

19 September 2017

## **Submission - Coral Sea Marine Park Draft Management Plan**

Douglas Shire Sustainability Group (DSSG) is an incorporated association active in the Douglas Shire for over 10 years. We are a community based environmental advocacy group with significant number of members. Our objects include promoting the preservation and conservation of the unique environment with the Douglas Shire and its surrounds and recognising and promoting the sustainable practices of the Traditional Owners of the Douglas Shire. Almost 80% of the Douglas Shire is World Heritage Listed, areas of natural beauty and ancient and complex ecosystems, including parts of the Coral Sea Marine Park.

The DSSG would like to draw to the attention of the Minister for Environment and Energy, Hon Josh Frydenberg MP the following points in regard to the Coral Sea Marine Park Draft Management Plan.

### **1. Cut backs of Marine National Park 'sanctuary' IUCN II zoning (MNPZ) across the Network should be rejected and the increase the IUCN II zoning in Australia's Marine Parks should be fully restored without delay.**

The Government's independent Review recognised the extensive science and consultation that led to the creation of the 40 parks in 2012. However, the Turnbull Government's draft management plans recommend reducing, relocating and in most cases completely removing the MNPZ protection over key habitats, particularly in the globally important Coral Sea. In the face of devastating coral bleaching, mangrove dieback and vanishing kelp forests, MNPZ coverage in Australia's Marine Parks are even more important now than ever.

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Australian Marine Parks Management Planning Comments

Department of the Environment and Energy

**2. The marine park zoning must be science-based** – the Government's own Expert Science Panel found that marine parks declared in 2012 were the result of sound science and consultation. Further, leading scientists found that the 2012 network would need more marine sanctuary coverage, not less (e.g. Barr and Possingham, *Are outcomes matching policy commitments in Australian marine conservation planning?* Marine Policy 42, 39-48 2013).

### **3. Partial protection zones are not a substitute for high level 'sanctuary' (Marine National Park / IUCNII) protection**

– claims by government that Habitat Protection (HPZs/yellow zones) are equal to Marine National Park zone (MNPZ/green zones) are false and misleading. Protecting the sea floor provides only partial protection and does not protect the marine life living within the water column. Each marine park should have adequately sized and located zones of high level MNPZ protection, with partial protection zones used in an ancillary way. It is well established in the scientific literature that partial protection does not generate biodiversity benefits comparable to full protection.

**4. Reject the proposal to allow mining in parks** – the Government proposes to allow mining and pipelines in the vast majority of the parks. Marine parks not currently containing mining exploration rights should be considered for full protection from mining. As emphasised at the recent World Conservation Congress, industrial activities like mining and mining exploration are not

compatible with marine parks. Marine parks should be fully protected from mining as has been achieved in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

**5. Reject the proposal for destructive commercial fishing activities such as trawling, gillnetting and long lining in the marine parks** – by opening up 38

of the marine parks to destructive commercial fishing practices such as trawling, gillnetting and long lining, the Government is proposing to ignore the findings of the independent Fishing Gear Risk Assessments it commissioned, which found those types of fishing to be incompatible with many of the conservation values in the parks. Further, allowing in destructive forms of commercial fishing puts at risk the benefits that marine parks provide not only to marine life, but also more broadly to tourism, recreational fishing and other types of commercial fishing that *can* operate sustainably inside parks alongside high level MNPZ zoning.

**6. There is no justifying economic argument** – Australia’s marine tourism industry is worth \$28b per year, whereas the catch value being returned to commercial fishing from the network-wide MNPZ cuts is worth only \$4m per annum – only 0.3% of the total revenue of Australia’s wild catch fisheries.

**7. The results of the statutory consultation are being ignored** - it is deeply concerning that despite the vast majority of submissions to Parks Australia’s first consultation round last year strongly supporting the restoration and increase in high level marine national park zone protection, the Government is proposing the complete opposite to the consultation outcomes in all but 1 of the 44 marine parks.

**8. Large cuts of 53% and fragmentation of Marine National Park Zone (MNPZ) coverage in the park** - the large offshore oceanic Marine National Park Zone

in the Coral Sea is Australia’s major global contribution to the protection of intact tropical pelagic marine life at a large scale. With such values and little if any fishing, this area is intact and therefore an important, achievable and rare opportunity for inclusion in the marine parks network as a large area of high level protection. Under the government’s proposals, most of the park would be opened up to long lining – a commercial fishing activity that the Government’s independent Fishing Gear Risk Assessment, concluded posed an unacceptable risk to the conservation values of the Coral Sea Marine Park.

**9. Reducing protection at a number of ecologically important reefs (Osprey, Shark, Vema, Flinders, Holmes, Marion and Wreck).** The Government’s

Expert Science Panel recognised the need to increase protection at key reefs. However the draft plan fails to do so, proposing MNPZ protection for only 7 of the Coral Sea’s 40 or so reefs. Fully protecting reefs protects fish and shark populations that are highly valuable to the dive tourism industry and will help build reef resilience in the face of climate change. This is not only to the benefit of marine life but also delivers economic certainty to dive operators who need a diversity of reefs protected against extreme weather events such as cyclones and coral bleaching. Recent research in the Coral Sea shows that reefs not in Marine National Park Zones see their shark populations depleted by 90% of their original biomass, with populations of other large predators halved and fish populations depleted by 70%. The importance of protecting the Coral Sea’s reef sharks was highlighted by the Expert Science Panel which identified that: “Coral Sea reefs comprise a globally significant hotspot for reef sharks”.

**10. Partial protection (Habitat Protection Zones) as a substitute for full**

**protection.** The role of partial protection zones (yellow or blue on the map) is to achieve particular social or economic outcomes, or to act as a buffer to the marine national park zones, which drive the biodiversity conservation outcomes in the parks. Scientific evidence clearly shows that full protection is one of five key factors in effective conservation of marine life. For example, the Government's Expert Science Panel found that areas within the Coral Sea outside fully protected areas have suffered 90% depletion in their shark populations. Furthermore, almost all the Habitat Protection Zones allow destructive commercial fishing activities such as long lining, mid-water trawl, and purse seining. These are commercial fishing activities that the Government's independent Fishing Gear Risk Assessment, concluded posed an unacceptable risk to the conservation values of Australia's marine parks.

#### **The Draft Plan fails the economics test**

□ **The draft plan undermines the economic viability of one of the Coral Sea's biggest industries - dive tourism**, by removing protection of some reefs most critical to the industry's future. Coral Sea dive tourism is estimated to contribute \$6m to the economy per year.

□ **The Draft recommends significant losses in protection at the Osprey Group of Reefs** - some of the world's premier dive spots with Marine National Park Zones completely removed for Shark and Vema Reefs and a very large section of the Marine National Park Zone protection of Osprey Reef also removed, leaving the iconic and economically critical shark populations vulnerable to the 90% depletion that has been documented on other unprotected coral reefs within the Coral Sea. The Review recommended increased protection for other key reefs like Holmes and Flinders due to their ecological and economic value to the dive industry but the Government has ignored this recommendation in the Draft Management Plan.

□ **The proposed management plan undermines the security of the existing dive industry and its potential to expand.** For scale, the current \$6 million in reef tourism direct sales in the Coral Sea Marine Park alone, is much larger than the total \$4 million projected gain for commercial fishers across all 44 of Australia's marine parks, let alone the small set of commercial fishers operating in the Coral Sea.

□ **Commercial fishers also consistently argue that marine national parks are having too great an impact on their activities - the evidence does not support this position.** The total maximum potential negative impact on commercial fishers from the 2012 plans, before taking into account the variety of potential positive impacts, is less than 1% of commercial fishing activities across the network. In the Coral Sea some of the commercial fisheries that have been promoted as being heavily affected are estimated to be displaced by as little as 0.1%.

#### **The Draft Plan fails recreational fishers**

□ **The draft management plan proposes the reintroduction of long lining, midwater trawl and purse seining into what was effectively Australia's largest and most prized recreational fishing zone.** The removal of long lining in the 2012 declaration was to protect the world's only known black marlin spawning area and the highly valuable recreational fishing in this area.

□ **The draft plan proposes the introduction of damaging fishing techniques like mid-water trawl, bottom trawling and demersal long lining** throughout vast

sections of the Coral Sea marine park. These fishing practices not only have a significant impact on the conservation values of the park but the recreational fishing values of this globally iconic location of the world's oceans.

### **Recommendations**

Despite finding that highly protected marine parks are vital as a key tool in marine management, the Turnbull Government has failed to act on its own advice, missing the opportunity to deliver a science based result in the Coral Sea.

The following are our recommendations to the Government in relation to the finalisation of the Coral Sea Marine Park Management Plan: -

1. Reject the proposed major loss and fragmentation of **the large Marine National Park Zone (MNPZ)**;
2. Reject the loss of protection at **Osprey Reef, Shark and Vema Reefs**. Osprey Reef needs high level MNPZ protection in order to deliver economic security to the valuable dive industry;
3. Reject the proposed loss of protection for **Flinders, Holmes and Wreck Reef** – reefs the Review found required protection;
4. Accept the proposed new MNPZ protection **at the border with the Great Barrier Reef**;
5. Reject the proposed opening up of the Coral Sea to **long lining, purse seining and mid-water trawl in the 'Area E' Coral Sea Zone of the Eastern Tuna Billfish Fishery**. Removal of these damaging commercial fishing techniques should be achieved in this area to ensure protection of the Queensland Plateau, Queensland Trough and the world's only known spawning ground for Black Marlin and their recreational fishing, economic and social values;
6. Reject the proposed loss of MNPZ protection for **Marion Reef**. Marion Reef is the only location where protection is proposed for the coral reefs, cays and herbivorous fish of the Marion Plateau which is a key ecological feature of the Coral Sea;
7. Reject the proposed **expansion of mid-water trawling, purse seining, demersal long lining and prawn trawling** within the Coral Sea.
8. Finalise the management plan and make it operational within the next 12 months.

Yours truly,

Roisin Allen

(On behalf of DSSG)