

# THE *Current*

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[Debra Herrick](#)

## Real-world coral studies spark future in ocean conservation

Hayden Vega, a marine science major from Long Beach, is graduating from UC Santa Barbara with a deep commitment to ocean conservation and community-centered research. For Vega, a lifelong fascination with fish became the foundation for a broader goal: understanding how science can help protect the ocean and support the people who depend on it.

“I grew up fishing with my dad, and I learned firsthand how meaningful fish and our oceans are to us,” Vega said. “Whether it’s food, medicine or just a day at the beach, our oceans play a vital role in our lives.”

At UCSB, Vega deepened that interest through research, fieldwork and mentorship. One of the most influential experiences came through working in the Ocean Recoveries Lab with [Adrian Stier](#), an associate professor in marine science. “He has given me the opportunity to experience marine science and the freedom to explore some of the scientific questions that keep me up at night,” Vega said.

That curiosity took Vega across the Pacific. In French Polynesia, he conducted an experiment to study how coral-dwelling fish affect coral health. The results were promising: corals paired with fish recovered more quickly from stress and showed higher photosynthetic activity. “It was my first real taste of being a marine scientist,” he said, “and it felt like a glimpse into my future.”

Throughout his studies, Vega came to view marine conservation as inherently connected to human well-being. “My obsession with fish drew me to marine science, but I’ve learned that when it comes to conservation, life above the water is just as important as life below. Healthy oceans make healthy humans.”

On campus, Vega found community through programs like [FUERTE](#), Bentson Scholars and onBOARD, which support students from underrepresented backgrounds in research. “They’ve cultivated a community of the most wickedly smart and joyful people that I’ve had the pleasure to know at UCSB,” he said.

Vega also credits his scientific diving instructor, [Eric Hessel](#), for advice that stuck with him beyond the water: “Remember to breathe.” The reminder, he said, has helped him stay grounded and focused in moments of stress.

After graduation, Vega will return to French Polynesia to continue his research and apply to Ph.D. programs in marine science. In five years, he hopes to be deep into his doctoral studies, exploring the relationships between people and the sea — possibly while swimming with sharks.

“My college journey has been shaped by countless acts of kindness from mentors, friends, and family,” he said. “I’ve learned how powerful it is to give your time to others, and that helping others is one of the best ways to help yourself.”

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The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community

of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.