

Executive summary

In November 2012, forty new Commonwealth marine reserves (CMRs) were proclaimed in the South-west, North-west, North, Temperate East and Coral Sea marine regions as part of the Australian Government's contribution to the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas (NRSMPA). This followed the establishment of the South-east network in 2007. In December 2013, management plans for these reserves were set aside pending the Commonwealth Marine Reserves Review (the CMR Review) to ensure that internal zoning and management arrangements reflected appropriate and further consultation with stakeholders, and were informed by the best available science.

Two parallel processes were established to conduct the CMR Review: a Bioregional Advisory Panel (BAP) with five Regional Panels to consult with affected and interested parties, to identify areas of contention and propose zoning arrangements, and to address these concerns; and an Expert Scientific Panel (ESP) to review and strengthen the science input into zoning, and to recommend future research and monitoring priorities and ways to address major information gaps in knowledge of the reserves. The BAP and ESP were asked to coordinate their work but to report separately.

Despite considerable criticism of the original design, size and location of the reserves, the Government made it clear in initiating this review that the outer boundaries of the reserves were out of scope, and that the focus of the review was on the internal zoning and allowed uses within each reserve.

This report from the BAP outlines the approach taken; the consultations with individuals, organisations and peak bodies; the submissions received; other inputs such as submissions to previous consultations; and the relevant findings of the ESP. The work of the BAP took into account socio-economic considerations such as the estimated economic impact of zoning options, and the impacts on local communities of including or excluding different types of activities from the reserves.

More than 260 meetings in 15 locations were held around Australia from February to August 2015 and elicited a wide diversity of views on the adequacy, appropriateness and effectiveness of the original zoning of the reserves. Many suggestions were also received, through written and online submissions, for improving reserve zoning.

Almost all of the areas of contention have been addressed in the zoning options recommended in this report. Scientific information was a key input and consideration in recommended new zoning and management arrangements. The solutions recommended either improve conservation outcomes without substantially increasing socio-economic impacts, or improve socio-economic outcomes without unacceptable impacts on the conservation values of the reserves.

There was a strong and consistent message from many stakeholders that the previous consultations that led to the establishment of these reserves had been lengthy and comprehensive, and had for the most part achieved a relatively robust balance of interests in reserve design and zoning. Many stakeholders expressed their desire for certainty so that they could make whatever decisions and adjustments were required and plan their futures accordingly—for example to exit the industry or to invest with confidence. Despite these strong expressions, many ideas for amending the existing zoning of the reserves were put to the Regional Panels.

Following extensive consultations, considerations of written and past submissions and the development of potential options to address many of the issues raised by stakeholders, a smaller set of options was distilled. This was based on an analysis of the potential economic impacts of these options and the overall balance of interests in the reserves and networks as a whole. This smaller set of options was tested with affected stakeholders in July and August 2015, and subsequently refined in the light of the feedback received.

As a result of these processes and considerations changes to zoning and zone boundaries are recommended for 26 of the 40 new reserves declared in 2012. Minor changes to three other CMRs are also recommended for overall consistency across the estate. As a package they will improve the representation and overall protection of conservation values, while providing access and continuity for a range of activities currently undertaken and proposed by commercial and recreational interests. The changes deliver more consistent zoning and reduce the displacement of existing economic activities.

The area zoned as Marine National Park (International Union for Conservation of Nature Protected Area Category II (IUCN II)) is increased in each of the four regional reserve networks, and decreased in the Coral Sea CMR. Protection of the Coral Sea coral reefs is improved with all zoned as either Sanctuary, Marine National Park, Habitat Protection or Habitat Protection (Reefs).

An additional 456 607 square kilometres across the reserve estate is recommended to be zoned as Habitat Protection (IUCN IV), to provide a higher level of protection against activities like seabed mining and some fishing gear types that are inconsistent with protecting conservation values. Together with Marine National Park (IUCN II) and Sanctuary (IUCN 1a) zones, the additional area zoned as Habitat Protection increases the proportion of the reserve estate receiving a high level of protection from 60% to 76%. In the Coral Sea, the combined area zoned for high level protection (IUCN Ia, II and IV) increases from 80% to 97% of the reserve.

The total area zoned as Multiple Use (IUCN VI) in these reserves, where extractive uses and mining are or may be allowed, is halved (to 18% of the estate), offset by a small increase (6%) in the area zoned as Special Purpose (IUCN VI). This reflects zoning that is much more tightly targeted for economic activities and other activities that would normally be excluded from the reserve estate. In some cases Special Purpose zoning also excludes seabed mining and oil and gas exploration and development, in addition to those activities being prohibited in all Marine National Park and Habitat Protection Zones (HPZs).

Impacts on commercial fishers will be substantially reduced from the proclaimed zoning, greatly reducing the cost to taxpayers of any adjustment to affected economic interests. Local solutions developed in close consultation with marine users generally accommodate the interests of recreational fishers and charter and dive tourism operators.

In three CMRs (Ningaloo and Ashmore and Mermaid reefs), zones that have had longstanding and continuing management arrangements that have provided for access and use of these zones have been assigned to a more appropriate IUCN category for consistency across the CMR estate.

In terms of the objectives of establishing the CMR estate and its contribution to the

NRSMPA, the recommended rezoning increases the number of primary conservation features (such as Provincial Bioregions, Depth Ranges, Key Ecological Features (KEFs) and Seafloor Types) in Sanctuary and Marine National Park Zones (up from 331 to 352 of the total of 509 features in the estate). The number of these features represented in HPZs increases from 192 to 272 in the recommended rezoning.

Two of the terms of reference for the BAP invited recommendations on the inclusion of social and economic considerations into reserve management decision-making, and on the inclusion of stakeholder views into management decisions. The BAP was also invited to comment on how the drafting of management plans could be improved. This report includes 24 recommendations for consideration by the Government on these and related issues.

Overall, the following succinct messages about stakeholder expectations of the CMR Review were distilled:

- My recreational experience will be better
- Fishing will be sustainable
- Climate resilience of our marine environment will be improved
- There will be economic gains from tourism
- There will be meaningful action on threatened, endangered and protected species
- There will be improved socio-economic outcomes for Indigenous and local communities
- Business will be able to invest with certainty
- Biodiversity will be protected
- We will see the benefits from the reserves
- The reserves will be adequately resourced and effectively managed.

In summary, the recommendations in this report set a positive and sound basis for delivering on these expectations.