

# Scoping Report

for the Northern Planning Area



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Scoping Report for the Northern Planning Area

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Front cover, left to right: Trawler in the Northern Prawn Fishery (Source: Australian Fisheries Management Authority); Boy with Spear (© Kerry Trapnell); Mangrove – Western Cape York Peninsula (© Kerry Trapnell)

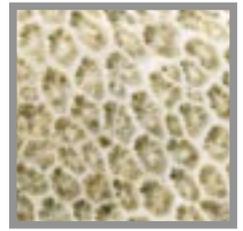
Insets: Gulf beach – sand ripples (© Kerry Trapnell); Coral on beach (Source: National Oceans Office)

Opposite page: Trawling silhouette (Source: Australian Fisheries Management Authority)  
Inside back cover: Mangrove – Western Cape York Peninsula (© Kerry Trapnell)

Scoping Report for the Northern Planning Area

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# Scoping Report

for the Northern Planning Area

*The Northern Planning Area is one of Australia's most distinctive coastal and marine regions, complemented by unique ecological and human values.*



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northern Planning Area is unique – ecologically and culturally. It is remote and its marine environments are largely undisturbed relative to other marine areas in Australia. It covers over 700 000 km<sup>2</sup> from Torres Strait to the Arafura Sea and the Gulf of Carpentaria, and has high biological diversity and internationally significant habitats for many species.

Mining, shipping, fishing and tourism are the major economic activities in the Northern Planning Area and there is potential to expand all of these industries in the future. One of Australia's most valuable fisheries – the Northern Prawn Fishery – operates in the Northern Planning Area, which is also an increasingly popular area for recreational fishing.

The Northern Planning Area is home to about 25 000 people who live mainly in small, isolated communities, many of whom rely on the sea for work, sustenance and culture. A majority of these people, around 70 per cent, are Indigenous Australians. Despite Indigenous peoples' strong and ancient associations with sea country, they are generally poorly represented in decision-making and management fora and derive inadequate economic and social benefits from the management of sea country. Regional marine planning has a role to play in addressing these inadequacies.

This *Scoping Report for the Northern Planning Area* is a major step in developing a Regional Marine Plan for the Northern Planning Area. We are aiming to make sure the use and management of the marine resources is ecologically sustainable well into the future. We will do this by:

- Developing a better way to do oceans business between governments to provide increased certainty for all oceans users;
- Recognising and better coordinating current initiatives;
- Identifying current and emerging issues that require more attention; and

- Putting in place a way to measure whether oceans management is contributing to a sustainable future.

By taking a close look at the Northern Planning Area – with advice from the science, industry, conservation and local communities – priorities for government in the marine environment have now been broadly identified. While there is much work underway, there is still much work to do to address issues in the Region.

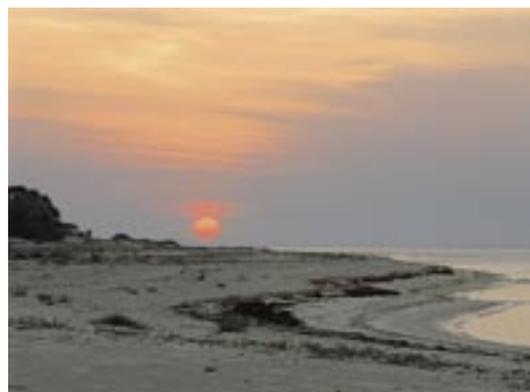
The work to support this report was developed jointly by the Australian, Queensland and Northern Territory Governments. The Queensland and Northern Territory Governments have an ongoing interest in the process and, as it continues, they will consider the nature of their relationship to the final Northern Regional Marine Plan.

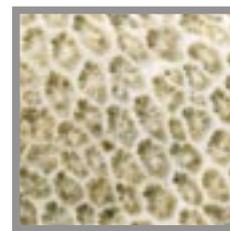
The Australian Government is working to release the final Northern Regional Marine Plan by the end of 2005. It will identify long-term objectives for the Northern Planning Area and actions to achieve them. Key outcomes of the Plan will be:

- measures to maintain and enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of industry, including the development of cultural and natural resource-based industries to address Indigenous and broader community sustainable development needs;
- improved Indigenous involvement in marine resource management including development of sea country management plans;
- identification of areas that will contribute to a comprehensive, adequate and representative system of marine protected areas (MPAs) in Commonwealth waters;

Sunset over beach Cape York Peninsula.

© Kerry Trapnell





- actions to minimise impacts on the marine environment, including better use of measures – other than marine protected areas – to achieve conservation objectives including reducing the impact of marine debris and sustainably managing turtle and dugong populations;
- integrated spatial management of marine uses to meet conservation, industry, infrastructure and community development objectives, to provide a fair and transparent basis for resource allocation decisions;
- better coordination of research and communication to make information more accessible for decision-makers as well as industry, communities and Indigenous interests; and
- a performance assessment system with long-term monitoring, risk assessment, reporting and review arrangements to guide sustainable development and measure the effectiveness of management decisions.

During the development of the Plan, the Australian Government will continue to work with the Queensland and Northern Territory Governments, key stakeholders and Indigenous people. There will also be:

- research to address some key information gaps – biophysical, social and economic – and analytical tools developed, including a National Bioregionalisation and an atlas of marine uses;
- identification of areas of high conservation, social, economic and cultural significance and development of a greater understanding of pressures on them;
- refinement of objectives in the Scoping Report and grouping of issues into three categories: Sustainable Industries and Communities – Biodiversity Conservation and Ecosystem Health – Institutional Arrangements and Governance. Discussion papers will be developed around each of these themes; and
- release of a draft Northern Regional Marine Plan for public comment.

The National Oceans Office is establishing a Northern Planning Advisory Committee which, in the first instance, will develop the discussion papers to inform the development of the Draft Northern Regional Marine Plan.

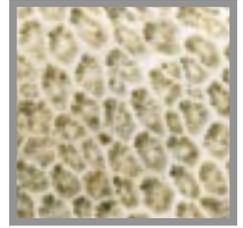
In October 2003, the National Oceans Office released the *Snapshot of the Northern Planning Area*, which broadly outlines the known characteristics and values of the Northern Planning Area. It provides the context for this Scoping Report and these two documents should be read in conjunction.

*Southern Surveyor.*

Source: CSIRO







## PART A

### Introduction

Sound oceans management is fundamental to Australia's future. Marine industries and coastal communities depend upon healthy ocean ecosystems for their long-term survival.

With the various community, industry, conservation and recreational sectors sharing an interest in Australia's oceans, it is not surprising that at times their interests diverge. The problems associated with divergent interests have sometimes been exacerbated because historically management systems have been sectorally focussed. Increasingly, however, governments are recognising the need to integrate decision making across sectors in order to maximise overall benefits to society and maintain ecosystem health.

Most laws and regulations cover specific types of marine industries and other human uses, each of which tend to be administered through separate government agencies. However, natural systems and marine resources do not recognise jurisdictional boundaries in the water. In some cases, these jurisdictional boundaries are not understood or even recognised by people. Because regional marine planning is undertaken on a whole-of-system basis using an integrated approach, it is well placed to address those marine-related issues that are cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral.

Through integrated management of the oceans we are seeking to avoid many of the mistakes made on land.

By undertaking regional marine planning, governments and non-government organisations and interests now have an opportunity to develop a system to avoid and resolve conflicts, to optimise the use of ocean resources and to avoid costly degradation of the marine environment.

### Australia's Oceans Policy

Australia's Oceans Policy reflects the Australian Government's commitment to achieve sustainable development of Australia's oceans through integrated processes that meet the needs of government, conservation, industry, Indigenous people and the

broader community. The policy presents a vision for Australia's oceans and is built around nine broad goals with the overall objective of achieving:

*Healthy oceans: cared for, understood and used wisely for the benefit of all, now and in the future.*

The goals and principles of Australia's Ocean Policy are available at [www.oceans.gov.au](http://www.oceans.gov.au).

Australia's Oceans Policy incorporates the concepts of Ecologically Sustainable Development and ecosystem-based management. The goal of Australia's National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development is development that improves the quality of life, both now and in the future, in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends. The core objectives of the Strategy are to enhance individual and community wellbeing by following a path of economic development that safeguards the welfare of future generations; to provide for equity within and between generations; to protect biological diversity; and maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems.

*Australia's Oceans Policy* recognises ocean ecosystem health and integrity is fundamental to Ecologically Sustainable Development. As one tool to achieve this, ecosystem-based management is an approach that, in recognising human uses and ecosystem health are interdependent, takes as its starting point the fundamental importance of maintaining the structure and function of ecosystems. Understanding and minimising the adverse consequences of human activities on ecosystem integrity should be a primary consideration in making management decisions.

Australian and State and Territory Governments are working toward a set of national principles for integrated oceans management.



## Regional Marine Planning

Regional marine planning is a systematic way of making decisions to improve management of Australia's oceans. It seeks to add value to existing management systems by developing a shared understanding and integrating decisions across sectors and jurisdictions. It is a way of putting the principles of *Australia's Oceans Policy* into practice and a means by which governments are seeking to implement the concepts of Ecologically Sustainable Development and ecosystem-based management.

On 21 May 2004, the Australian Government released the *South-East Regional Marine Plan*, the first of its kind on this scale in the world. This Scoping Report marks completion of the Scoping Phase for Australia's second Regional Marine Plan.

The Australian Government is committed to working with Indigenous people and key stakeholders to pursue regional marine planning in a process that is inclusive, equitable and transparent and creates effective, long-lasting arrangements. Certainty and long-term security for stakeholders and marine resource users are improved when their activities are ecologically sustainable. Regional marine planning will increase certainty by providing a mechanism for stakeholders and interests to work together and with government to address areas of potential conflict.

*Waterbirds – Aurukun Wetlands.*

© Kerry Trapnell



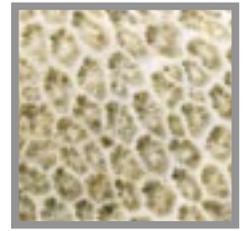
The Scoping Phase took account of other relevant planning processes to ensure regional marine planning adds value, rather than duplicating work that has already been done or is in progress. For example, Regional Natural Resource Management Plans are currently being developed under the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust arrangements with Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Cooperation with other bodies, including regional and international organisations will be required to address a range of issues in the Northern regional marine planning process. One such issue is the Indigenous concept of sea country, in which the sea is not viewed as a common domain open to all, and in which the sea is not clearly distinguished from the land but rather where land and sea are viewed as a continuum of country. This is an important consideration for governments in an area where Indigenous people comprise the majority of the coastal population.

Planning is a key step in a cycle designed to improve our capacity to manage adaptively – to respond effectively to environmental, social and economic changes. Marine ecosystems and our interactions with them are dynamic. While the Northern Regional Marine Plan is due for completion in late 2005, the continuing relevance of its objectives and actions, along with the effectiveness of its implementation will be subject to review.

Regional marine planning will not fundamentally alter existing sectoral and jurisdictional management responsibilities in the North. Instead the emphasis will be on better utilising existing organisations to address common themes, and enhancing the capacity of existing organisations to work together where such cooperation is required to make progress.

While we have begun to understand the environment and people of the Northern Planning Area better, the Scoping Phase has also helped identify key information gaps which the planning process will help to address.



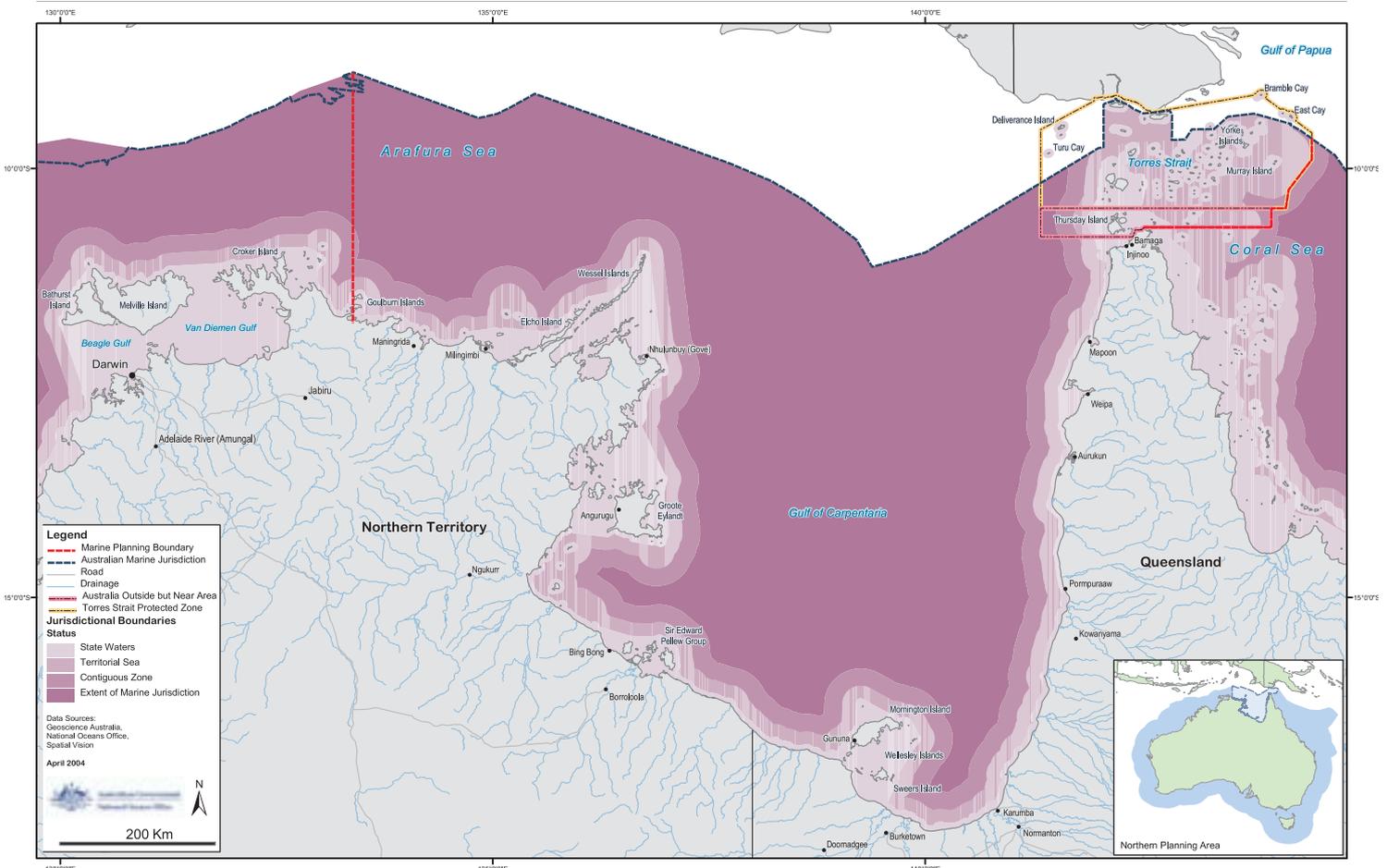
## The Northern Planning Area

The Northern Planning Area extends from the Torres Strait to include the Gulf of Carpentaria and the eastern Arafura Sea, as far as a line coinciding with the Goulburn Islands or 133°23'E (see Map 1).

The Northern Planning Area covers over 700,000 square kilometres. Its key characteristics include:

- unique ecological and human cultural values;
- a shallow-water tropical marine ecosystem with extensive and productive marine and estuarine habitats;
- an area of high biological diversity with internationally significant habitats for many species;
- significant parts of the Area are relatively undisturbed – relative integrity of ecological pathways and processes ;
- sparsely populated with a population of about 25 000 people;
- indigenous people make up the majority (approximately 70%) of the population;
- strong, continuous associations with Sea Country for Indigenous peoples with majority ownership of the coast, about 60% in total with 85% in the Northern Territory;
- large industrial projects (particularly mining) occurring in and just outside the Region;
- commercial fishing is a major economic activity with one of Australia's most valuable fisheries – the Northern Prawn Fishery – located in the Region;
- recreational fishing is a major leisure pursuit in the Region; and
- the sea route across northern Australia is one of the nation's busiest – approximately 2900 ships in 2001

Map 1 – The Northern Planning Area





- with a growing number of cruising yachts also traversing the Region. Torres Strait is recognised as an international shipping strait.

In October 2003, the National Oceans Office released a *Snapshot of the Northern Planning Area*. This report broadly describes the environmental, social and economic characteristics of the Region and is available from the National Oceans Office or electronically at [www.oceans.gov.au/publications](http://www.oceans.gov.au/publications)

Recreational fishing at Karumba. Source: National Oceans Office



### Torres Strait

Due to significant ecological and institutional differences to the rest of the Northern Planning Area, planning in Torres Strait will be progressed through a separate but concurrent process linked to the Natural Heritage Trust-funded regional natural resource management planning process in Torres Strait.

The following issues will be progressed through the Torres Strait marine planning process:

- The conservation needs;
- The future of the seabed mining and drilling moratorium;
- The promotion of marine-based industries; and
- The adequacy of marine resource information management arrangements.

For the purposes of this report, references to the Northern Planning Area do not specifically include Torres Strait.

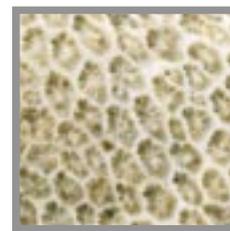
### The Scoping Phase

The Scoping Phase was undertaken through memoranda of understanding between the Queensland, Northern Territory and Australian Governments. The memoranda committed all three governments to work together on a whole of government basis and applied until the end of the Scoping Phase. The Queensland and Northern Territory Governments will continue a formal engagement and will consider the nature of their relationship to the Northern Regional Marine Plan as the process progresses.

The cooperative approach between governments has been assisted by the employment of Oceans Liaison Officers in Cairns and Darwin by the National Oceans Office. These officers will continue to provide direct communication with the National Oceans Office for individuals and groups in the Region.

Several information-gathering projects have been undertaken during the Scoping Phase to collate existing knowledge and assist in identifying issues and knowledge gaps. Some of these were specific to the Region and others were part of the National Oceans Office's National Science Work Program and will continue into the planning process. These projects include:

- **A Snapshot of the Northern Planning Area** – To provide an overview of major uses and ecological characteristics of the Northern Planning Area;
- **The National Bioregionalisation** – To update the regional classification of Australia's oceans based on relevant biophysical information including mapping of demersal fish and sponge distributions, updating bathymetric coverage of Australia's ocean floor, mapping sediment distributions and mapping oceanographic characteristics;
- **The National Socio-Economic Program** – To collate and map contextual information including marine resource uses and activities, employment in particular sectors, and employment within coastal regions to assist marine management and planning;
- **A Description of Key Species Groups in the Northern Planning Area** – To collate and describe



the known information about key species groups in the Northern Planning Area, including the identification of major knowledge gaps;

- **A Description of State and Territory Marine Management and Institutional Arrangements** – To describe the current Australian, State and Territory governance arrangements in the Region including relevant legislation, regulation, administrative arrangements, policies, plans and institutions;
- **Coordinating Input by Conservation Non-Government Organisations** – This culminated in a report produced by members of the Northern Australia Environmental Alliance containing members' views on the conservation priorities for the Northern regional marine planning process;
- **Consultation with Indigenous Communities and Literature Review** – To consult with Indigenous communities about sea country issues with associated literature review;
- **A Preliminary Identification and Description of Ecosystem Impacts of Current Activities in the Northern Planning Area** – To identify the known impacts of current activities in the Northern Planning Area on the ecosystems of the Region; and
- **The Finding Solutions – Derelict Fishing Gear and Other Marine Debris in Northern Australia** – To identify options for addressing problems associated with derelict fishing gear and other marine debris in northern Australia.

Most of these projects are now complete. More information on the current status of work undertaken by the National Oceans Office can be found at [www.oceans.gov.au](http://www.oceans.gov.au). The reports will be publicly released as they become available.

The Scoping Phase has involved extensive consultation with governments, communities and interest groups. This consultation has involved:

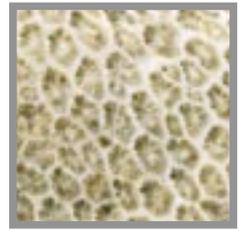
- direct discussions with organisations and their representatives;
- using existing consultative mechanisms, eg fisheries management advisory committees;
- dedicated consultative projects to facilitate discussion with Indigenous communities and the conservation sector;
- facilitating collaboration between research organisations; and
- convening workshops in Cairns and Darwin with representatives of key groups in the Region.

Workshops were held in Darwin and Cairns on 8-9 and 11-12 September 2003. Participants discussed the planning process and worked together to identify issues in the Region that may appropriately be addressed through regional marine planning. The reports from these workshops are available on the National Oceans Office website.

The Scoping Phase identified a range of issues that may be appropriate to address through the regional marine planning process. These issues are presented as common themes in Part B of this report. Associated with each common theme are a number of recommended objectives to be pursued through the planning process. While objectives can be articulated with some confidence, in general actions to progress them need to be further developed through consultation with stakeholders and other interests. In some cases, where there is already strong community and government endorsement, actions to advance the objectives can be implemented throughout the planning process.

The common themes and objectives have been drawn from a review of information in the area, input from management and policy agencies and the involvement of individuals and groups who live or have an interest in the Region. Feedback on this document and further consultation may reveal other issues that may need to be considered. Where possible, actions will be implemented throughout the planning process for those issues that are clearly a priority. This will enable issues to be progressed and ensure emerging risks can be addressed in a timely way.





## PART B

Common themes emerged from research and consultations undertaken during the Scoping Phase that warrant further investigation through the regional marine planning process. Not all of the objectives will be met during the planning process and most are likely to be further refined. Regional marine planning provides an opportunity to identify and address priorities where resolution requires holistic approaches.

The ability of communities and organisations engaged in the planning process to respond to the common themes and objectives identified through the Scoping Phase varies considerably. Different organisations and communities require different forms of information and different mechanisms to facilitate their involvement. Capacity building is a common thread running through many government-community interactions and is reflected in many of the common themes identified in this report.

### Theme 1: Understanding the Region

Our understanding of northern marine ecosystems is rudimentary. Information on the socioeconomic dependence on these systems is also sparse. Improving our understanding of ecosystems, and our reliance on them, is important if we are to effectively manage human activities within the capacity of the ecosystems to support them.

It is unlikely we will ever have complete knowledge of ecosystems, or possess sufficient resources to adequately address gaps in our understanding. As a consequence we need to:

- target our research, management and other activities towards addressing the most pressing priorities with the best available knowledge;
- manage cautiously and adaptively; and
- seek to address issues at the most appropriate scale.

Objectives to be pursued through the planning process include:

- further identifying and addressing priority information needs associated with environmental, cultural, economic and social objectives using the most effective means, including enhanced coordination of science agency activities;
- enhancing research collaboration with Australia's neighbours to address issues of mutual concern, including through the Arafura and Timor Seas Expert Forum; and
- broadening the knowledge base and management capacity by drawing on modern science and Indigenous knowledge.

Rivermouth – Gulf of Carpentaria.

© Kerry Trapnell





## Theme 2: Communicating and sharing information

Much current information of potential value to managers and other interests is in forms that are difficult to access or readily interpret. Informed decision making relies on an awareness of what information is available, timely access to the information and a capacity to make best use of it and to understand the impacts of decisions on others. Good access to information helps to ensure people and organisations are informed and able to influence decisions in which they have an interest.

One of the roles performed by the National Oceans Office is capacity-building in the area of national marine information management. The Office is sponsoring initiatives specifically designed to improve access to marine science data resources and the mechanisms by which we can publish and communicate marine information. The regional marine planning process will help to apply national initiatives at a regional scale. Through initiatives such as the Oceans Portal Project ([www.oceans.gov.au/oceans\\_portal.jsp](http://www.oceans.gov.au/oceans_portal.jsp)) it will be possible to access data and information held by a wide range of custodians through the web.

Darwin Workshop September 2003. Source: National Oceans Office



The National Oceans Office is strongly supporting the development of fundamental datasets in accordance with the Australian Government Spatial Data Access and Pricing Policy ([www.osdm.gov.au](http://www.osdm.gov.au)). The policy is designed to ensure datasets are captured and made available to underpin environmental and socio-economic management.

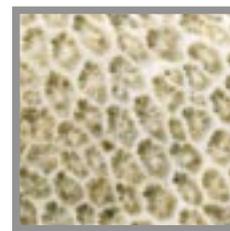
The National Oceans Office will also work with others to develop appropriate methods for dissemination of information collected through the regional marine planning process, recognising that many of the interests in the Northern Planning Area require specific approaches to meet their information needs.

It is not always appropriate to make information publicly available. Cultural and legal sensitivities and policy objectives at times require a degree of confidentiality in information management.

Improving understanding and mutual respect between interests in the Northern Planning Area is necessary for harmonious and sustainable development of the Region and requires an appreciation of the rights and needs of other marine resource users. Improving understanding and communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is particularly important given the significant cultural and conceptual differences that exist in relation to issues such as ownership and management in marine environments.

Objectives for the planning process include:

- promoting mutual respect and understanding between those with an interest in the Northern Planning Area;
- working with research and management agencies, communities and industries to collect and communicate data and information relevant to regional marine planning; and
- ensuring data and information, including data descriptions or metadata, are collected, maintained and made readily available through appropriate methods of dissemination.



### Theme 3: Biodiversity and ecosystem health

The Northern Planning Area is biologically diverse. Healthy populations of species and habitats must be maintained for ecosystem integrity and some species may be key indicators of ecosystem function and health. Some species, such as prawns, are vital for certain industries. Others, including marine turtles and dugongs, are vital for the maintenance of culture. Still others, such as sawfish and migratory birds, are of conservation concern. There are legal responsibilities for the management of protected species and ecological communities.

Different organisations and people have an interest in the management of many of the species of the Northern Planning Area. These interests may vary and, particularly where conservation, economic and cultural objectives intersect, good coordination of management across these interests is important.

There is an increase in marine pollution world-wide. Australia has put in place robust arrangements, such as oil spill responses, to deal with pollution within its jurisdiction. The regional marine planning process can assist to implement these arrangements through better information sharing, improved risk assessment capacity and improved monitoring arrangements, including the involvement of communities in this sparsely inhabited Region.

The high volume of marine debris, particularly in the form of discarded fishing nets originating beyond Australia's marine jurisdiction, is posing a significant threat to biodiversity and habitats in the Northern Planning Area. The nets are also navigational hazards and of concern to Indigenous and other coastal people of the Region.

The National Oceans Office and the Department of Environment and Heritage recently commissioned a report entitled *Finding Solutions – Derelict Fishing Gear and Other Marine Debris in Northern Australia*. The report was produced by the Key Centre for Tropical Wildlife Management at Charles Darwin University with assistance from the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation. It was released by Dr David Kemp, former Minister for the Environment and Heritage, in December 2003.

As part of the regional marine planning process, the National Oceans Office will work with Australian, Queensland and Northern Territory Government agencies and non-government interests to consider and implement the recommendations of the report. This includes working to develop the international collaboration required to stem the discarding of fishing nets at sea.

The growing numbers of commercial and recreational vessels using the waters of the Northern Planning Area will increase the risk of introduction and spread of marine species. Regional marine planning will support the application of regulatory arrangements and other initiatives to manage introduced marine species.

The National Introduced Marine Pests Consultative Group, which includes industry representatives, is the cross-jurisdictional body responsible for advising on national action to address introduced marine pests. Regional marine planning provides one vehicle for implementing this group's recommendations in the Northern Planning Area.

The Australian Government is developing a National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas in waters under its jurisdiction as part of regional marine planning. Decisions on the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas will be based on the best scientific and community resource advice available, incorporating community and industry knowledge.

In 2001, the Minister for the Environment and Heritage decided to assess the Gulf of Carpentaria seagrass beds, within the Northern Planning Area, to identify if marine protected areas were warranted. To avoid confusion and duplication, the assessment of the seagrass beds will be integrated into the identification of a comprehensive, adequate and representative system of marine protected areas in the Northern Planning Area. This work is being undertaken as part of the regional marine planning process by the recently established Marine Protected Area Taskforce located in the Australian Government Department of Environment and Heritage.



Queensland and the Northern Territory are also working to assess their state and territory wide conservation needs, including the need for marine protected areas.

Objectives to be pursued through the planning process include:

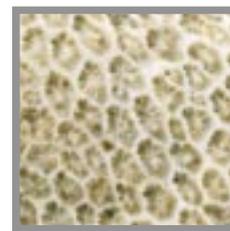
- developing mechanisms to maintain biodiversity and ecosystem health including those that integrate conservation, cultural (including customary management regimes), economic and other objectives;
  - pursuing international, national and regional cooperation between government agencies and other interests in the management of species and ecological communities;
  - encouraging the development of cross-cultural knowledge and management systems for sustainable use of resources (including Indigenous use of turtle and dugong);
- supporting national action under the National System for the Prevention and Management of Introduced Marine Pests to address introduced marine species issues, including community-based monitoring programs;
  - ensuring adequate processes are in place to reduce threats associated with apprehended and abandoned vessels;
  - addressing sources and impacts of marine debris at appropriate scales including consideration of recommendations from the report *Finding Solutions – Derelict Fishing Gear and Other Marine Debris in Northern Australia* and the development and implementation of a national threat abatement plan for the Key Threatening Process *Injury and Fatality to Vertebrate Marine Life Caused by Ingestion of, or Entanglement in, Harmful Marine Debris*;
  - establishing an effectively managed, comprehensive, adequate and representative system of marine protected areas using consultative processes and appropriate science tools; and
  - fostering cooperation between jurisdictions to seek complementarity of marine protected areas in the Northern Planning Area.

Dugong and calf.

Source: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority



## Theme 4: Sustainable industries and communities



Ecologically sustainable industries and livelihoods are essential to the environmental, economic and social well-being of Australia. Our knowledge of and capacity to use resources is constantly improving, thus providing new economic and social opportunities. Regional marine planning can benefit and enhance marine-based industries by recognising improvements in technology and understanding, increasing certainty for industry, promoting new opportunities for economic and community development and reducing the potential for conflict by improving decision making, access to information and increasing cooperation between users.

Expansion of existing industries and development of new economic opportunities in the Region need to be considered in the context of multiple-use management. Outcomes-based planning and management, based on adequate risk assessment, provides opportunities to combine regulatory arrangements with more flexible approaches to industry and community development.

Indigenous people have strong interests in participating in the use and management of marine resources. There is a need to encourage the development of mechanisms that involve Indigenous people in these activities, including exploring opportunities for Indigenous community enterprises.

The Australian Government, through the National Oceans Office, has funded the development of two pilot Sea Country Plans as part of the development of the *South East Regional Marine Plan*. The support for these pilots was in recognition that particular groups of Indigenous people have strong on-going cultural attachment to, and a broad range of interests and responsibilities in, specific areas of sea country. It was also recognised that these interests, attachments and responsibilities are difficult to adequately accommodate in state, territory and national planning or management arrangements. Sea Country Planning recognises the fundamental relationship between Indigenous people and their sea country and seeks to provide a means to address Indigenous community interests at the appropriate geographic scale. The Sea Country Planning concept will be applied and further developed in the Northern Planning Area.

The Northern Planning Area hosts an array of leisure pursuits, including significant levels of recreational fishing. People travel from all over Australia to fish in remote Australian areas. Increasingly, visitors from overseas are arriving – attracted by the Region's remoteness, culture and recreational fishing opportunities. Sustainable tourism and recreation pursuits are important for both social and economic reasons within the Region.

Objectives to pursue through the planning process include:

- working with industry, communities and government agencies to promote the ecologically sustainable development of marine-based industries;
- fostering better planning for development of sustainable industries in the Northern Planning Area and for managing changes in access arrangements where required to meet policy objectives;
- supporting community and industry initiatives to improve stewardship and sustainability of resource use in the Region, including the maintenance of customary use;
- increasing opportunities for Indigenous participation in marine resource use and management; and
- encouraging appropriate infrastructure development consistent with environmental, social, cultural and economic objectives in the Region.

*Shipping at Thursday Island.*

*Source: National Oceans Office*





**Theme 5:**  
**Access to natural resources and areas**

The seeking of access by different sectors, industries, community interests or jurisdictions to the same areas and resources can be a source of conflict. As opportunities for economic development in the Northern Planning Area increase, the potential for such conflict is likely to rise. At the same time, secure and long-term access to resources and markets is essential for

Fishing for barra – Gulf of Carpentaria.

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sustainable marine-based industries and therefore the future prosperity of the Region.

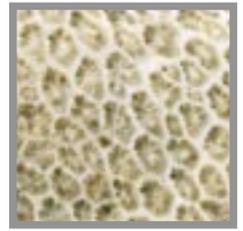
In general, ocean resources should be allocated to the mix of uses within an area that offers the greatest long-term community benefits (taking economic, environmental, social and cultural values into account) compatible with maintaining ecosystem health.

Visitors, such as tourists, to the Region are often unfamiliar with Indigenous protocols and unaware of when they are on Indigenous land. Access to Aboriginal country and respect for Indigenous culture is an important issue in the Northern Planning Area.

The diversity of marine resources and the uses we make of them, the multiple jurisdictions responsible for management and resultant complexity of the ocean regulatory system combine to make it difficult to manage for sustainability through sectoral management arrangements alone. The Australian Government is establishing a best-practice, integrated process to address broad-scale resource sharing issues. These mechanisms are outlined in *Oceans Policy: Principles and Processes* available at [www.oceans.gov.au/publications](http://www.oceans.gov.au/publications).

Objectives for the planning process include:

- developing integrated processes for allocating resources between sectors and interests consistent with ecosystem-based management and the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development;
- assisting to develop protocols for sustainable multiple-use and clarify issues regarding rights and access to natural resources and areas; and
- promoting greater understanding of the importance of marine resources to Indigenous communities and promoting cross-cultural education and awareness to ensure Aboriginal country is respected and accessed appropriately.



## Theme 6: Surveillance, compliance and enforcement

Some activities, such as unlawful access, unlawful local fishing and marine pollution, are a threat to the ongoing sustainable use of resources and are of concern to many people in the Northern Planning Area. Local communities could play a more active role in the detection of these activities and other events in the marine environment such as marine pest incursions.

The surveillance and enforcement capacity in the Northern Planning Area in respect to these activities is challenged by isolation, climate, the need for effective cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral coordination and sufficient resources to cover such a vast area. Australian Government agencies cooperate in the application of integrated risk management approaches to determine and review surveillance and enforcement priorities. Cost effective and innovative means of providing improved compliance and enforcement in respect of these activities of concern may include the devolution of some enforcement powers to local people.

Many people including Indigenous people, recreational fishers and tourists are not aware of their rights and responsibilities in relation to their activities in the

Northern Planning Area. There is a need to raise awareness and communicate to promote understanding of not only the use of the marine environment but of the rights and needs of other marine resource users.

Objectives to pursue through the planning process include:

- ensuring effective cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral arrangements are in place to effectively manage surveillance and compliance systems;
- identifying and progressing opportunities for industries and communities to play an appropriate and effective role in surveillance, compliance and enforcement arrangements where required in the Region including monitoring and detection of marine pollution and introduced marine pests; and
- increasing awareness in local communities of their rights and responsibilities and of the roles of agencies responsible for surveillance, compliance and enforcement in the Northern Planning Area.

Surveillance vessels.

Source: National Oceans Office





### Theme 7: Adaptive management

The marine environment and our understanding of it are dynamic. Management of marine resources therefore needs to be adaptive and open to continuous improvement. Adaptive management is a proactive, precautionary and planned approach to management. It provides for different management options based on the identification of risks and uncertainties. It seeks to ensure that there are clear options to change the use and management of resources as we increase our understanding of how the marine environment works and how the different management strategies are performing.

Sunset – Mitchell River.

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Good adaptive management should also include transparent processes for decision making.

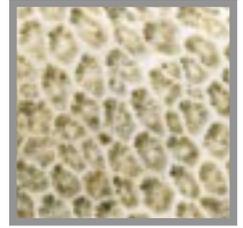
Human activities will always impact in some way on the marine environment and potentially on the activities of other users. The challenge for management is to ensure these activities are sustainable and consistent with broader social and policy objectives. Managing the cumulative impacts of a wide range of users and uses over time is particularly challenging.

Our capacity to manage for unknown but likely impacts of large-scale changes in natural systems, such as climate change, is currently limited. Regional marine planning may provide an opportunity for preliminary consideration of such potential impacts.

A better understanding of the social, cultural, environmental and economic impacts of current or proposed activities is important to ensure we don't limit ecologically sustainable development options.

Objectives to pursue through the planning process include:

- improving capacity to monitor, predict and manage changes in relationships between humans and the natural environment;
- identifying and addressing current and cumulative impacts of uses on human and ecological communities ;
- applying appropriate risk assessment methods; and
- developing a performance assessment system to inform adaptive management.



## Theme 8: Managing across the land-sea interface

Activities in river catchments can have adverse downstream impacts on coastal and marine environments. The concept of Integrated Catchment Management reflects recognition in terrestrial natural resource management of the need to manage across sectors and across landscapes. This need also applies to the marine environment and to the interface between marine and terrestrial environments – the coastal zone. Terrestrial run-off during the wet season is an important driver of natural systems in shallow waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The Natural Heritage Trust Natural Resource Management planning is an example where the Australian, Queensland and Northern Territory Governments are working cooperatively to develop better ways to manage across jurisdictional and landscape boundaries where this is required to achieve sustainable natural resource management and environmental objectives.

Objectives to pursue through the planning process include:

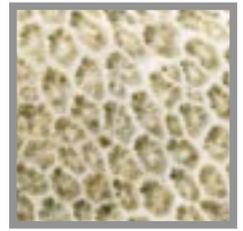
- improving the capacity of management agencies, industries and communities to manage across the land and sea interface; and
- assisting to apply the *Framework for a National Cooperative Approach to Integrated Coastal Zone Management* in the Northern Planning Area.

*Mangroves and floodplain.*

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## PART C

### Process

For regional marine planning to be effective, objectives must be articulated, stakeholders and other interests must be informed and engaged, research and information activities must be efficient and well targeted, and there must be transparent processes for decision-making.

While the Australian Government is responsible for the final form and content of the Northern Regional Marine Plan, working effectively with community and other interests in the Region is fundamental to the planning process. This is essential to ensure the objectives pursued are the most relevant and that planning outcomes are implemented by all with a stake in the Region.

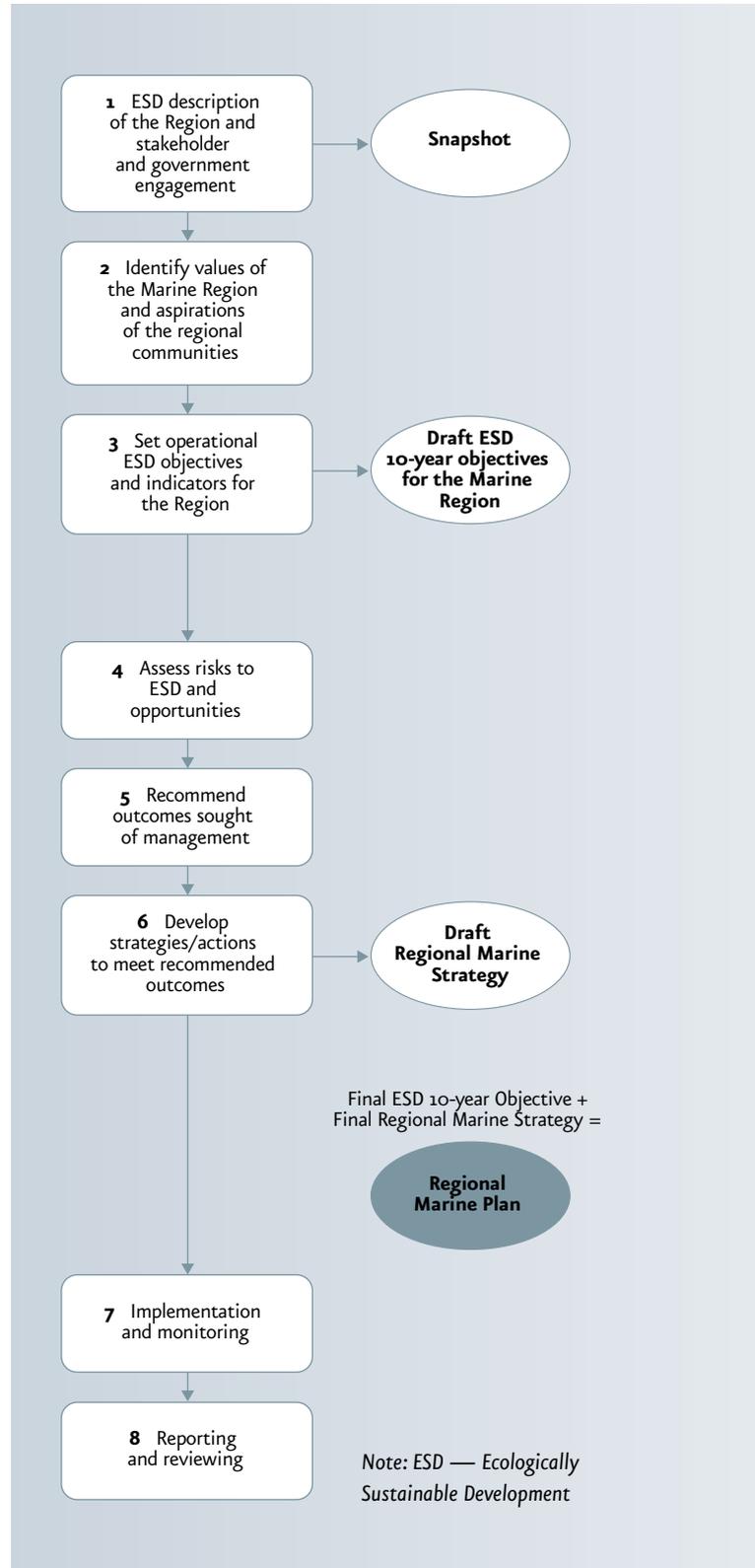
The objectives for the planning process outlined in Part B will not automatically translate into long-term objectives for the Region in the Draft Northern Regional Marine Plan itself.

The final Plan will incorporate an adaptive management framework for the Northern Planning Area. This will include a performance assessment system. This is essential to ensure:

- the management, regulatory and policy measures do contribute to environmental, social and economic outcomes;
- management measures promote Ecologically Sustainable Development and mitigate identified threats to it; and
- governments are spending money effectively and efficiently.

The Australian Government has endorsed an Oceans Adaptive Management Framework. This framework will be implemented in the northern marine planning process and has been incorporated into the *South-East Regional Marine Plan*. It is outlined in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Oceans Adaptive Management Framework**





**Figure 2: Regional marine planning process for the Northern Planning Area**

Effectively, the Scoping Phase has addressed steps 1 and 2 of this framework. The Northern Regional Marine Plan will address steps 3-6 and will outline the process for steps 7 and 8.

Figure 2 broadly outlines the process for regional marine planning in the Northern Planning Area. The common themes and objectives in Part B will be progressed in discussion papers to be drafted during 2004. The discussion papers will be developed by a Northern Planning Advisory Committee (described below).

### Engagement

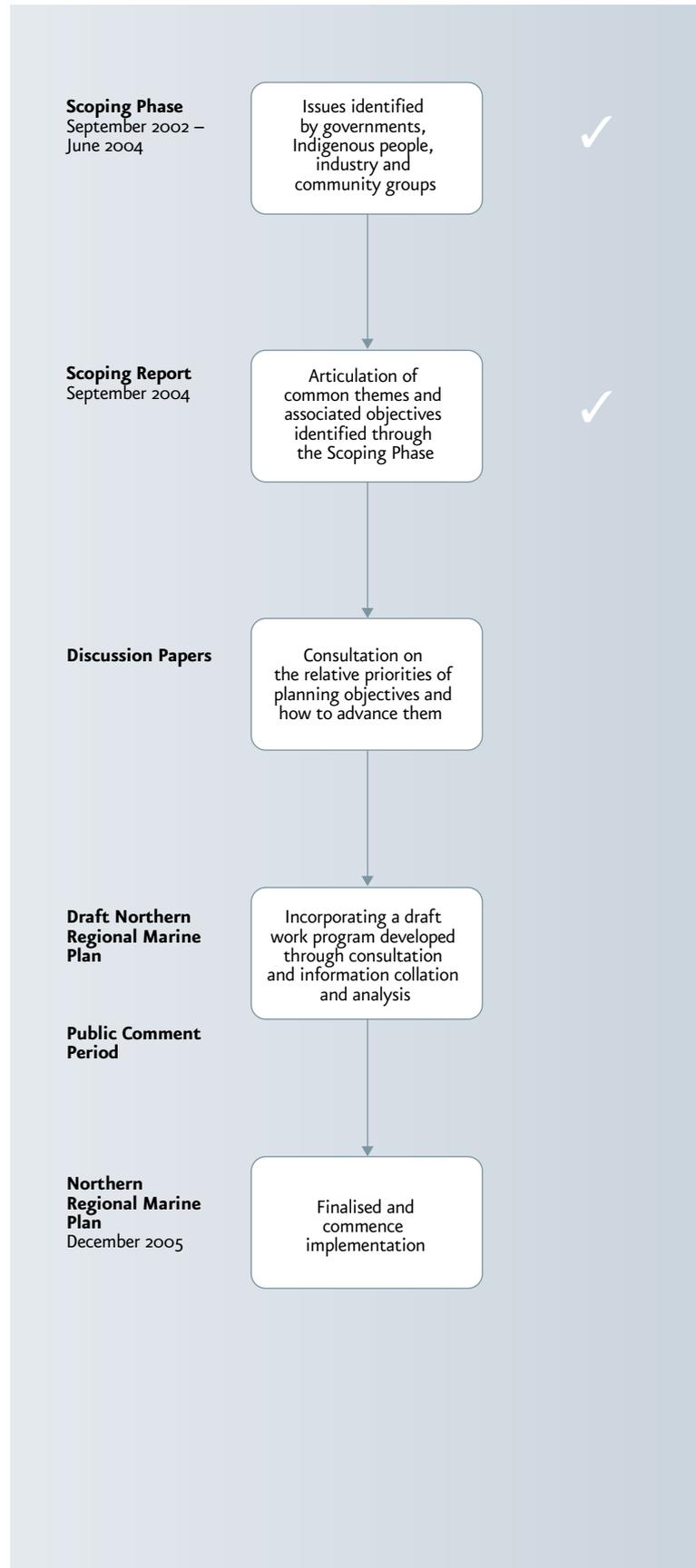
The levels and types of engagement of organisations, communities and individuals will reflect the nature of the common themes and objectives and organisational, community and individual needs for consultation.

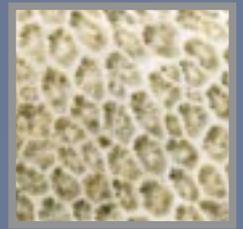
Consultation with existing stakeholder and Indigenous organisations will continue, but in addition, a new body is required to progress the planning process.

### The Northern Planning Advisory Committee

The Northern Planning Advisory Committee will be a sectoral-based committee, providing advice to the Director of the National Oceans Office.

The committee's advice will not be considered to necessarily reflect the views of the organisations or sectors represented and will not be considered to be binding on governments or sectoral interests.





*Healthy oceans: cared for, understood and used wisely for the benefit of all, now and in the future. Healthy oceans: cared for, understood and used wisely for the benefit of all,*



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The National Oceans Office is an Executive Agency of the Australian Government

**SCOPING REPORT FOR THE NORTHERN PLANNING AREA**