

A National Marine Reserves Plan



“Australia has rights and responsibilities over some 16 million square kilometres of ocean - more than twice the area of the Australian continent.”¹ Our oceans contain some of the world’s most ecologically diverse areas of the marine environment, ranging from arctic to sub-tropical areas. Our oceans provide a multitude of natural resources for productive and recreational use. Maintaining a healthy marine environment is vital for Australians to continue to enjoy our coastal and marine environment, but also for economic reasons. Much of our tourist industry is reliant on our marine environment and our fishing industry needs sustainable fish stocks.

The world’s oceans are in real trouble. About 80% of world fish stocks are fully exploited or overexploited. The world’s coral reefs are disappearing at a rate five times faster than that of the rainforests and 90 per cent of the world’s big fish—such as shark, tuna, marlin, groper and snapper—have vanished in the last 50 years from overfishing. Climate change, pollution from land-based sources and shipping, destructive fishing practices and oil and gas exploration and exploitation are the key threats to our oceans and our marine environment.

The bio-regional marine planning process currently being undertaken around Australia is an opportunity to strengthen the protection of our marine environment and provides the pathway to a sustainable management. The Greens believe that a much greater area of our precious oceans should be protected through marine reserves. Currently less than 5% of Australian ocean waters are protected in marine reserves. We must ensure there are significant ecologically representative marine protected areas with significant areas of “no take”, such as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park which has 33% of its area as a “no take” zone.

The Greens National Marine Reserve Plan will ensure:

- a minimum of 30% of the marine reserves established through bio-regional planning to be Marine National Parks – that is, must be ‘no take’ zones, with no extractive uses, such as petroleum exploration or operations and fishing.
- identification of the “no take” areas must be based on science and representative of essential ecosystems.
- accelerated establishment of large-scale marine reserves, declaring the Naturalist Plateau area in South-West marine bio-region of Western Australia a marine reserve

¹ Commonwealth of Australia, Australia’s Oceans Policy (1998),

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Marine National Parks - 'No take' Zones

Australia has international obligations to protect the world's biodiversity, including our marine biodiversity. Under Australia's Oceans Policy the key mechanism for meeting these obligations is through bio-regional marine planning.

The protection of large areas from extractive use is central to appropriate marine planning. A 'no take' zone means extractive uses are prohibited in the area: that is, no fishing, no oil or gas exploration or production, and no other harvesting of the environment. These protected areas are essential to ensure the health of marine ecosystems; they protect biodiversity by ensuring essential species, habitats and breeding and nursery grounds are left intact.

'No take' areas help stop and potentially reverse the decline in fish populations, thereby helping the environment, recreational and commercial fishing and the tourist industry. A recent report on the Great Barrier Reef found that "the network of marine reserves on the GBR has brought major, sustained ecological benefits, including enhanced populations of target fish, sharks, and even corals, the foundation of the coral reef ecosystem."² Such areas protect against both natural disasters, as well provide opportunities for scientific research in areas largely free from human contact.

The process of identifying marine reserve areas must be driven by science and underpinned by a policy focused on conserving our oceans for future generations. In spite of the planning process that does exist, the government has recently released new areas for oil and gas exploration.

The importance of establishing large scale marine reserves

On the 8 June, 2010, more than 250 scientists from around the globe named the establishment of large marine reserves a top priority in protecting ocean ecosystems. These scientists identified marine reserves as essential in maintaining the health of the ocean and increasing the ocean's chance to recover and replenish its ecosystems.

² Adaptive management of the Great Barrier Reef: A globally significant demonstration of the benefits of networks of marine reserves, <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2010/02/18/0909335107.full.pdf>.

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The scientists' statement notes that, "Large reserves, where ecological processes and functions can operate much as they have for millennia, are virtually missing from the marine conservation and management portfolio. The world's great terrestrial parks provide an important service in preserving ecosystems and wide-ranging species and in supporting non-extractive industries such as tourism. The world needs to establish similar ocean-scale reserves."³

The establishment of large-scale marine reserves are essential if we are going to reduce the damage to our oceans caused by overfishing, climate change and pollution. The Greens propose that the establishment of large scale marine reserves in Australia's waters are prioritised.

Protecting the Naturalist Plateau marine bio-region - off the coast of Margaret River, Western Australia

The area in the South-West of Western Australia, just 83km off the coast of Margaret River, known as the Naturalist Plateau, has previously been flagged for assessment as a marine sanctuary. The area has unique biodiversity - 90% of species in the south west bioregion are found no where else in the world. 50% of the world's whale and dolphin species use the area.

This area is now at risk, because the federal government has released it as acreage for oil and gas exploration, even though the bio-regional marine planning process for the area is yet to be finalised. A large part of the South -West marine bio-region would be devastated by an oil spill. The marine environment and the coast would be irreparably damaged, the unique biodiversity of the area, tourism and fishing industries would be decimated, local residents, surfers and agriculture would all suffer.

The Greens are calling for the acreage release for this area to be rescinded and for the Naturalist Plateau area in South-West marine bio-region to be declared a marine reserve.

³ "Scientific Rationale For The Designation Of Very Large Marine Reserves" <http://www.globaloceanlegacy.org/GOLScienceStatement.pdf>