

SUNSHINE COAST
Environment Council
www.scec.org.au



Sunshine Coast Environment Council
PO Box 269
NAMBOUR QLD 4560
ABN: 23 500 365 569
07 5441 5747
liaison@scec.org.au

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Australian Marine Parks Management Planning Comments
Department of the Environment and Energy
Reply Paid 787
Canberra ACT 2601
Via email: managementplanning.marine@environment.gov.au

CORAL SEA MARINE PARK DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN

Dear Sir/Madam,

While we are extremely disappointed and concerned at the scale of the proposed decrease in the Marine Reserve extent and the unacceptable consequences this represents, the Sunshine Coast Environment Council takes this opportunity to again provide our views on the Coral Sea Marine Park Draft Management Plan.

Established in 1980, the Sunshine Coast Environment Council (SCEC) is the peak environmental advocacy organisation for the Sunshine Coast region. SCEC currently represents 64 member groups predominantly working in the areas of natural resource management, conservation, environmental restoration and protection and sustainability. This membership represents a collective of almost 10,000 individuals with a further 4000 people as SCEC supporters.

It is on behalf of our members, supporters and wider community with whom we engage that we submit the following comment for due consideration.

The following comments reflect our views on the Coral Sea Marine Park Draft Management Plan

The Turnbull Governments draft management plans for Australia's 44 suspended Commonwealth Waters marine parks include big cutbacks to high level protection, making way for destructive forms of commercial and experimental fishing and mining. Inexplicably, reductions in protection proposed by the Government far exceed those proposed by the Government's own independent Review, released last year. This review and the subsequent recommendations were determined through extensive, multi-sector consultation and in some instances, consensus on various elements. It is therefore even more inexplicable and highly unacceptable that this review is not only ignored, but that questionable politics is eroding democracy and undermining beneficial and equitable outcomes.

Almost 40 million hectares of marine 'sanctuary' area (Marine National Park / IUCNII) is proposed to be cut from Australia's marine parks network – an area twice the size of Victoria – and equivalent to removing almost every second national park on land.

If this proceeds, Australia will be the first nation in the world to go backwards on marine protection – setting a damaging international precedent at a time when the world's oceans need more, not less protection.

In 2012, Australia declared the world's first National Network of Marine Parks, including the jewel in the crown of the network, the Coral Sea Marine Park. This was the culmination of many decades of science which found that marine parks with large 'sanctuaries' (Marine National Park zones / IUCNII) at their core are a key tool for keeping the world's oceans functioning well.

The 44 marine parks declared in 2012 were the final tranche of the 60 in National Network of Marine Parks, a bipartisan process commenced by the Howard Government in the late 1990s, building on the iconic declarations of the 1970s and 80s which began with the Great Barrier Reef and Ningaloo Marine Parks – declared by the Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke Governments.

However, in 2013 the incoming Abbott Government suspended the newly created marine parks, ordering a premature Review. As a result, 95% of Australia's oceans have remained unprotected these last 4 years. Following completion and release of the Review late last year, the Turnbull Government has ignored the advice of its own Review and released dramatically revised management plans for the suspended marine parks which propose major cutbacks in protection, replacing zones of high level protection with partial, low level protection.

Network/Australia-wide notes on the proposed management plans:

1. Reject the cut backs of Marine National Park 'sanctuary' IUCN II zoning (MNPZ) across the Network and call for the Turnbull Government to fully restore and increase the IUCN II zoning in Australia's Marine Parks 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.
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 (eg: 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 longlining in the marine parks – by opening up 38 of the marine parks to destructive commercial fishing practices such as trawling, gillnetting and longlining, 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.

Submission points with respect to the Coral Sea Marine Reserve:

The Coral Sea Draft Management Plan fails the science test

The Government’s Expert Science Panel recognised the Coral Sea as a significant biodiversity hotspot for sharks and tuna and marlin. It acknowledged it as one of the few remaining areas globally that hasn’t been impacted significantly by humans. It also recognised the value of its unique reefs and acknowledged that they warrant higher protection.

However, the Government proposes:

- 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 longlining – 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.
- 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".

- 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 a 90% depletion in their shark populations. Furthermore, almost all the Habitat Protection Zones allow destructive commercial fishing activities such as longlining, 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 - this position is not supported by the evidence. 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 longlining, mid-water trawl and purse seining into what was effectively Australia's largest and most prized recreational fishing zone. The removal of longlining 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 longlining 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.

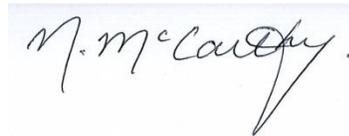
The following are our recommendations to the Government in relation to the finalisation of the Coral Sea Marine Park Management Plan: -

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 longlining, 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 longlining and prawn trawling within the Coral Sea.
8. Finalise the management plan and make it operational within the next 12 months.

SCEC implores the government to not have the unenviable reputation of being the first country to actually REDUCE the extent of its marine reserves. Not only would this add to Australia's atrocious track record on conservation, but would be at odds with the necessity for sustainability.

Yours sincerely,



Narelle McCarthy
Liaison and Advocacy



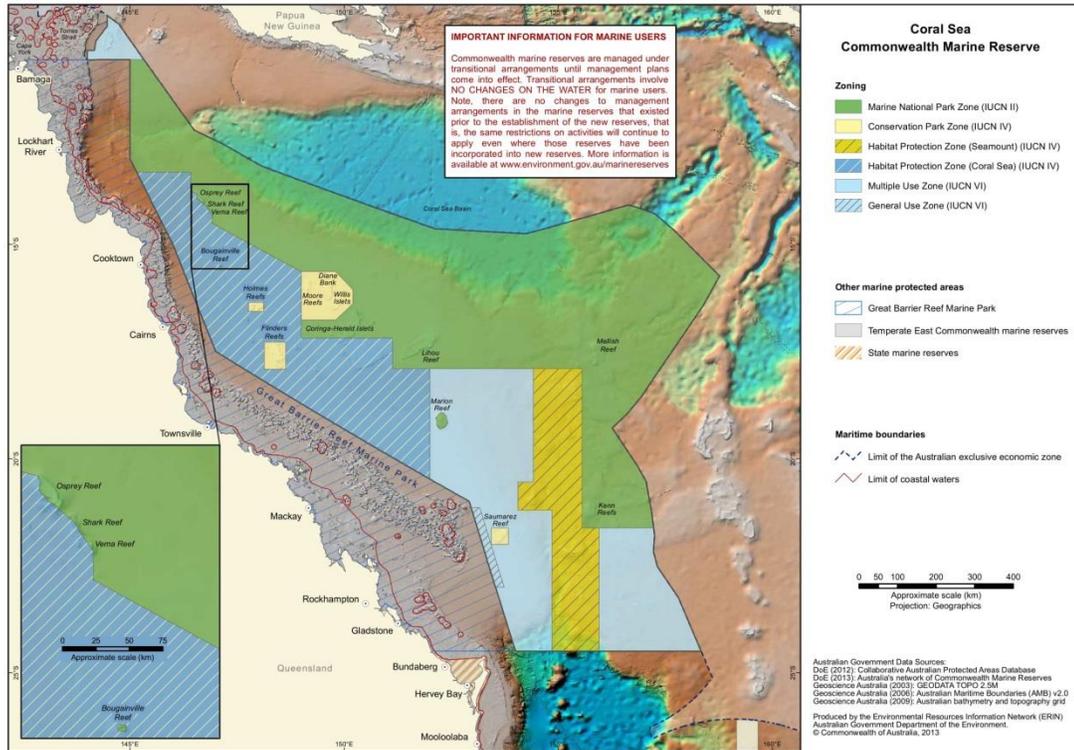
Leah Hays
Coordinator

GLOSSARY – the following terms all mean the same thing –

- 'no-take',
- 'Marine National Park Zone' or 'National Park Zone',
- 'IUCN category II',
- 'sanctuary zone',
- 'green zone'.

They are all terms for the high-level type of zone (green on the maps) in a marine park that allows non-extractive use only (eg: boating, diving, swimming), and which therefore is the most effective part of a marine park in protecting biodiversity. Yellow and blue zones offer less protection – allowing various forms of fishing, and mining depending on the zone.

The original Coral Sea Marine Park, declared in 2012:



The Turnbull Government's draft proposals for rezoning the Coral Sea Marine Park, released Aug 2017:

