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UCT alum wins Earthshot prize for restoring coral reefs

Trailblazing entrepreneur Gator Halpern, who recently scooped one of the most prestigious environmental awards in history, has credited the University of Cape Town (UCT) for helping to shape his mission to restore dying coral reefs.

Halpern, who won the Earthshot Revive our Oceans award with his Coral Vita business partner, Sam Teicher, spent a pivotal six months on a Semester Study Abroad programme at UCT in 2010.

The Earthshot awards were launched two years ago by Prince William and Sir David Attenborough to generate a global movement to repair the planet. The inaugural winners were announced at a glittering awards ceremony at London's Alexandra Palace in October.

Halpern and Teicher founded Coral Vita to solve one of the planet's greatest environmental challenges – preserving coral reefs. Coral Vita creates high-tech coral farms. The coral is grown in tanks at a rate 50 times faster it grows in nature, and then outplanted into degraded reefs.

"Coral reefs are the first major ecosystem around the world where we're seeing collapse due to climate change. We've already lost half of the world's coral reefs. The latest scientific projections predict that over 95% of the reefs on earth will be dead by 2050," said Halpern.

"Despite only covering less than a percent of the ocean floor, coral reefs support over a quarter of all known marine species. They're the most biodiverse habitat on Earth. It's a serious socio-economic issue too, because reefs provide enormous benefits to communities around the world and support the livelihoods of up to a billion people."

They aim to revive life in the ocean through their high-tech coral farm in Grand Bahama. Using Coral Vita's methods, a single farm could potentially supply coral for an entire nation. Halpern and Teicher envisage a network of farms in all countries with coral reefs, with the ultimate goal of protecting reefs and boosting their resilience against warming oceans that threaten their survival.

Coral Vita was one of five winners in five categories chosen from 750 applications, include cutting-edge technologists, innovators, the country of Costa Rica for protecting and restoring nature, and the city of Milan for its work in pioneering food-waste hubs. The five

category winners were selected by [The Earthshot Prize Council](#), and were chosen for their groundbreaking solutions to the greatest environmental challenges facing our planet and their ability to scale their impact globally in response to the urgent challenges we face.

Winners receive £1 million in prize money and are given tailored support and opportunities to help scale their work.

For Halpern, the journey to the coveted award started when he was a child. Growing up in San Diego in California, the ocean always had a pull.

“I spent as much time as I could on the beach and in the waves. I have a deep passion and love for the ocean, and for the natural environment in general.”

As an undergraduate, Halpern spent the first semester of 2010 in UCT’s Department of Environmental and Geographical Science, as part of UCT’s Globalisation, Environment & Society Semester Study Abroad programme that the department runs each year for up to 12 students from one of three US liberal arts colleges.

“South Africa opened my eyes to the kind of issues that societies face around the world, and UCT played a key role in kick-starting my academic career. The programme was great in fostering a global vision and discussing challenges,” he said.

“It led me into doing more research in environmental science, and eventually going to grad school at Yale, where we ended up founding Coral Vita. If I hadn’t had those experiences at UCT, I may never have ended up starting this company and pursuing the career path I’m on.”

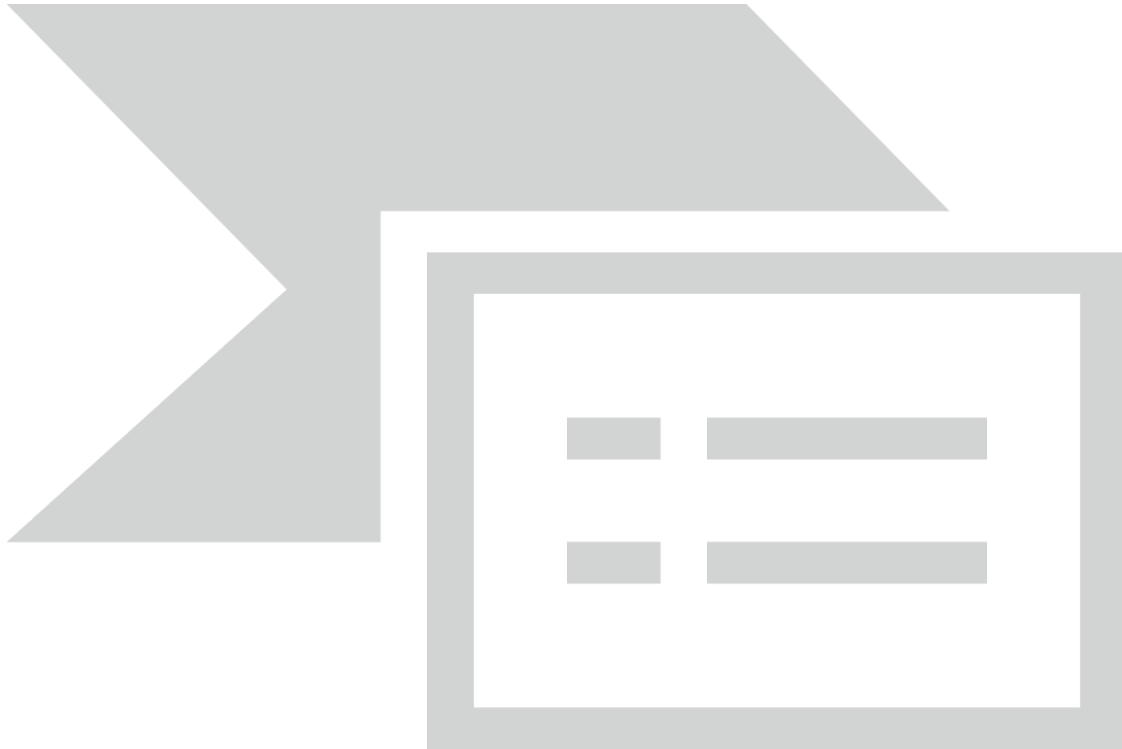
Halpern describes UCT Professor Michael Meadows as a “mentor and key influence” on his life during his student years. He supervised Halpern’s research project.

Professor Meadows described the award as “an extraordinary achievement by a young man who has had the vision, the determination and the talent to do something tangible about a really serious environmental issue”.

“Gator and his partner are indeed blazing a trail in the quest for a sustainable future for the world’s coral reefs, at a time when these important systems are facing increasing pressure.”

Halpern said the award is incredible recognition for the team, and for the community in the Bahamas who had been so welcoming and embracing of the project.

“Winning the award will allow us to do a few really important things. We will broaden the impact of our work in the Bahamas, and innovate in our farming model to create an even more scalable, more efficient way to grow the millions of corals we are hoping to grow in the near future. The award will also help us to jumpstart our development of other farms around the world.”



UCT alum Gator Halpern (right) won the Earthshot prize.

Photo: Coral Vita

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