

20 September 2017

Ms Sally Barnes
Director of National Parks
Parks Australia
GPO Box 787, Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Ms Barnes

The Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the 2017 set of draft management plans for the networks of Commonwealth marine parks in the South West, North West, North and Temperate East marine regions and the Coral Sea.

VNPA is Victoria's leading community-based nature conservation organisation and, since its establishment in 1952, has had a major focus on the protection of marine environments. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, VNPA coordinated a community campaign that resulted in the establishment of the world's first network of marine national parks and sanctuaries here in Victoria in 2002. We have also maintained a keen interest in the Commonwealth networks of marine parks and represent Victorian conservation interests on the South-east Forum, which provides advice to Parks Australia on the implementation of the management plan for the South-east Marine Region's network.

Along with many others in the community, we were delighted with the 2012 proclamation of the Commonwealth marine park networks in the four regions and the Coral Sea, which followed on from the proclamation of the network in the South-east Marine Region. Establishing these networks and legislatively affirming their external boundaries went a long way to honouring the Commonwealth's commitment to the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas (NRSMPA) signed off with the states in 1998.

VNPA and other community environment groups and the science community raised concerns about the placement of the marine parks—there were too few on the continental shelf and many were in areas that had little economic interest. But the subsequent draft management plans intensified these concerns because they contained insufficient Marine National Park Zones (MNPZs)—many marine parks had none at all. And the MNPZs were largely well offshore with next to none on the continental shelf: CAR principles of the NMRSPA were not satisfied.

It was hoped that the current Government's review of the initial draft management plans would produce a new set of draft management plans that would deal with these concerns and strengthen the protection levels of the marine park networks. Sadly, if the new draft management plans were implemented, protection levels would be slashed. The coverage of MNPZs would be cut by 400,000km², the residual nature of the networks exacerbated, and Australia would retreat from what has been its international leadership in marine conservation. The MNPZs would be reduced, relocated and, in many cases, completely removed from 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. Further, implementation of the 2017 draft management plans would:

- allow mining, pipelines and destructive commercial fishing activities such as trawling, gillnetting and longlining in the vast majority of the parks, activities

incompatible with the purpose of marine parks. The independent Fishing Gear Risk Assessments the government commissioned found these types of fishing to be incompatible with many park conservation values. They also risk the benefits that marine parks provide to tourism, recreational fishing and other types of commercial fishing that *can* operate sustainably inside parks alongside high level MNPZ zoning

- ignore the overwhelming scientific evidence, which says that for effective marine conservation, priority should be given to areas of high-level protection in the right places and in the right numbers and coverage
- replace many MNPZs with Habitat Protection Zones (HPZs), which may give some protection to the seabed but not the water column. Any claim that conflates the two zones is simply untrue. HPZs will not generate the conservation benefits provided by MNPZs
- protect even fewer conservation features than the initial draft plans at a level recognised by the scientific community, the World Parks Congress (Sydney, 2015) and the IUCN Members Assembly at the World Conservation Congress (Hawaii, 2016) i.e. a minimum of 30% covered by IUCN II
- undermine the dive industry and other marine-based tourism activities reliant on healthy oceans for a small projected revenue increase for commercial fishers. 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 \$4million per year—just 0.3% of the total revenue of Australia's wild catch fisheries.

A regional perspective on reduced protection for Australia's oceans

From a regional perspective, the loss of MNPZ coverage would be as follows: 57% in the North; 53% in the Coral Sea; 49% in the North West; 40% in the South West; 2% in the Temperate East. Of the 44 marine parks across the four marine regions and the Coral Sea, 13 would experience reductions in MNPZ coverage (one reduced to zero), four would have small gains, 12 would retain their existing MNPZ coverage and 15 would continue to be without them.

South West Marine Region

In the South-west Marine Region, the largest reduction in MNPZ coverage is recommended for the South West Corner Marine Park, which includes the Naturaliste Plateau and the Diamantina Fracture Zone. The park would lose 73,825 km² of MNPZ, a 57% reduction on the initial draft management plan. Within the fracture zone, which is a key ecological feature, are the deepest waters in Australia's oceans and the nation's highest mountain range, with marine life likely to be diverse with many endemic species. Until now, the area has been free from human disturbance. The park also contains some areas of continental shelf, including at Peaceful Bay where the MNPZ would also be cut. The zoning changes would allow mining and most forms of fishing, despite its extremely remote, rough and deep location that makes it unsafe for oil and gas drilling (with an adequate oil spill response most likely impossible) and highly unlikely to be a serious economic proposition for fishing.

MNPZ reductions are also recommended for the shallow and sheltered waters of Geographe Marine Park (there would be no MNPZ). The Government's Review recommended retaining the MNPZs in Geographe Marine Park, while reconfiguring them slightly to better align with immediately adjacent green zones in the Ngari Capes Marine Park established by the WA Government, and to improve ease of navigation for fishers.

While the draft plan proposes an increase in the area of MNPZ in the Perth Canyon Marine Park, it is achieved by moving it away from the canyon's head, the key critical habitat feeding ground for the endangered blue whale—and the only one that would be within the Australian Marine Parks Network.

In more positive recommendations, Bremer Marine Park would be given greater MNPZ protection on its continental shelf and slope, although there would be a narrowing of the MNPZ on the shelf at the western head of the park, and there are small areas of MNPZ on the shelf in the Two Rocks and South West Corner (Swan Canyon off Walpole) marine parks. However, the shelf-based Twilight Marine Park would have its MNPZ coverage reduced by more than 1,000km² and, along with cuts to MNPZs on the shelf in the Bremer and South West Corner marine parks, there would be an overall reduction of shelf protection in the South West Marine Region.

Recommendations

- Abandon cuts to MNPZs in the South West Marine Region and ensure the final plans include MNPZ coverage in each marine park.
- Extend the MNPZ in the Great Australian Bight Marine Park westwards to the SA/WA border. There is very little MNPZ protection on the continental shelf in the Commonwealth waters marine parks network. This proposal would create Australia's largest area of high level protection on the continental shelf in an area with globally recognised values, and with no displacement of mining and very little additional fishing displacement.
- Mirror the welcome Special Purpose Zone (Mining Exclusion) proposal that would exclude mining from the Great Australian Bight Marine Park in the Western and Southern Kangaroo Island marine parks, and at Esperance (the SW Corner and Eastern Recherche Marine Parks), Peaceful Bay (SW Corner Marine Park) and Perth Canyon Marine Park
- Provide permanent protection from gillnetting for Australian sea lions in the relevant Commonwealth marine parks by ensuring that the zoning does not offer less protection than existing fisheries closures.

North West Marine Region

In the initial draft management plans, the Dampier Marine Park was largely covered by HPZ with a small wedge of MNPZ. Most of that HPZ has been downgraded to MUZ, while the small area of MNPZ has had some of its area converted to HPZ. If implemented, the management plans would expose 84% of the park to mining.

The MNPZ in the Kimberley Marine Park has been reconfigured and reduced in area by 2,860km², slashing protection for these critical tropical shelf habitats and ignoring its growing importance for marine-based tourism. Further, the plan fails to propose MNPZ protection for the globally significant Adele Island or match the proposed MNPZs in the WA government's North Kimberley marine parks. The plans also fail to improve the protection of another globally significant marine environment, including around the Lacepede Islands, which are one of the most important seabird and turtle-breeding colonies in Australia but which would be given no protection from mining.

By leaving the north section of the Kimberley Marine Park without an MNPZ, the Government is missing an important opportunity to enhance the conservation outcome of this park – the WA Government has placed an MNPZ-equivalent green zone in the adjacent North Kimberley Marine Park and over Long Reef and the East Holothuria Reef. The Holothuria Banks in the Commonwealth park are important for flatback turtles and should also be covered by an MNPZ.

The MNPZs in the Argo-Rowley Terrace Marine Park, an area of deep canyons and plateau with upwellings that are an important breeding ground for sperm and beaked whales, have been cut by 26,570 km² or 42%. Were the draft management plan to be implemented, the park would also be exposed to destructive trawling and mining.

Gascoyne Marine Park is recommended for a cut of 24,305km² in its MNPZ protection. Like Argo-Rowley Terrace Marine Park, it is a national key ecological feature, with the upwellings from its abyssal plain supporting the rich diversity of Ningaloo Reef. The Sanctuary Zone (IUCN Ia) covering the entirety of Mermaid Reef Marine Park has been converted to MNPZ, another downgrade.

Roebuck, 80 Mile Beach, Montebello, Shark Bay, Ningaloo and Carnarvon Canyon marine parks remain without MNPZ protection, contrary to CSIRO recommendations. 80 Mile and Roebuck marine parks are critical to the economically important Kimberley pearling industry, are both adjacent to Ramsar-listed wetlands of international importance, and host migrating humpback whales—a species recovering from the threat of extinction and increasingly important to the Kimberley’s \$68million tourism industry. As well as established impacts on cetaceans, new evidence suggests that seismic testing can kill pearl oyster larvae. A decline in water quality would also be devastating to the pearling industry.

Recommendations

- Abandon the proposed cuts to MNPZs in the region and ensure that each marine park has areas of such high-level protection, including Roebuck, 80 Mile Beach, Montebello, Shark Bay, Ningaloo and Carnarvon Canyon marine parks, which currently have none.
- Abandon the trawling zone close to the Rowley Shoals in the Argo-Rowley Terrace Marine Park, and protect the Rowley Shoals from mining.
- With respect of the Kimberley Marine Park:
 - replace the proposed HPZ for Adele Island with an MNPZ
 - upgrade the MUZ around the Lacepede Islands
 - upgrade the MUZ throughout the Kimberley Marine Park to either HPZ or Special Purpose Zone (mining exclusion)
 - establish a new large MNPZ in the north section of the Kimberley Marine Park to match that declared in the adjacent ‘Great Kimberley Marine Parks network’. This would protect globally significant values including the Holothuria Banks.
- Increase MNPZ protection in the Ningaloo Marine Park to match that in the adjoining state park where mining is excluded.

North Marine Region

Although the North Marine Region was to be given limited protection under the initial draft management plan, the new draft management plan recommends even less protection. MNPZ protection would be cut across the eight parks in the region by 57%, leaving only 1% of the region in high-level protection. The only park in the region to have its protection level upgraded would be Limmen Marine Park, where the MUZ covering the entire park would be converted to HPZ. Joseph Bonaparte, Arafura, Arnhem, Limmen and Wessel marine parks would have no MNPZs.

The Wessel Marine Park would have its MNPZ and MUZ converted to Special Use Zone (Trawl). These waters have high levels of endemism and pelagic fish such as sharks, snapper, tuna and mackerel, as well as a variety of unique sponge and coral communities. As recommended by the Government’s own review, the MNPZ should be increased in size, not removed, to provide additional protection for this unique area.

The Arafura Marine Park’s MUZ would also be converted to Special Use Zone (Trawl). These canyons support a diversity of large predatory fish, endangered saw fish, marine turtle and whale sharks, species that may be significantly affected by increased destructive fishing techniques.

The Oceanic Shoals Marine Park would have a new area of HPZ and a small MNPZ replacing some of its MUZ, with the remaining MUZ converted to SUZ (Trawl). This new zone will open a large area of the carbonate bank and terrace systems of the Van Diemen Rise to gillnets and demersal trawling, which would not be permitted if they remained as MUZs. These fishing techniques have been deemed incompatible with the aims of marine parks.

The Gulf of Carpentaria Marine Park would have its MNPZ reconfigured and cut by 3,765 km², with most of the park to be zoned SUZ (Trawl). The Gulf of Carpentaria contains a number of key ecological features and biodiversity hotspots critically important to dugongs, dolphins and flatback, hawksbill and olive ridley turtles. Trawling and gillnetting are recognised as having unacceptably high risks for marine life and incompatible with marine parks by the Government's own Fisheries Gear Risk Assessments.

The removal of high value shelf habitat adjacent to the Wellesley Islands will compromise the protection of this biodiversity hotspot, an important nesting site for the endangered hawksbill turtle and vulnerable olive ridley turtle, and a biologically important area for coastal dolphins. Further, the Review's advice to the Government was to increase the size of this MNPZ to provide additional protection for several key ecological features including the Gulf's famous submerged coral reefs.

The West Cape York Marine Park would experience a conversion of 4,628 km² of MNPZ and MUZ to HPZ. This is the largest proposed change in the region and would allow trawling, longlining and hand collection. A Government commissioned ABARES report shows that these changes to West Cape York Marine Park will decrease the potential displacement by just \$141,200. The removal of the MUZ adjacent to Queensland coastal waters opens the area within the marine park to gillnetting. Gillnetting is particularly dangerous for local populations of dugong and marine turtles, including those at Crab island, the world's largest nesting population of flatback turtles.

Under the draft plans, Limmen Marine Park remains without an MNPZ. Such a zone would compliment the Northern Territory state marine park and provide additional protection for threatened dugong populations and the near-pristine Gulf of Carpentaria key ecological feature.

Recommendations

- Abandon the proposed cuts to MNPZ in the region and ensure that each marine park has areas of MNPZ protection, including Joseph Bonaparte, Arafura, Arnhem, Limmen and Wessel marine parks, which currently have none.
- Increase MNPZ coverage in the Oceanic Shoals Marine Park and around the north Wellesley Islands within the Gulf of Carpentaria Marine Park
- Protect key coastal communities that are adjacent to Commonwealth marine parks from mining i.e. Tiwi Islands (the Oceanic Shoals Marine Park), Port Keats and Wyndham (the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf Marine Park), Maningrida (the Arnhem Marine Park), and Minjilang (the Arafura Marine Park).

Temperate East Marine Region

The Temperate East Marine Region would suffer the least of the marine regions from the 2017 draft management plans, with only a two per cent reduction overall in MNPZ. But if the draft management plan were to be implemented, 96% of the region would have no MNPZ protection, and 85% no protection at all.

There is a 12% (1,215 km²) reduction in MNPZ in the Lord Howe Marine Park on the Middleton Reef seamounts and remote coral reef habitats. Small protection upgrades from MUZ to HPZ would be given to the Hunter, Norfolk and Central Eastern marine parks (and protect these areas from mining), but they will still fail to protect marine life in the water

column, and except for the tiny areas of MNPZ in the Cod Grounds and Solitary Islands marine parks, there is no MNPZ protection on the continental Shelf.

The draft plan also fails to provide MNPZ protection for any of the Norfolk Island seamounts, which were identified by the former Howard Government as one of Australia's 11 most unique habitats for marine life. The Government review recommended that the Vening Meinez Fracture Zone, an area covered in rich benthic fauna in the Norfolk Island Marine Park, should be given MNPZ protection. The plan also ignores the Review's recommendation to upgrade the zoning outside the MNPZs and Norfolk Island's extended MOU Box from MUZ to HPZ, opening the park to the possibility of oil production and highly destructive seabed mining

Recommendations

- Abandon the proposed cuts to MNPZ in the region's final management plans and include MNPZs in each marine park, including those on the continental shelf.
- Prohibit seabed mining and oil and gas production in the Norfolk Island and Lord Howe marine parks.

Coral Sea

Like the many other proposed cuts in the draft management plans, those for the Coral Sea Marine Park—53% or 264,000km² reduction in MNPZ coverage—have no basis in science. It would halve and fragment the MNPZ area on the eastern side, slash MNPZ protection for Osprey and Marion reefs, and downgrade Vema Reef's MNPZ to HPZ. And it would fail to improve protection for Flinders, Holmes and Wreck reefs.

The large offshore oceanic MNPZ, which in the original draft management plans covers around half the park, was to be Australia's major global contribution to the protection of intact tropical pelagic marine life at a large scale. Under the draft plans, 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 its conservation values.

The Government's Expert Science Panel recognised the need to increase protection at key reefs, recommending increased protection for them due to their ecological values and their economic importance to the dive industry. But this has been ignored in the draft plan, which proposes MNPZ protection for only 7 of the Coral Sea's 40 or so reefs, some of the world's premier dive spots. MNPZs would also be completely removed for Shark and Vema Reefs, and a very large section of that covering Osprey Reef. Marion Reef, a key ecological feature of the Coral Sea with coral reefs, cays and herbivorous fish of the Marion Plateau, would have its MNPZ halved.

MNPZs protect reef fish and shark populations highly valuable to the dive tourism industry and help build reef resilience in the face of climate change. Recent research in the Coral Sea shows that reefs excluded from MNPZs experience depletions of 90% in the original biomass of their shark populations, with populations of other large predators halved and fish populations depleted by 70%.

MNPZs can also deliver economic certainty to dive operators who need a diversity of reefs protected against extreme weather events, such as cyclones and coral bleaching. Failure to protect the Coral Sea's reefs will undermine the industry, which is estimated to contribute \$6million to the economy each year. That is more than the \$4 million projected gain commercial fishers would receive across the 44 marine parks, let alone the small set of commercial fishers operating in the Coral Sea who are estimated to be displaced by as little as 0.1%.

The conversion of MNPZs to HPZs generally allows 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 were an unacceptable risk to the conservation values of Australia's marine parks. In the Coral Sea, they would put at risk the recreational fishing, economic and social values of the Queensland Plateau and Queensland Trough and the world's only known spawning ground for Black Marlin.

Recommendations

- Abandon the proposed MNPZ cuts within the Coral Sea Marine Park and proposals to expand of mid-water trawling, purse seining, demersal longlining and prawn trawling
- Increase protection levels for all of the Coral Sea Marine Park's reefs, including MNPZs for Flinders, Holmes and Wreck reefs.
- 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.
- Implement the proposed new MNPZ protection at the border with the Great Barrier Reef.

Yours faithfully



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