sites + Impact site; Variable 2: sum of squares of △CC*Reference sites*) was then performed to test whether net loss at the Impact site was significantly greater than changes recorded at Reference sites.

3. Results

3.1. Assessment Against EPO 6-1(1)

Results of the assessment against EPO: *No detectable net reduction of live coral cover at any of the coral Impact monitoring locations attributable to the proposal is being, or has been, achieved* is presented in [Table 2](#page-18-2) and [Figure 4.](#page-19-1) All Reference [s](#page-18-3)ites (n=15) were pooled and included in the EPO assessment against all Impact sites². The results indicate that *Net Coral Loss*was recorded at COBN only, although was not significant in comparison to Reference sites.

Net Coral Loss was not recorded at CONI and CONI2 (i.e. a negative value in [Table 2\)](#page-18-2), indicating losses were greater across Reference sites than recorded at these Impact sites. The assessment validates the findings of no recorded water quality exceedances at any Impact (or Influence) site during trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging or backfill activities, implemented as part of the TMMF to protect sensitive benthic receptors. Hence, no detectable net reduction of live coral cover was recorded at any of the Impact monitoring locations as a result of the Project in accordance with EPO 6-1(1).

Site	Zone	Classification	Net Coral Loss	F-test	p-value	EPO 6-1(1) met?
COBN	B	Impact	1.083%	$F = 0.504$	p=0.449	
CONI	B	Impact	$-0.781%$	Not required as no net loss		
CONI2	Β	Impact	-2.257%	Not required as no net loss		

Table 2: Summary of EPO assessment evaluation for changes in coral cover at impact sites

WOODSIDE ENERGY LIMITED 2 Preliminary inspection of results indicated that \triangle CC was relatively consistent between sites, so statistics were precautionarily calculated using all Reference sites. If the one sided F-test ad indicated a significant difference in Net Coral Loss, further investigation in the suitability of each Reference site for the assessment would have been triggered as part of a larger analysis, if required.

Figure 4: Mean change in hard coral cover per site.

3.2. Site Specific Summaries

Specific site characteristics are described in Section [3.2.1](#page-25-0) and [3.2.2.](#page-27-0) In summary, benthic cover and composition was relatively consistent between surveys [\(Figure 5,](#page-21-0) [Figure 6;](#page-21-1) [Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Coral cover varied by less than 5% at all sites except ANG2 (-8%) and MIDI (+13%). Bleaching was observed to be affecting a smaller proportion of the hard coral community, ranging from 3% to 16% [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0), compared to 5% to 33% recorded in the pre-activity survey. Reductions in coral cover, or abiotic substrate, generally correlated with an increase in Flora, typically turfing algae colonising dead coral or rubble [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Specifically, changes in coral cover at ANG2 correlate with turf algae growth, likely associated with bleaching recorded in the pre-activity survey, whilst increases in cover at MIDI indicate variation attributable to intermittent seasonal macroalgal growth.

Community composition of coral communities was also comparable between surveys [\(Figure 6;](#page-21-1) [Table 3\)](#page-23-0). Sites were either dominated by Poritidae or Acroporidae, followed by Merulinidae and Agariciidae. Bleaching affected a range of families across all sites in both pre- and post-activity surveys, although accounted for less than 16% (MIDI) of the coral community in the post-activity, compared to up to 33% (MAL2) in the pre-activity [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0). Diversity indices were comparable between surveys; richness varied by less than six genera within sites, which is likely due to the variability and limitations inherent in surveying small colonies and cryptic species. Overall, all sites displayed moderate to high diversity and richness, comparable to the pre-activity survey [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Coral stressors were observed at all sites [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0), and was comparable to the pre-activity survey [\(](#page-24-1)

[Table 4\)](#page-24-1). Sedimentation occurred at all sites, particularly SUP2, CONI2 and FFP1, occurring as a fine layer of sediment over turf covered dead coral colonies and rubble. Predation and mucus production were common stressors at the majority of sites. Coral diseases (white syndromes, tissue lesions) were also observed at eight sites, an increase from five sites in the pre-activity survey. *Porites* were the most commonly affected colonies, followed by *Turbinaria*, Juvenile corals were also observed at most sites, particularly at NWIT and SUP2, which recorded over 200 and 100 juvenile colonies, respectively [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0).

Figure 5: Changes in benthic composition between pre- and post-activity survey

Figure 6: Changes in community composition between pre- and post-activity surveys

Figure 8: Contribution of families to bleached coral community composition between surveys. Composition relative to overall coral cover.

Table 3: Diversity indices calculated from coral genera abundance at each site across surveys

Table 4: Summary of colony observations of coral stressors and juveniles per site across surveys

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3.2.1. Ecological Zone A

KGBY

Hard coral cover was relatively consistent between surveys, accounting for 33% of benthic composition, down from 34.9% pre-activity. Mean coral cover ranged between transects, from 25.7% to 42.3% [\(Appendix C\)](#page-59-0). Flora (primarily turf algae) increased from 49% to 53%, whereas other benthic invertebrates remained relatively consistent [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0).

Community composition and diversity was comparable between surveys, dominated by Merulinidae (36%), followed by Poritidae (23%), Agariciidae (12%) and Lobophylliidae (10%) in the post-activity assessment [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). No reduction in diversity measures were recorded [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

The composition of bleached corals reduced between surveys, accounting for 7% of the live coral community, compared to 19% in the pre-activity survey (, with recovery recorded across all families [\(Figure 8\)](#page-23-1). Stressors observed largely consisted of predation and sedimentation. Occasional juveniles were observed, mainly *Pseudosiderastrea.*

MIDI

Variation in benthic composition between pre- and post- activity surveys was greater at MIDI than observed at other sites, largely due to the seasonality of macroalgae. Hard coral cover increased between surveys from 25% in the pre-activity to 38% in post-activity [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Mean cover was consistent between transects, ranging from 33.6% to 43.3% [\(Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). Conversely, flora (predominantly macroalgae) reduced from 65% to 45%, indicative of the seasonality of macroalgae at the site. Other benthic invertebrates remained consistent, accounting for 2% of benthic habitat, and abiotic substrate, i.e. sand, increased to 15% from 7%.

The coral composition was dominated by Agariciidae (23%), Acroporidae (20%), Merulinidae (15%) and Fungiidae (14%[; Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). This varied from pre-activity surveys, although the families that recorded an increase (namely Fungiidae, Lobophylliidae and Merulinidae) are typically smaller coral morphologies that were possibly overtopped by macroalgae in the pre-activity survey. Diversity metrics reflected an increase in coral diversity, with 37 genera recorded from the pre-activity survey to 41 genera in the post activity survey [\(Table](#page-23-0) [3\)](#page-23-0).

Bleached corals accounted for 16% of the hard coral community, combined with no reduction in coral cover, indicates recovery from Major bleaching (33%) recorded in the pre-activity survey [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0). Sedimentation, mucus production, predation and damage are sporadically observed across all transects. Juveniles were also recorded, primarily *Turbinaria* or *Pseudosiderastrea* colonies.

NWIT

Benthic composition at NWIT was dominated by turf algae, accounting for 63% of cover, relatively consistent with the pre-activity survey (68%) [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Hard coral cover reduced from 16% in the pre-activity survey to 13%, and bleached corals accounted for 10% of the hard coral community (compared to pre-activity levels of 26%; [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0), affecting all families consistently [\(Figure 8\)](#page-23-1) however indicating overall recovery in the community. Between transects, mean cover was generally consistent, with four transects recording 11-12% cover, and one (Transect 4) recording 19% [\(Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). Abiotic substrate (sediment) remained consistent between surveys (18%).

Coral community composition remained relatively consistent between surveys. Acroporidae cover increased (17% to 25%), whereas Merulinidae decreased (26% to 20%; [Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). However, diversity was comparable between surveys (41 genera compared to 39[; Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Mucus production was frequently observed at NWIT, with over 160 observations of colonies with mucus across a range of families [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0). Observations of disease (tissue loss) were recorded on two *Porites* colonies. Juvenile corals were also prevalent, with over 200 colonies recorded, primarily *Turbinaria*.

SUP2

Mean coral cover at SUP2 remained comparable between surveys, accounting for 13% of benthic community composition compared to 16% in pre-activity surveys [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Cover ranged between transects, from 9.4% to 17.9% [\(Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). Turf algae (74%), and sediment (12%) composed the remaining habitat composition. The coral community indicated recovery from bleaching recorded in the pre-activity survey (6% down fr4om 23%) with comparable coral cover [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0) and affected all families consistently between surveys [\(Figure 8\)](#page-23-1).

Coral community composition also remained relatively consistent between surveys [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1), dominated by Agariciidae (22% in both surveys), Dendrophylliidae (15% up to 17%) and Merulinidae (22% down to 16%). Diversity indices reported a minor increase in genera richness, from 37, to 40, reflective of smaller colony sizes which may be missed utilising a random point count method [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Mucus production and sedimentation were common stressors observed at SUP2, as well as predation, damage and two observations of disease (white syndrome affecting *Turbinaria*). Juvenile corals were also common, mainly consisting of *Turbinaria*, followed by Merulinidae and Fungiidae [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0).

SWIT

Benthic composition at SWIT comprised of turf algae (74%), hard coral (19%) and sediment (4%; [Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Hard coral cover was marginally lower than the pre-activity survey (22%), correlating with a slight increase of 7% in turf algae (up from 67%). Mean coral cover ranged from 14.7% to 23.1% [\(Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). Bleached coral cover accounted for 6% of hard coral cover, down from 18% in the pre-activity survey [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0), affecting predominantly Merulinidae and Poritidae colonies [\(Figure 8\)](#page-23-1). An increase of Poritidae composition (11%) correlateswith a decline in Merulinidae (11%), whist remaining community remained relatively stable between surveys [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1), as indicated by diversity indices [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

A range of coral stressors were recorded from SWIT, including sedimentation, mucus production, predation and disease (white patch affecting *Diploastrea*). Juvenile *Turbinaria* corals were also recorded across all transects [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0).

3.2.2. Ecological Zone B

ANG2

Benthic composition of ANG2 is comprised largely of hard coral (42%) and turf algae (39%), followed by sediment (14%; [Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Mean coral cover was variable between transects (28.3% to 55.4%; [Appendix C\)](#page-60-0), although this is reflective of the high density coral bommies interspersed with sand that characterise the site. Coral cover at ANG2 declined by 8% from cover recorded in the pre-activity survey, correlating with a 15% increase in turf algae recorded. This is likely the result of mortality following bleaching recorded during the pre-activity survey. Bleaching recorded in the post-activity survey accounts for a small proportion of coral cover (6%; [Figure 7\)](#page-22-0), in comparison to 13% of the community in the pre-activity survey, however all families were affected in similar proportions between surveys [\(Figure 8\)](#page-23-1).

Coral community composition remained consistent, indicating bleaching resilience between families also comparable. The community was largely dominated by Poritidae (58%), followed by Agariciidae (11%), Acroporiidae (9%) and Merulinidae (9%; [Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). Diversity and richness of the coral community was consistent between surveys [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0). Coral stressors typically observed included predation (e.g. tube worms and bivalves) and sedimentation [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0). No juvenile corals were observed at ANG2.

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COBN

Turf algae and macroalgae dominated the benthic composition at COBN, accounting for 69% of the habitat [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Hard coral was comparable between pre- and post-activity surveys, (26% and 25% respectively) and was relatively consistent between transects (19.7% - 28.4%; [Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). Similarly, the cover of turf algae and sediment were representative of the pre-activity survey [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Bleached corals accounted for 12% of the hard coral cover, reduced from 14% in the pre-activity survey [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0), largely affecting Poritidae and Acroporidae families [\(Figure 8\)](#page-23-1).

Coral community composition was dominated by Poritidae (25%), Acroporidae (22%) and Merulinidae (17%), and was generally consistent with the community recorded during the pre-activity survey [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). Thirty six genera were recorded in the post-activity survey, compared to 40 in pre-activity survey [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Predation and sedimentation were prevalent among observations of coral colony health, primarily evident on *Porites* colonies. Ten juvenile *Turbinaria* coral colonies were also observed, across four of the five transects [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0).

CONI

Benthic composition was generally consistent with pre-activity surveys. Mean hard coral cover recorded at CONI during the post activity survey was 42%, ranging from 34% to 46% across transects [\(Figure 5;](#page-21-0) [Appendix](#page-60-0) [C\)](#page-60-0). Turf algae (35%) and sediment (17%) were also prevalent at the site. Bleaching accounted for 10% of hard coral cover, consistent with the pre-activity survey (14%[; Figure 7\)](#page-22-0), largely affecting Poritidae colonies [\(Figure](#page-23-1) [8\)](#page-23-1).

Similarly, coral community composition remained consistent between surveys [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1), with Poritidae dominant (52%), followed by Merulinidae (14%) and Acroporidae (10%). Diversity indices were also comparable, with 40 genera recorded in both surveys [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Stressors observed on coral colonies at CONI were typically physical damage (i.e. fish scrapes), followed by predation and sedimentation [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0). Six observations of disease (white syndromes) were reported to be affecting *Porites* colonies. Two juvenile corals were observed across all transects.

CONI2

Mean hard coral cover at CONI2 increased slightly between surveys, from 27% to 29% [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Cover was generally consistent between transects, ranging from 23.9% to 26.5% [\(Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). Turf algae and sediment cover also remained comparable to the pre-activity survey, recording 46% and 21%, respectively. Bleached coral comprised 11% of coral cover, affecting Poritidae and Merulinidae predominately [\(Figure 8\)](#page-23-1), a reduction from 24% recorded during the pre-activity survey [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0).

The composition of the coral community remained relatively similar to the pre-activity survey, with Poritidae recording a 7% increase in cover (45% to 52%; [Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). Subdominant community composition varied in response; Merulinidae cover declined (20% to 17%) as did Other (9% to <5%) whereas Acroporidae and Agariciidae remained comparable. Diversity indices reported a slight decrease in diversity recorded during the post-activity survey, declining from 43 to 39 genera [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Coral stressors were prevalent from coral colony observations across all transects, predominantly recorded as predation, followed by mucus production, sedimentation and damage. Eight observations of disease (white syndromes) were observed to be affecting *Porites.* Juvenile corals were common, particularly in Transect 1, comprising a diversity of families [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0).

CRTS

CRTS is dominated by macroalgae and turf algae, which increased in recorded cover from 77% to 85% between surveys [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Mean coral cover reduced from 9% to 6%, with the post activity survey recording cover ranging from 4.5% to 9.3% among transects [\(Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). Bleached coral comprised 6% cover, indicating recovery from 23% of the coral community bleached in the pre-activity survey. Bleached corals generally consisted of Acroporidae, Poritidae, Dendrophylliidae and Other, consistent between surveys [\(Figure 8\)](#page-23-1).

Merulinidae recorded a reduction in relative coral cover, from 23% to 12%, however Dendrophylliidae and Other cover increased (10% to 17% and 12% to 17% respectively). The composition of the remaining coral community was largely consistent between surveys [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). Diversity indices reported a marginal drop in diversity and richness from values recorded during the pre-activity survey (37 genera to 34[; Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Sedimentation was observed on coral colonies infrequently across the site, with very few other observations of stressors recorded from the site [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0). Juvenile corals were also relatively abundant (37 observations), predominantly *Turbinaria* species.

FFP1

Benthic composition at FFP1 was stable between surveys. Mean coral cover increased by 4% at FFP1 between surveys, from 39% to 43% [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Cover was relatively consistent between transects during the post activity survey, ranging from 32.8% to 50% [\(Appendix C\)](#page-59-0). Bleaching was recorded to be affecting 7% of the hard coral community in comparison to 29% in the pre-activity survey [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0). Flora (turf algae) and abiotic substrate also remained comparable between surveys (48% to 47%, and 8% respectively), indicating recovery of the coral community from Moderate bleaching.

Acroporidae dominated the coral community, increasing between surveys from 45% to 58%. The remaining community reported minor decreases in comparison, predominantly Poritidae (16% to 11%), followed by ~1- 2% declines in Merulinidae, Agariciidae, Fungiidae and Other [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). Diversity indices were consistent, with genera recorded increasing from 37 to 40 [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Sedimentation, followed by mucus production and predation were prevalent stressors observed on coral colonies affecting all families. Juvenile coral from the genera *Favites, Acropora* and *Fungia* were also observed but were relatively uncommon in comparison to other sites [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0).

GIDI

Turf algae dominate the benthic community at GIDI [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Mean hard coral reduced from 23% to 20%, as did abiotic substrate (25% to 3%[; Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). This correlates with an increase in turf algae, likely overtopping dead coral or rubble [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). In the pre-activity survey, bleached coral represented 26% of the hard coral community which reduced to 5% in the post-activity survey [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0) and indicating high recovery of the coral community from Moderate bleaching.

Coral community composition and diversity indices remained relatively consistent between surveys [\(Figure 6;](#page-21-1) [Table 3\)](#page-23-0). Dendrophylliidae (29% to 26%), Poritidae (19% to 22%) and Merulinidae (21% to 18%) were the dominant coral families within the community.

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Observations of the coral stressors sedimentation and predation were relatively commonly recorded on colonies at GIDI. Juvenile corals were recorded from Merulinidae or *Turbinaria* species, however, were relatively uncommon (16 observations) [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0)*.*

HAM3

Benthic composition at HAM3 recorded an increase in the cover of flora (macroalgae and turf algae) between surveys from 72% to 88% [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Comparatively, abiotic cover reduced from 17% to 5%, indicating colonisation of algal species. Hard coral cover remained low and comparable between the pre and post activity surveys (8% and 6%, respectively). Cover of hard coral was variable between transects from the recent survey (3% to 11%; [Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). Bleached coral cover represented 7% of the coral community, reduced from 18% in the pre-activity survey [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0) and affecting largely Poritidae and Other families/groups [\(Figure 8\)](#page-23-1).

Community structure altered between surveys. Poritidae dominated the coral community, accounting for 32% of the coral cover, increased from 15% in pre-activity surveys, whereas declines were reported from Acroporidae (22% to 16%), Dendrophylliidae (16% to 12%) and Merulinidae (14% to 9%). Diversity indices reflected this shift, and declined slightly between surveys, with richness decreasing from 34 to 31 genera [\(Table](#page-23-0) [3\)](#page-23-0).

Coral stressors were commonly observed on coral colonies, typically consisted of sedimentation, followed by predation and damage [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0). Juvenile corals were also common and included *Turbinaria, Favities, Acropora* and *Platygyra* species.

HAUY

Mean coral cover at HAUY increased between surveys from 18% to 23% [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Coral cover was relatively consistent between transects during the post activity survey, ranging from 16% to 27% [\(Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). Turf algae and macroalgae were consistent with pre-activity survey and accounted for a third of the benthic community (32% down from 35%) as was abiotic substrate (44% down from 46%). Bleached coral cover represented 5% of the community, no change to pre-activity survey levels [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0).

Coral community composition remained relatively consistent between surveys [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1), dominated by Acroporidae (71%), followed by Poritidae (9%) and Merulinidae (8%). Similarly, diversity indices were relatively consistent across all measures between survey results [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Sedimentation and disease (white syndromes) were observed to be affecting colonies at HAUY from a range of families. No juvenile corals were observed [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0).

HGPT

Benthic composition at HGPT was consistent between pre- and post-activity surveys [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Mean coral cover accounted for 10% of the benthic community, which is dominated by turf covered boulders. Coral cover between transects was also consistent, ranging from 7.4% to 12.1% [\(Appendix C\)](#page-60-0). Bleached corals comprised 15% of the community, consistent with the pre-activity survey [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0).

Community composition was also consistent between surveys, with Poritidae dominant [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). An additional six genera were recorded during the post-activity survey [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Sedimentation and predation were commonly recorded observations of colony health [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0). Juvenile corals were prevalent across all transects, typically *Turbinaria* species.

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LANI

Mean coral cover accounted for 23% of benthic habitat during the post activity survey, which varied across transects (8.1% to 35.7%[; Appendix C\)](#page-59-0). Despite the variation, coral cover remained consistent between surveys [\(Figure 5\)](#page-21-0). Turf algae cover increased from 58% to 64% likely correlating with the decrease in abiotic substrate (15% to 7%). Bleaching affected approximately 6% of the hard coral community, in line with pre-activity survey [\(Figure 7\)](#page-22-0).

Coral community composition remained consistent between surveys, with Poritidae (46%), Acroporidae (18%) and Merulinidae (17%) as key families [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). As in the pre-activity survey, the community was highly diverse, recording 36 genera (compare to 35[; Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Observations of predation, sedimentation, mucus production and disease (tissue loss affecting *Porites*) were recorded from health assessments of colonies at LANI. Juvenile corals were not recorded at the site [\(Appendix](#page-65-0) [D\)](#page-65-0).

LEGD

Benthic composition was consistent between surveys. Mean coral cover at LEGD comprised 28% of the benthic community, including 3% bleached coral composition [\(Figure 5;](#page-21-0) [Figure 7\)](#page-22-0), compared to 28% cover including 11% bleaching. Cover was consistent between transects, ranging from 24% to 32.1%. Other benthic invertebrates dominated the benthic community at LEGD (40%, down from 44%), generally consisting of soft corals and sponges [\(Appendix C\)](#page-60-0).

Consistent with the pre-activity survey, Acroporidae was the dominant family at the site with 56% relative coral cover [\(Figure 6\)](#page-21-1). Poritidae (13%), 'Other' (13%) and Merulinidae (7%) were subdominant. Diversity also remained high with 35 genera recorded at the site [\(Table 3\)](#page-23-0).

Observations of coral stressors on colonies were rare at LEGD, with only a few instances of damage (fish scrapes) and sedimentation recorded. No juvenile corals were observed [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0).

MAL2

Mean coral cover comprised 28% of the benthic community, and varied between transects (17% to 33%), compared to 26% coral cover recorded in the pre-activity survey [\(Figure 8\)](#page-23-1). Thus, coral cover at MAL2 indicates high survivability from Major bleaching recorded in the pre-activity survey (33% community affected[; Figure 7\)](#page-22-0).

Similarly, the coral community composition displayed comparable diversity (42 genera recorded compared to 40 genera in pre-activity; [Table 3\)](#page-23-0). Poritidae (23%) was the dominant family, followed by Agariciidae (22%), Acroporidae (18%) and Merulinidae (17%[; Figure 6\)](#page-21-1).

Some observations of damage, sedimentation and predation were observed on coral colonies [\(Appendix D\)](#page-65-0). Juvenile corals were frequently observed, typically comprised of the families Merulinidae, Lobophylliidae and Dendrophylliidae.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1. Coral Community Assessment Against EPO 6-1(1)

A coral community assessment has been implemented in accordance with the DSDMP (Woodside 2023) as part of the TMMF implementation during trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities. The coral community assessment program was designed to determine whether the coral EPO specified in condition 6-1(1) has been achieved, which relates to detection of a net reduction of live coral cover at any coral impact monitoring location attributable to the project.

In June 2023, a pre-activity survey established a coral community baseline at 18 sites across Ecological Zones A and B (O2 Marine 2024b). Coral cover ranged from 8% (HAM3) to 50% (ANG2) and was typical of Dampier fringing reefs. Importantly, the coral community was observed to be affected by a significant bleaching event, with seven sites recording over 20% of the community to be affected by bleaching, and likely correlated with prolonged temperatures exceeding 30°C.

In March 2024, a repeat post-activity survey was undertaken at the same sites to facilitate a comparison against coral community data collected during the pre-activity survey (O2 Marine 2024b). The survey was undertaken using an ROV and photogrammetry techniques, with post-processing of orthomosaics implemented to capture five replicate 10 m fixed transects at each site. Percent cover, community composition and health observations were recorded at each site. In accordance with the DSDMP, net change in coral cover (\triangle CC) was used to assess against EPO6-1(1).

The coral community assessment determined that EPO 6-1(1) has been achieved. A net reduction in live coral cover attributable to trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities was not recorded at any of the coral Impact monitoring sites. This outcome was expected following completion of the water quality monitoring program (Section [1.2.2;](#page-9-0) O2 Marine 2024a) given no exceedances of water quality management triggers ware recorded throughout the program. As such, the TMMF detailed in the DSDMP was designed and implemented to sufficiently mitigate impacts to sensitive benthic receptors.

4.2. Variation in Coral Communities

Coral reefs in the Dampier Archipelago exist as narrow fringing reefs along the Burrup Peninsula and islands, or as deeper, clear water shoals in the wider Mermaid Sound (Griffith 1998). Reef coverage is often patchy, with high density bommies or outcroppings interspersed with bare sediment or rubble. Across the Archipelago, coral reefs display spatio-temporal heterogeneity, where local conditions result in unique assemblage patterns in *Acropora*, *Porites* and *Turbinaria* species (Moustaka et al. 2019). Inshore processes play a key role in determining the composition of benthic habitats, distribution of key genera, and their resilience to environmental pressures.

Benthic composition remain largely consistent between surveys. Coral cover ranged from 6% (CRTS and HAM3) to 43% (FFP1), varying by less than 5% at all sites except ANG2 (-8%) and MIDI (+13%). Flora was again the dominant benthic habitat at most sites, and generally consisted of turf algae, and macroalgae at select sites. Turf algae is a rapid coloniser of open space on coral reefs, often covering dead coral and rubble within the space of weeks (Fong & Paul 2011) and can inhibit successful recruitment of coral larvae (Roth et al. 2018). At ANG2, the reduction in coral cover was recorded in conjunction with a 12% increase in turf algae and is likely representative of turfing algae colonising dead coral colonies. An increase in Flora was also observed at HAM3 (16%) however coral cover varied by only 2%, whereas abiotic substrate (i.e. rubble, rock, sand) declined by 12%. Conversely, MIDI recorded a decline in 'Flora' of 21%; coinciding with the increase in coral cover, however this may be attributed to seasonal macroalgae, rather than turf algae.

Macroalgae may overtop hard coral communities, particularly in shallow water sites, resulting in obscuration of habitat type (Blakeway 2005; Stoddart et al. 2005). The pre-activity survey was conducted in May 2023, after a prolonged warm period which may have exacerbated seasonal growth of macroalgae, such as the genus *Sargassum* (Blakeway 2005; Stoddart et al. 2005). The post-activity survey at MIDI recorded a reduction in macroalgae, and a 13% increase in coral cover, namely Acroporidae, Fungiidae and Lobophylliidae species. Whilst some genera exhibit rapid regrowth (i.e. *Acropora*; Gouezo et al 2019; Pratchett et al. 2013), it is unlikely that the variation in coral cover observed at MIDI is isolated rapid growth, and more likely reflective of the intermittent prevalence of macroalgal cover. If surveying *in situ* macroalgae can be wafted, and records collected of the underlying habitat, however this is not feasible with diverless methods.

Coral community composition remained relatively stable between surveys. Dominant coral families included Merulinidae, Poritidae, Agariciidae, and Acroporidae, with variations in dominance across sites. For example, Acroporidae was prominent at FFP1, increasing from 45% to 58% post-activity, while Poritidae dominated ANG2 (58%) and CONI (52%). MIDI's coral community experienced minor changes, with an increase in smaller coral families such as Fungiidae and Merulinidae, likely due to changes in macroalgae cover revealing coral substrate. In most sites, coral diversity metrics remained stable or showed slight increases, with some reporting a minor decline in the number of genera, such as CRTS and HAM3. Despite variations in family composition, the overall diversity remained high across all sites between surveys.

Several stressors were recorded across the study sites, including sedimentation, mucus production, predation, and occasional disease observations, such as white syndrome and tissue lesions. Bleaching levels generally declined, with many areas showing signs of recovery. Juvenile corals were prevalent at many sites, particularly *Turbinaria, Pseudosiderastrea*, and Merulinidae species, though they were sparse in some locations, such as ANG2 and LANI. Observations of juveniles indicate ongoing coral recruitment and recovery, particularly at sites like CONI2, where juveniles were diverse across families.

4.3. Bleaching Recovery

The Dampier Archipelago experiences water temperatures of between 18-32°C and naturally high turbidity (ERM 2023; O2 Marine 2024a). Thermal stress events are of increasing prevalence (1998, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2016, 2022 (AIMS 2024), often resulting in coral bleaching (Babcock et al 2020). Research suggests that turbid reefs, such as those in Dampier, may be able to cope better with thermal stress (Cacciapaglia & van Woesik 2016; Perry et al. 2012) however this hypothesis has not been formally tested in the Dampier Archipelago.

During the baseline water quality monitoring program (ERM 2023), benthic water quality instrumentation recorded temperatures of over 32°C in 2022/2023, over 14 degree heating weeks (DHWs) were reported by NOAA (NOAA 2018; ERM 2023; O2 Marine 2024a; 2024b), and a Coral Bleaching Alert Level 2 issued for Central Western Australia for over a month in February – April 2023. The subsequent pre-activity survey recorded bleaching affecting greater than 10% of the coral community at most sites and over 30%, defined by AIMS

(2022) as 'Major bleaching', at MAL2. Given the extent of bleaching observed during the pre-activity survey, and the Coral Bleaching Alert issued by NOAA in 2023, mortality in a large proportion of the affected communities was to be expected. However, the results of this post-activity survey generally suggest Dampier's reefs recovered from the bleaching event, with coral cover remaining relatively stable (<5% change) at the majority of sites and bleaching only affecting 3% - 16% of the community.

ANG2 was the only site reporting a greater than average decline in coral cover (-8%). Further investigation indicates Unidentified corals and Poritidae contributed the greatest change in community composition (-41% and -33% respectively). Poritidae accounted for 27% of bleached corals in the pre-activity and may have resulted in mortality of affected corals which were subsequently colonised by turf algae. Whilst this may have also occurred for unidentified corals, a change in cover may be attributed to re-assigning the correct family name to previously ambiguous points. It should be noted however, that variation inherent in the method (i.e. random point analysis) integrates a level of uncertainty in determining the specific cause of change on any one colony, as it cannot be presumed the same colony is counted in both surveys.

4.4. Conclusion

The coral community assessment conducted in accordance with the DSDMP determined that EPO 6-1(1) has been achieved. A net reduction in live coral cover attributable to trenching, spoil disposal, borrow ground dredging and backfill activities was not recorded at any of the coral Impact monitoring sites, with the pre- and post-activity surveys indicating that hard coral cover remained relatively stable across the majority of sites. This outcome was expected following completion of the water quality monitoring program (Section [1.2.2;](#page-9-0) O2 Marine 2024a) given no exceedances of water quality management triggers ware recorded throughout the program. As such, the TMMF detailed in the DSDMP was designed and implemented to sufficiently mitigate impacts to sensitive benthic receptors.

Whilst variations in coral cover and community composition were observed between the pre- and post-activity surveys, these changes were largely consistent with natural processes, including seasonal fluctuations. Bleaching levels generally declined in conjunction with stable coral cover, indicating recovery across many sites, though some stressors, such as sedimentation and algae colonization, were recorded. Overall, coral communities demonstrated resilience, with stable community composition and ongoing juvenile recruitment.

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Appendix A. Orthographic Mosaics per Site

Figure 9: ANG2 orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 10: COBN orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 11: CONI orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 12: CONI2 orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 13:CRTS orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 14: FFP1 orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 15: GIDI orthomosaic and digital transects.

Figure 16: HAM3 orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 17: HAUY orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 18: HGPT orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 19: KGBY orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 20: LANI orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 21: LEGD orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 22:MAL2 orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 23: MIDI orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 24: NWIT orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 25: SUP2 orthomosaic and digital transects

Figure 26: SWIT orthomosaic and digital transects

Appendix B. ReefCloud Classification List

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Appendix C. Benthic Cover (%) by Site

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Appendix D. Colony Observations by Site

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