

# Joint Media Release

7 August 2015

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## DISCOVERY OF NEW SPECIES SHINES LIGHT ON THE TAMAR

The discovery of six new species of soft coral in the Tamar River estuary is being revealed for the first time today, in what scientists say is an exciting find and highlights the conservation significance of the Tamar.

Yet to be formally named, the soft coral was discovered by University of Tasmania student Megan Dykman in the lower estuary between Beauty Point and Low Head.

Ms Dykman, an Honours student with the University's Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies in Launceston, sampled 46 soft corals in her survey of rocky reef communities in the Tamar, of which six proved to be previously unknown.

"My original intention was simply to describe the animals and plants that live on the reefs in the Tamar with a focus on soft corals, but it looks like I have discovered four new species, and even more exciting, is that I have found two new genera of soft corals; that is to say two new groups of animal. The next step is to formally describe them," Ms Dykman said.

Ms Dykman's project supervisor and Curator of the Natural Sciences at QVMAG, David Maynard said a lot more is now known about the lower Tamar thanks to Ms Dykman's research.

"Typically, the mix of plants and animals that form reef communities is dependent on water depth. The greatest diversity occurs at depths between 15 to 30 metres. There are vast sponge gardens that act as a home to many weird and wonderful invertebrates, including this amazing diversity of soft corals."

Amanda Locatelli, of NRM North's Tamar Estuary and Esk Rivers Program, which has co-sponsored the project, said the soft coral discovery is encouraging and shines a positive light on the health of the Tamar.

"This discovery emphasises the high conservation significance of the Tamar and will provide crucial data to help monitor and understand any impacts on the health of the estuary into the future."

IMAS Launceston senior lecturer Dr Jeffrey Wright said that it was inspirational to see Megan, who will graduate this month, complete her degree in Launceston and then make such a big impact with her Honours project.

"She really has done some fantastic work on this project - combining challenging technical diving, electron microscopy and DNA sequence analysis. She did a great job," he said.

"Soft corals are quite common in the Tamar River estuary and often photographed by divers. It is amazing that until now no-one has formally identified these species. To find several new species was surprising and it highlights how much there is to learn about the plants and animals in the estuaries and ocean around Tasmania.

"We know precious little about the ecology of soft corals in temperate regions such as Tasmania. Identifying the species is really just the start of understanding their role in these complex ecosystems."

The research project was funded by the University of Tasmania, The Plomley Foundation and NRM North's Tamar Estuary and Esk Rivers Program and was generously supported by octocoral taxonomist, Dr Phil Alderslade.

Ends

## DETAILS:

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- Media are invited to the announcement to be held on **Friday 7 August 2015 at 9.00am at the QVMAG, Inveresk.**
- The new species of corals will be displayed in marine tanks at QVMAG
- High resolution images of the corals are available on request from NRM North
- Media are able to access and use unedited video footage of the corals and divers at the following link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/exdtv5mpa64ve68/AACw52oBJM5gkvwipMBzJoUMa?dl=0> and link to an edited video at [https://youtu.be/hU5H1\\_FkZms](https://youtu.be/hU5H1_FkZms)

- Amanda Locatelli (NRM North), David Maynard (QVMAG), Megan Dykman and Dr Jeff Wright (UTAS/IMAS) will be available for media interviews by contacting the following people:
  - Amanda Locatelli, NRM North's Water Theme Manager and TEER Program Coordinator on 03 6333 7783
  - For interviews with David Maynard contact QVMAG Marketing and Media Coordinator Irene Burlein on 0439 473 962 or 6323 3702
  - For interviews with Megan Dykman or Dr Jeff Wright contact IMAS Communications and Media Officer Lana Best on 0417 978 025 or 6324 5019