

Coral reef researcher aims to share love of biodiversity after graduation

By Risa Aria Schnebly, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

When Luis Gutierrez flew into Bermuda for the first time, he was stunned.

"I still remember flying in — I had the window seat — and it was so magical," he said. "You could see the coral reefs from the airplane, and there was this turquoise blue water as far as you could see."

His favorite memory of Bermuda, though, was when he found an underwater entrance to a secret cave while snorkeling in Tobacco Bay. There was a hole in the roof of the cave that was big enough to let the perfect amount of sunlight in.

"I remember sitting there on the rocks, sunbathing and feeling the waves crashing against me, and it was so quiet. I loved it so much. It felt like I had found my home in the middle of the ocean," Gutierrez said.

This spring, he will graduate from Arizona State University's [Biology and Society](#) PhD program, where he studies the future impacts of the loss of coral species in the Caribbean. In his dissertation, Gutierrez went beyond making predictions about which coral species were most likely to disappear from the reefs. He also looked at the ecological function of those species compared to corals that were less at risk to make predictions about how reef systems as a whole would be affected in terms of ecological function.

"The idea of my research is, what can we expect to come from what remains of these coral communities, and how can we prepare for that?" Gutierrez explained. "I'm not saying that conservation isn't possible, but we need to have reasonable expectations about the future of these ecosystems, and we need to have a strategy for how to shift around those futures to protect people's livelihoods."

Gutierrez had dreamed about working in the ocean since he was a kid growing up in the desert of south Phoenix. Studying corals was a route to achieve that — he waited years for the day he could get to Bermuda and learn to scuba dive. And while he was amazed by Bermuda and fell in love with the beach, he didn't fall in love with scuba diving to survey the reefs like he expected.

"It was actually anxiety-inducing," he says with a laugh. "I was like, 'Oh, this is not at all what I want to do with my life.'"

After returning from Bermuda, Gutierrez continued his research on land by diving deep into the literature around the ecological functions of coral species and their likelihood of being lost. At the same time, he was continually doing service and outreach work, like volunteering for the School of Life Sciences E-board, organizing weekly "brown bag" seminars for graduate students, and even writing [an article about coral reef ecology for Ask a Biologist](#).

"Coming to the end of my PhD and reflecting on all the experiences I had, the things that resonated with me most were actually all the things that had to do with public engagement and education," Gutierrez said.

Those experiences reminded him of when he worked at Sea Life Arizona Aquarium, talking to guests about the colorful marine life behind the glass tanks.

"That was one of my favorite jobs I ever had," he said. "People were there to experience marine life, maybe even for the first time, and they were so excited about what they were looking at and wanting to form a connection with these other organisms. It was always amazing to help with that."

As he neared the end of his PhD, he found himself looking back at his time at the aquarium all the more: "I realized that the more people-focused, community-centered aspect of it, that's where my heart is, really."

Now, after defending his PhD, Gutierrez hopes to find a job working as an educator at an aquarium or museum or teaching classrooms full of high schoolers or college students.

The research he's done has shaped the way he wants to educate in the future, going beyond teaching basic science "to talk to people about what our role as people is in terms of our relationship and our responsibilities to ecosystems and other organisms, and wrestle with ideas like sustainability and environmental equity."

"Ultimately," he said, "I've always been interested in thinking deeply about the future of a world that's less biodiverse, and what that means for not only ecosystems, but for people."

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Main image



A photo of a Caribbean coral reef that Gutierrez took while scuba diving.

Text image(s)



Luis Gutierrez, courtesy photo



Gutierrez scuba diving in Bermuda, courtesy photo