



# Commonwealth Marine Reserves Review

National Parks Association of Queensland Submission

30th March 2015

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The National Parks Association of Queensland (NPAQ) promotes the preservation, expansion and appropriate management of National Parks and the wider protected area estate in Queensland. NPAQ has a strong interest in Australian Marine Parks. NPAQ's submission refers explicitly to the Coral Sea Marine Reserve, and reiterates points made by Save our Marine Life and the Protect Our Coral Sea Alliances.

Like these and other conservation groups, NPAQ believes that the existing zoning in all Commonwealth Marine Reserves should be retained, that the marine national park zones should be improved and expanded, and that the marine reserves should be established immediately.

## **Retain Marine National Park Zones**

The Coral Sea Marine Reserve contains Australia's largest Marine National Park Zone which extends over 51% of the Marine Reserve. This is one of the few places in the world where a large marine sanctuary for tropical marine life can be established, making the conservation values of this area globally significant.

The Marine National Park Zones reclaimed by the Coalition Government in December 2013 represent a compromise between these values and a desire to keep certain areas within the reserve open to commercial and/or recreational fishers. The broad structure of this compromise was first outlined in 2011 with the release of the draft plan for the Coral Sea Marine Reserve - largely welcomed by both commercial and recreational fishers. Over 70% of the commercial fishing interests displaced by the Coral Sea Marine Reserve stated that they would prefer to see simpler management arrangements involving increased protection down to 22°S, provided adequate structural adjustment assistance was available. This desire to see greater protection of the Coral Sea is also reflected in the broader community with over 99% of the nearly half a million submissions to the draft zoning plan asking for an increase in Marine National Park Zones, particularly around coral reefs. The Marine National Park Zones reclaimed by the Coalition Government in December 2013 are 95% identical to those about which these comments were made.

The Marine National Park Zones reclaimed by the Coalition Government in December 2013 maximise the protection of marine life by:

- 1. Protecting tropical marine life at a large scale:** the Coral Sea's Marine National Park Zones represent *probably the only tropical pelagic environment not markedly impacted by fishing where an area of very large scale can be established and effectively managed* (Ceccarelli 2011).
- 2. Protecting Marion Reef:** the Zone at Marion Reef increases the protection of the *reefs, cays and herbivorous fish of the Marion Plateau* (one of the three key ecological features of the Coral Sea) within Marine National Park Zones from 0% to a respectable 33%.
- 3. Protecting Osprey, Shark and Vema Reefs:** one of the world's iconic dive sites, with the shark dive at North Horn on Osprey Reef the main drawcard for the Coral Sea dive tourism industry (worth over \$6 million per annum in direct sales; KPMG 2010). As such, the Marine National Park Zones over these reefs are a key piece of regional economic infrastructure for

tourism. These reefs also have a different evolutionary history to almost all other reefs in the Coral Sea.

4. **Protecting Bougainville Reef:** host to a spawning aggregation of endangered Maori Wrasse, and the only mapped biologically important whale shark aggregation site in eastern Australia, Bougainville Reef has unique conservation values.
5. **Establishing the first protection of seamounts in tropical Australia:** the protection of Mellish Reef, Kenn Reefs and three unnamed seamounts within Marine National Park Zones establishes the first-ever protection for seamounts in Australia's tropical waters.
6. **Protecting turtles and seabirds:** the Marine National Park Zones meet the minimum Australian science community recommendations for protection for the biologically important areas of endangered (IUCN red list) green turtles and for seven of the seabirds that breed and feed in the Coral Sea.
7. **Protecting a diversity of marine habitats:** the Marine National Park Zones meet the minimum Australian science community benchmarks for protection for 236 of the 547 different seafloor environment types mapped by the Centre for Conservation Geography within the Coral Sea. These habitats are home to more than 300 of the animal species currently list by the IUCN on its red list.
8. **Protection from seabed mining and oil and gas mining:** protects the Coral Sea and Great Barrier Reef from oil spills and the impacts of seabed mining by excluding mining and exploration for oil and gas from the entire Coral Sea.

Marine Park Zones are the only zones that scientific research consistently shows are capable of delivering broad ranging and significant benefits for marine life. Marine National Park Zones are critical to research efforts to understand Australia's oceans. They are the baselines against which it becomes possible to understand and improve the management of current and future impacts on the Australia's oceans. Zones that allow recreational fishing do not protect marine life as effectively Marine National Park Zones. Recreational fishing has the capacity to cause trophic cascades through the removal of older individuals in a population, or through the removal of top order predators. Surveys of Queensland recreational fishers show a clear majority support the Marine National Park Zones already in place, citing benefits for sustainability and conservation.

While commercial fishers argue that Marine National Park Zones are having an impact on their activities, over 70% of the commercial fishing interests displaced by the Coral Sea Marine Reserve have been seeking greater (not lesser) protection, provided that adequate structural adjustment assistance is put in place. Total displacement of commercial fishers in the Coral Sea is just 2.3% of the commercial fisheries active in the Coral Sea, with some fisheries being displaced as little as 0.1% (Commonwealth of Australia 2012, National Seafood Industry Alliance 2014).

### **Social and Economic Impacts**

The net social and economic value of the Coral Sea Marine Reserve to the Australian community is estimated to be worth \$1.2 billion. The net increase in employment associated with the implementation of the Coral Sea Marine Reserve is predicted to be over 100 jobs, particularly in North Queensland. In addition:

1. The remote nature of the Coral Sea Marine Reserve means that it supports some of Australia's lowest levels of recreational fishing activity. For example, less than 1% of recreational and game fishing in Queensland occurs in the Coral Sea Marine Reserve. The closest zone off-limits to recreational fishing is 210km from the mainland Australian coastline. The two environments of most interest to recreational fishers in the Coral Sea are the black marlin spawning grounds in the Queensland Trough and Coral Reefs.
  - a. **Black Marlin Spawning Grounds:** The Coral Sea Marine Reserve increases recreational fishing opportunities in the black marlin spawning grounds of the Coral Sea by placing the area within the Habitat Protection Zone (Coral Sea). This zone maintains

access for recreational fishers to 100% of the Queensland Trough while completely removing commercial fisheries that target black marlin.

- b. Coral Reefs:** The Coral Sea Marine Reserve minimises the impact on recreational fishers seeking to fish remote coral reefs by maintaining recreational fishing access to 24 of the 36 coral reefs of the Coral Sea. This includes all of the coral reefs most accessible to recreational fishers, i.e. Saumarez Reef and the inner reefs of the Queensland Plateau.
2. Commercial charter fishing operations have previously been supportive of the zoning plan for the Coral Sea Marine Reserve, even when it contained larger areas off limits to recreational fishing, and smaller areas with effectively exclusive recreational fishing access.
3. The Coral Sea Marine Reserve will successfully minimise the displacement of commercial fishing activities with the maximum potential negative impact estimated to be \$4.2 million (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). The Coral Sea Marine Reserve extends over 100% of the Coral Sea and includes 51% of the Coral Sea in Marine National Park Zones, but displaces only 2.3% of the commercial fisheries active in the region.
  - a. Eastern Tuna and Billfish Fishery:** over 85% of the total commercial fishing displaced is from the Eastern Tuna and Billfish Fishery (ETBF). Key operators in the ETBF fishery are supportive of the Reserve but want to see the zoning plan simplified and extended, with restrictions on long-lining down to 22<sup>0</sup>S, provided that adequate structural adjustment funding is provided (De Brett Seafood Pty Ltd *et al* 2012).
  - b. Coral Sea Fishery:** the zoning plan removes the more damaging aspects of the Coral Sea Fishery (demersal trawl and demersal long-lining) as recommended by the risk assessment process, while having minimal impact on the other aspects of the fishery.
  - c. Queensland Trawl Fishery:** the zoning plan minimises the impact on the Queensland Trawl fishery by creating a General Use zone that allows trawling to continue in a small area on the western edge of the Coral Sea Marine Reserve to the west of Saumarez Reef. This reduces the displacement of the fishery down to 0.1% (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012).
4. The creation of the Coral Sea Marine Reserve is predicted to enable the dive tourism industry to expand by around 150%, which is a gain in direct sales of \$9 million (KPMG, 2010). The Coral Sea Marine Reserve creates this economic opportunity by creating a globally iconic marine reserve that includes permanent Marine National Park Zone protection for key dive tourism reefs like the Osprey Group of reefs (Osprey, Shark and Vema reefs).
5. The creation of the Coral Sea Marine Reserve is estimated to create a net increase in employment, particularly in North Queensland of over 100 jobs (as noted in the KPMG Economic analysis of the Coral Sea).

### **Expanding Marine National Park Zones**

In 1982 the Fraser Government protected 30% of the Coral Sea's coral reefs in two of Australia's oldest Marine National Park Zones. Thirty years later, the proclamation of the Coral Sea Marine Reserve by the Gillard Government in 2012, and by the Abbott Government in 2013, has increased the protection of coral reefs within Marine National Parks zones in the Coral Sea from 30% to 40% by targeting an additional eight reefs for protection. A scientific study of marine reserves across the world shows that effective Marine National Park Zones should be greater than 100km<sup>2</sup> in size and include whole coral reefs within their boundaries, in addition to a buffer zone of deep water or sand (Edger *et al* 2014). In light of this new information the Marine National Park Zones for Coringa Islets, Magdelaine Cays, Bougainville Reef, Marion Reef and the Osprey Group of reefs should be updated or the protection provided to these reefs may not prove effective:

#### **Osprey Group of Reefs**

- The Marine National Park Zone at the Osprey Group currently includes over 99% of Osprey, Shark and Vema Reefs. Expanding the Marine National Park Zone to the boundaries of the

Habitat Protection Zone proposed in the 2011 draft zoning plan would establish full protection for the reefs, plus a buffer zone capable of protecting the vulnerable shark populations that make these reefs a globally iconic dive location.

### **Marion Reef**

- The Marine National Park Zone at Marion Reef currently includes 97% of the coral reef. To include the whole reef and associated banks, terraces, aprons and fans, including a buffer zone of sand and deep water around the reef, the Marine National Park Zone should be expanded to the boundaries of the Habitat Protection Zone proposed in the 2011 draft zoning plan.

### **Bougainville Reef**

- The Marine National Park Zone at Bougainville Reef is currently 27 km<sup>2</sup>. Bougainville Reef itself is 100% contained within the Marine National Park Zone, however the current Marine National Park Zone is not large enough to isolate the reef from extractive pressures occurring outside the Marine National Park Zone. Expanding this small marine sanctuary to include all of the mapped whale shark aggregation site would be a major improvement to the protection of whale sharks and will bring the boundaries into line with the recommendations of recent scientific research. This whale shark aggregation is a potential high value tourism asset.

### **Coringa Islets/ Magdelaine Cays**

- One of the original coral reefs targeted for protection in 1982, the Coringa Herald Marine National Park Zone covered 84% of the Coringa Islets / Magdelaine Cays reef system. This has now increased to 88% with the 2013 extension of the original zone eastwards. NPAQ supports extension of the marine sanctuary southwards in this area from 17°11' to 17°26'.

In addition, the uniqueness of its coral reefs and the very large number of unprotected reefs combine to create a number of areas in the Coral Sea that provide opportunities to build regional economic infrastructure for the dive tourism industry. Unprotected reefs with high levels of uniqueness include: Boot and Ashmore Reefs, Tregrosse Reef, Wreck Reefs, Frederick Reef and Calder Bank, Willis Islets, and Queensland Plateau Inner Reefs (including Flinders Reefs, Flora Reef, Holmes Reefs, Heralds Surprise and Dart Reef). Establishing Marine National Park Zones for one or more of these reefs would have significant economic advantages by creating a more diverse portfolio of dive infrastructure, and mitigate against the potential loss of dive sites via catastrophic events (such as cyclones, coral bleaching or a crown of thorns outbreak).

In summary, NPAQ believes that the existing zoning in all Commonwealth Marine Reserves should be retained, that the marine national park zones should be improved and expanded, and that the marine reserves should be established immediately.

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