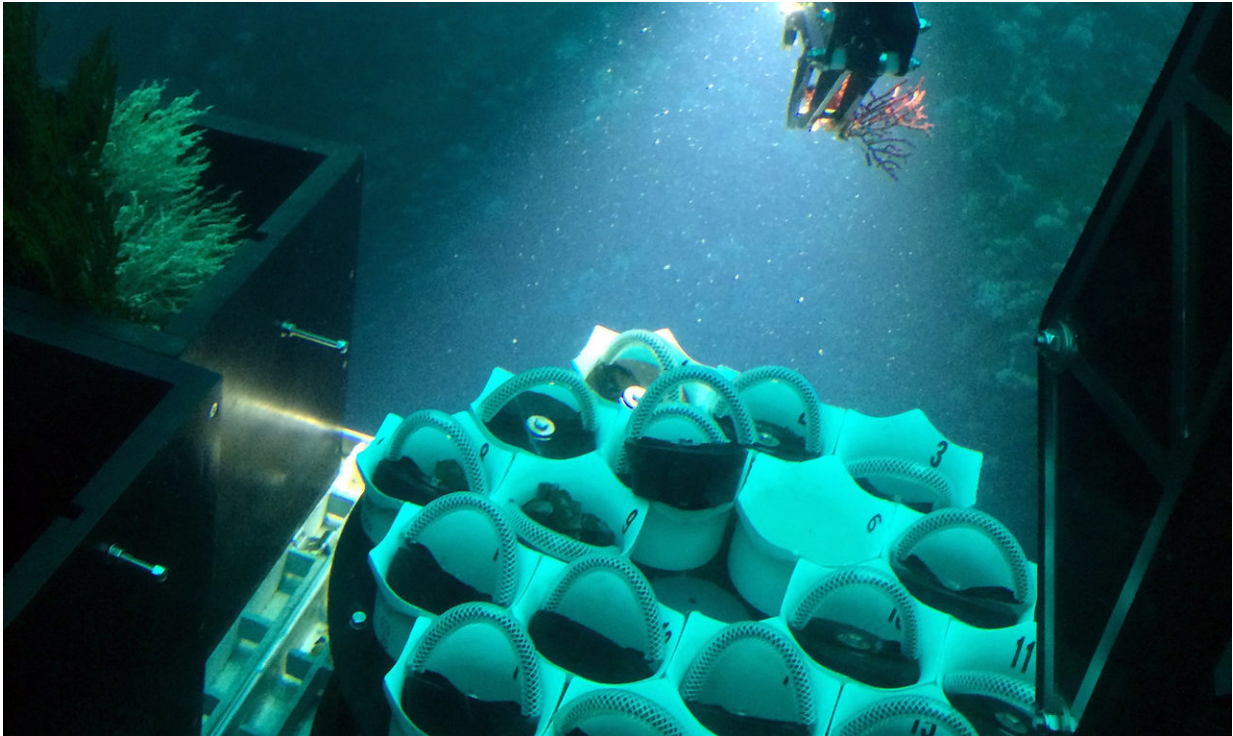


New soft coral species discovered in Panama

September 14 2018, by Beth King



DeepSea submersible collects coral sample. Credit: Hèctor Guzmán, STRI

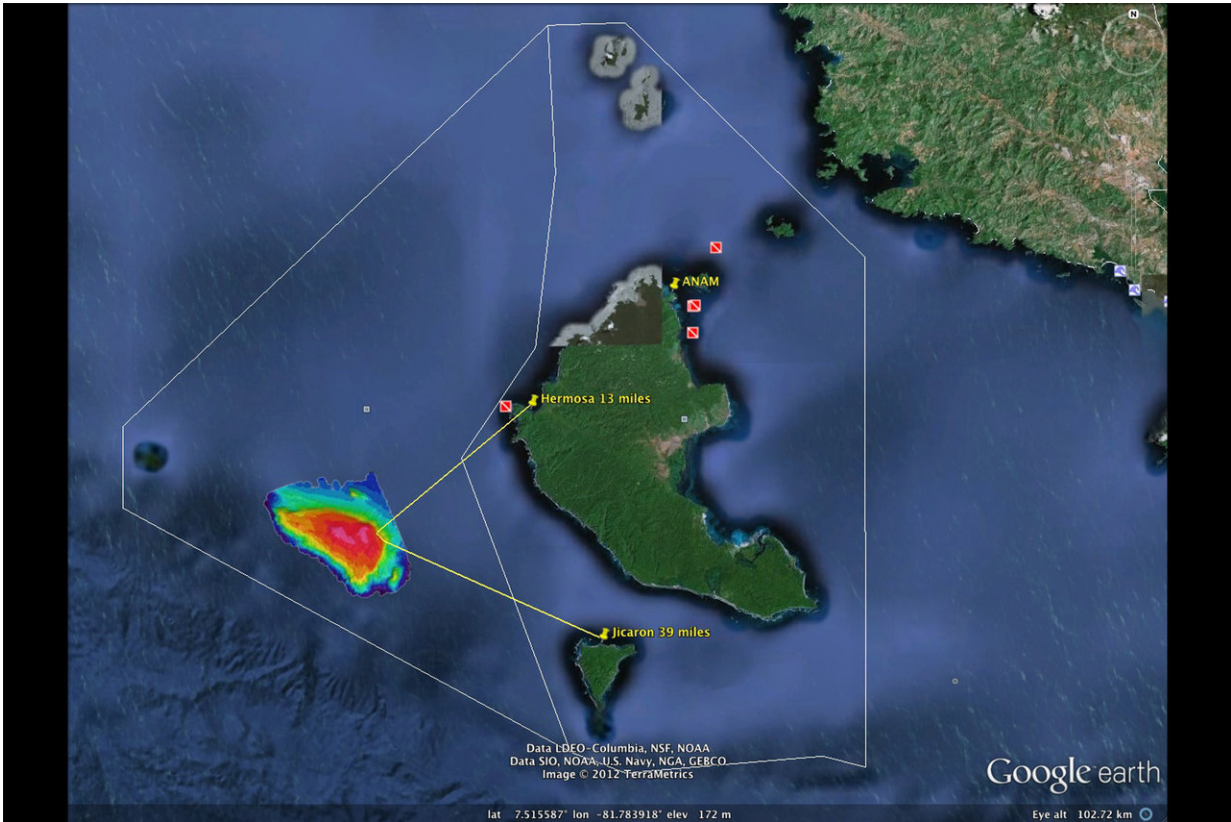
A study in the journal *Bulletin of Marine Science* describes a new, blood-red species of octocoral found in Panama. The species in the genus *Thesea* was discovered in the threatened low-light reef environment on Hannibal Bank, 60 kilometers off mainland Pacific Panama, by researchers at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama (STRI) and the Centro de Investigación en Ciencias del Mar y

Limnología (CIMAR) at the University of Costa Rica.

Scientists established the [new species](#), *Thesea dalioi*, by comparing its physical traits, such as branch thickness and the bright red colony color, with the only other species in the genus in the eastern Pacific, *T. variabilis*.

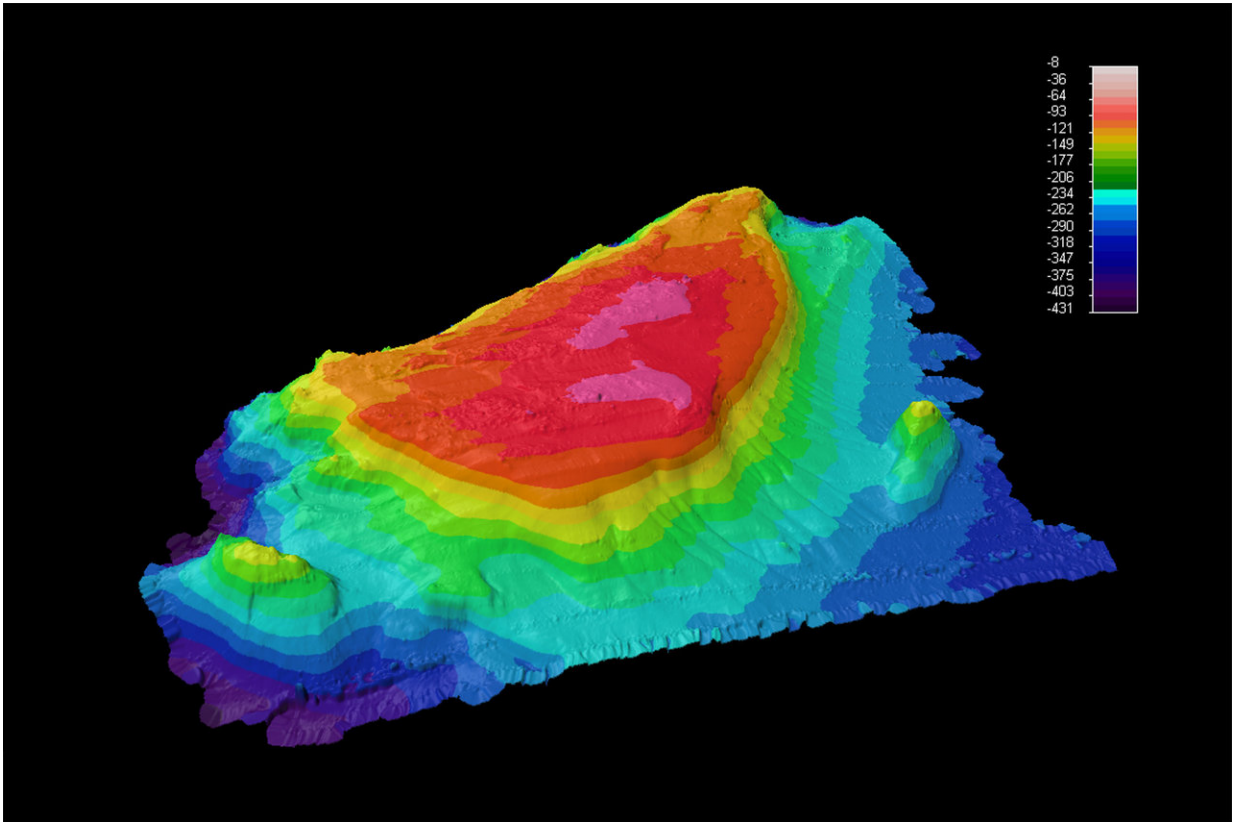
T. dalioi is named for Ray Dalio, a supporter of marine exploration. Its name is intended to recognize Dalio's valuable contributions to marine research and public outreach. Hannibal Bank, part of the Coiba National Park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a coastal seamount and a biodiversity hot spot that has only been explored recently. "After just two expeditions using submersibles down to 300 meters, we have identified 17 species of octocorals for the Hannibal Bank, including the discovery and description of three new [species](#)," said Hector M. Guzman, marine ecologist at STRI and one of the authors of the study.

Light-dependent coral and algae, as well as other life-forms found in low-light environments, live on mesophotic reefs: meso means middle and photic means light. These reefs, such as the one where *T. dalioi* was found, are considered fragile habitats with a high diversity of corals, algae and sponges. They are also generally neglected in most environmental and conservation policies because they are difficult to reach. Hannibal Bank is one of the spots requiring more attention for its protection. "The present study should provide the basis for further research on the genus and contributes to the diversity and distribution knowledge of octocorals from the mesophotic zone in the eastern Pacific Ocean," said Odalisca Breedy, marine biologist at CIMAR and one of the authors of the study.



A large seamount rising from the ocean floor, Hannibal Bank is located west of Coiba and Jicaron Islands in Panama. Credit: Google Earth image of Hannibal Bank provided by Héctor Guzmán

"Medical researchers have identified therapeutic benefits derived from both soft and hard corals such as anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer properties, bone repair and neurological benefits," said Guzman. "But our ability to contribute to the understanding of soft corals and their habitats, depends not only on steady funding for the use of submersibles, but also on our continued ability to obtain permission to work in Coiba National Park."



A large, poorly explored underwater seamount, Hannibal Bank is part of Panama's protected Coiba National Park. Credit: Héctor Guzmán

More information: Odalisca Breedy et al, A new alcyonacean species (Cnidaria: Anthozoa: Octocorallia) from a seamount in the tropical Pacific Ocean, *Bulletin of Marine Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.5343/bms.2018.0027](https://doi.org/10.5343/bms.2018.0027)

Provided by Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute

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