



# Marine Protected Areas: Coming to the NT!

## How do we conserve our marine biodiversity?

Over 85% of Australians live near the coast. Surfing, fishing, diving and swimming are embedded in the Australian way of life. Only recently have we begun to understand the extent to which Australia's marine and coastal environments are being degraded by poor land management practices, overfishing, industrial and residential development, and climate change

Because it is mostly under water, there is a high level of **interconnection** in the marine environment, more so than on land. Solutions to the problems affecting our marine environments must come from an **integrated approach** to managing both marine and land-based threats. This will include stopping pollution of the marine environment from both land- and sea-based sources, ensuring sustainable marine industries, and the establishment of a comprehensive system of **Marine Protected Areas**.

## What is a Marine Protected Area?

The internationally accepted definition of a Marine Protected Area (MPA) is "any area of intertidal or sub-tidal terrain, together with its overlying water and associated flora, fauna, historical and cultural features, which has been reserved by law or other effective means to protect part or all of the enclosed environment". MPAs may also be called marine parks, marine reserves, or marine conservation reserves.

In Australia, MPAs are usually 'multiple use' conservation areas created by State, Territory or Commonwealth governments. They usually contain a variety of **zones** that offer different levels and mixes of protection and permitted uses, ranging from highly protected 'no take' zones through to zones allowing fishing and other commercial or extractive use.

Some MPAs are fully protected areas or 'sea sanctuaries' that exclude all extractive activities including all forms of fishing, collecting and mining - providing a high level of environmental protection throughout the entire area.

## Northern Territory's Unique Waters

The Top End's coasts and seas are one of Australia's most culturally, aesthetically and ecologically significant marine regions, home to a spectacular variety of sea life and habitats:

- 137 **estuaries** and enclosed waters with high fishery and conservation values. The Territory's estuaries are used by a number of protected species such as turtle and dolphin.
- 6 of the world's 7 species of **marine turtles**. 4 species are considered endangered and one critically endangered.
- Productive and diverse **mangrove** systems are found all along the NT coast. Mangroves represent a unique and significant ecosystem and are critical habitat for many fish, crustacean and bird species.
- NT waters are visited by a large number of **whale** and **dolphin** species such as the false killer whale and bottlenose dolphin.
- Extensive **seagrass** communities providing food and shelter for many species including dugong, turtle, fish and prawns.
- Large populations of **migratory seabirds**, many of which are listed under international treaties.
- Important **coral reef** localities such as the Vernon Islands, NE Arnhem Land and the Quail and Grose Islands.

The world's leading marine scientists are now recommending that we **fully protect** 20-50% of all marine habitats in sea sanctuaries to guarantee the health of our oceans and help keep our fisheries sustainable.

## What roles do MPAs fulfil?

- **Protecting endangered species and their habitats** - It is vitally important to not only protect species that are endangered but to also protect the marine habitats that are crucial to the species life cycle. Already Australia is considered an important refuge for many vulnerable species like dugongs and turtles.



- **Preserving natural and aesthetic values** - We have a responsibility to ourselves and future generations to conserve the environment we enjoy. We all need places of beauty, variety and naturalness.
- **Enhancing fisheries** – ‘Fully protected areas’ or ‘sea sanctuaries’ can protect and conserve habitats and ecological processes **crucial** to the life cycle of marine species **and** serve as nursery and replenishment areas for marine species important to recreational and commercial fishing. Other MPA zones, where fishing is permitted, would of course need to be managed to ensure that the activities are sustainable.

Scientific research shows that areas where fishing is not permitted provide the greatest benefit to biodiversity. Studies in New Zealand, Australia and around the world have demonstrated that fish numbers have increased within ‘no-take’ sea sanctuaries – and this has flow on benefits to surrounding fishing stocks.

- **Providing recreation and tourism opportunities** - MPAs can accommodate a broad spectrum of recreational opportunities including whale watching, diving, swimming and sailing. Increasingly MPAs are a focus for tourism.
- **Maintaining cultural heritage** - MPAs can and should recognise and protect the traditional ownership rights and cultural values of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples.
- **Maintaining marine biodiversity** - A comprehensive system of MPAs is essential to ensure that the great variety of life that characterises Australia’s marine ecosystems is permanently maintained, including its genetic diversity and evolutionary processes.
- **Education, monitoring and research** - MPAs encompass valuable geological, archaeological, historic and cultural sites and provide a control area of relatively undisturbed environment against which impacts in adjacent areas can be measured. To be useful for education and



Big-bellied  
Seahorse

research, marine areas need to be secure. MPAs provide these opportunities to broaden our understanding of marine ecosystems and increase our capacity to ensure their protection.

## A National System of Marine Protected Areas

In 1999 all Australian Governments, including the NT, agreed to develop a National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas (NRSMPA), which is **comprehensive**, **adequate** and **representative** of Australia’s marine ecosystems.

Establishment of a NRSMPA will contribute to the long term viability of marine and estuarine ecosystems, maintain ecological processes, and protect Australia’s biodiversity at all levels. AMCS is working with Government and the community to help select the appropriate size, shape and placement of marine protected areas to maximise the benefit to our valuable marine ecosystems and everything that depends on them.

## AMCS and MPAs

AMCS believes that an effective network of MPAs needs:

- A core of fully protected areas or sea sanctuaries as the centrepiece of any credible marine protected area system.
- 20-50% of all marine habitats protected in sea sanctuaries to guarantee the health of our oceans and help keep our fisheries sustainable.
- Core sea sanctuary zones surrounded by zones which, although they may allow for more types of use and activity, nonetheless adequately buffer core ecological values.
- Individual MPA’s should be of sufficient size to adequately protect identified conservation values and reflect ecosystem linkages and the connectivity of the surrounding system.

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