



CHAPTER 6 DEVELOPING AN EAST MARINE BIOREGIONAL PLAN: NEXT STEPS

This Bioregional Profile describes the characteristics and conservation values of the East Marine Region and the adjacent coastal waters and land. This information will guide development of a Draft Marine Bioregional Plan for the Region.

The Region encompasses a vast area of ocean spanning 2.4 million km², crossing tropical and temperate waters and extending many hundreds of kilometres from the mainland to include the seas around Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands. The Region is characterised by high variability in habitats, species, climate, oceanography and geomorphology.

The tropical north of the Region is dominated by the warm, shallow waters of the Coral Sea. Corals and other autotrophic species dominate the shallow Queensland Plateau and the many scattered and diverse reefs and atolls of the Coral Sea. These waters are home to sharks, tuna, billfish, turtles, parrotfish and a range of other ecologically important species.

The temperate south of the Region is characterised by a short continental shelf sloping sharply down to large, deep abyssal plains stretching across the floor of the Tasman Sea. Three parallel ranges of seamounts cross the deep sea plains in north-south lines: the Tasmantids, Lord Howe Rise and the Norfolk Ridge. The seamounts of this area are biological islands – home to corals, sponges and brittle stars, and supporting many other species. Whales, turtles and large predator fish, such as tuna and billfish, pass through the area feeding on squid and other prey.

The primary ecological driver of the Region is the East Australian Current (EAC). The EAC begins in the tropical north of the Region and carries warm water south throughout the length of the Region. Off the northern New South Wales coast, an arm of the current spirals out into the Tasman Sea, spawning a series of eddies and gyres and extending past Lord Howe Island and out into the Pacific Ocean around Norfolk Island. The East Australian Current provides ecological connectivity throughout the Region and is a major force for the tropical and temperate climate of the east Australian coastline.

One hundred and eight species that are known to occur in the Region are protected under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, as either threatened, migratory, cetacean or listed marine species. Of these, 38 species are listed as threatened, including two critically endangered, eight endangered, 27 vulnerable species and

three conservation-dependant species. Nine key ecological features have been identified as playing a significant role in the marine environment of the Region.

The Region shares international borders with Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, New Caledonia (a self-governing territory of France) and New Zealand. The Region also includes a major global shipping lane carrying most of Australia's international trade with Asia, and critical submarine telecommunications cables linking Australia with North America and Asia.

The Region supports a range of human uses and activities including commercial and recreational fishing, tourism, shipping and border protection activities. The Region is also culturally and spiritually important to the Indigenous communities of eastern Australia who have lived in the area for many thousands of years.

The ecosystems of the East Marine Region have been under pressure from human activities longer than any other Region in Australian waters. The Australian economy has been steadily growing over recent decades, based largely on the extraction and utilisation of natural resources. Increased activity in, and increased pressure on, the marine environment of the Region has followed.

Shipping and commercial fishing are the two most economically significant offshore activities occurring in the Region. Although shipping activity in the Region is increasing, it is focussed in narrow shipping lanes, and commercial fishing is declining as a result of reduced catches and rising costs. Human use of the Region is heavily concentrated in a narrow band along the western boundary of the Region adjoining New South Wales and Queensland state waters and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Large, ecologically important areas, such as the Coral Sea and the areas around Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands have been less visited and are believed to remain in much the same condition they were in prior to European settlement of Australia.

Next steps in the planning process

This Marine Bioregional Profile is the first product in the marine bioregional planning process. It forms the information base for development of the Draft Marine Bioregional Plan, the next major product in the process. The development of the Draft Marine Bioregional Plan comprises two major activities:



Pink anemonefish. Photo: Photolibary.

- the EPBC assessment, which examines the conservation values of the region, analyses the threats to those values, and identifies the most appropriate existing and new measures required to conserve the values to meet the requirements of the EPBC Act; and
- Marine Protected Area development, which identifies representative areas to include in a Marine Protected Area network for the East Marine Region.

The Draft Marine Bioregional Plan will include guidelines for meeting the requirements of the EPBC Act, conservation and protection measures and new actions proposed, including the Marine Protected Area network. The Draft Plan will be released for a period of formal public comment, as required under the EPBC Act. A final Marine Bioregional Plan will then be developed for consideration and approval by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts.

Once finalised, the Minister will be guided by the final Marine Bioregional Plan in all decisions made under the EPBC Act for which the Plan has relevance. The release of the final Plan will also trigger a further formal consultation process for declaration of the Marine Protected Area network.

Linkages with state and territory planning

Although marine bioregional planning is an Australian Government program undertaken under Commonwealth legislation, the planning process occurs in consultation with State and Territory governments. This consultation is important because the governments of Queensland and New South Wales are also undertaking planning and Marine Protected Area development processes in state waters.

Consultation during the planning process

Consultation with stakeholders will focus on issues and activities relevant to the East Marine Region. Workshops will be held early, mid-way and late in the process of developing the Draft Marine Bioregional Plan to provide an update on progress and to discuss and seek feedback on planning approaches. In addition to these workshops, the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts will also undertake consultation with stakeholders or sectors on specific aspects of the planning process.

As the Draft Plan is being prepared under the EPBC Act, consultations with stakeholders will be undertaken in accordance with the requirements of the Act and its Regulations. The consultation phase will last at least 60 days, during which the Department will contact stakeholders and hold public meetings where needed to facilitate and discuss feedback on the Draft Plan.

Views expressed by stakeholders during this time will be considered by the Government before the Bioregional Plan is finalised and adopted for the Region.

At a national scale, information sessions will be organised for key national stakeholder groups as necessary. At these sessions, the Department will provide a general briefing on the progress of the marine bioregional planning process across Australian waters. If required, the Department will also meet with national stakeholder groups to address specific national issues relevant to the marine bioregional planning process.

Statutory consultation on the candidate Marine Protected Area network

Once the Minister has adopted the final Marine Bioregional Plan, the declaration process for the proposed Marine Protected Area network will commence. The consultation process will include:

- a 60 day period inviting public submissions on the proposed declaration;



Yacht in the Rolex Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race 2005. Photo: Carlo Borlenghi / Rolex.

- preparation of a report by the Director of National Parks for the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts that includes each submission received and the Director's views on each;
- preparation of a Regulation Impact Statement approved by the Office of Best Practice Regulation; and
- development of interim management arrangements in discussion with key stakeholder groups.

Following declaration of the Marine Protected Area network, the process for determining how the new Marine Protected Areas will be managed begins. Two rounds of consultation will occur as the management plan for each Marine Protected Area is developed. The first round of consultation will be a public invitation to comment on a proposal to prepare a draft management plan for a particular Marine Protected Area, and the second round will involve a public invitation to comment on the draft management plan prepared for a particular Marine Protected Area.

More information and feedback

Further information and updates on the marine bioregional planning process for the East Marine Region can be found on the website <www.environment.gov.au/coasts/mbp/east>.

The Department welcomes comments on the Bioregional Profile and any additional information that may assist in developing the East Marine Bioregional Plan. Comments and additional information can be sent by email to eastmarineplan@environment.gov.au or by post to:

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Hermit crabs, Lihou Reef, Coral Sea. Image courtesy of the Australian Institute of Marine Science.