

Science statement on marine park zoning in New South Wales

13 January 2014

We the undersigned marine scientists are concerned that the integrity of the NSW marine parks network and marine conservation objectives will be severely undermined by Government moves to allow recreational fishing in sanctuary zones.

From the cool waters in the south to the warm waters of the north, the coral reefs, estuaries, seagrass meadows, sandy beaches, rocky headlands, kelp beds, sponge gardens, subtidal and deep-water rocky reefs, sandy plains and seamounts in NSW support a rich mix of tropical and temperate marine life. This includes marine turtles, tropical fish and manta rays in the north, blue devilfish, weedy seadragons, fur seals and sharks down south, and humpback whales seasonally migrating along the 2000-kilometre NSW coast.

The NSW marine parks network began its protection of marine life in 1991 with the establishment of the Solitary Islands Marine Park. Since then five other marine parks have been created, each after extensive scientific research and community consultation, and each linking with the Commonwealth marine bioregional plans. The knowledge and expertise of the NSW marine science community has been critical to building the network. In response to the feedback received during the zoning process, the current network (before the government's action) allowed for all forms of recreational fishing in about 93% of the NSW coastal environment (>10,000km²). It also set aside about 1,800km² of the coast (~17%) as "Habitat Protection Zones" which allow nearly all forms of recreational fishing but only a very limited set of commercial activities.

In contrast to these transparent and well-informed zoning processes, the NSW Government decision in March 2013 to temporarily allow recreational fishing in sanctuary zones off beaches and headlands was not based on any scientific research or consultation, and failed to establish the necessary scientific protocols for the monitoring of impacts on marine life that would result. It is now of significant concern to the marine science community that what was announced as a temporary lifting of restrictions on recreational fishing in sanctuary zones may become a permanent feature of marine parks management in this state. Such a move would represent a considerable step backwards in environmental awareness in the country's most populous state and as such has drawn the attention of inter-state and international marine scientists.

Sanctuary zones free of extractive activities, such as recreational fishing i.e. 'no-take', must be the corner stone of marine conservation. Their prime purpose is the conservation of marine life and ecological processes, but there is increasing evidence from Australia and overseas that sanctuary zones can help reverse the decline in marine health, build the resilience of marine life to climate change, and serve as buffers against overharvest which often occurs under conventional fisheries management.

The habitats in sanctuary zones off sandy beaches and rocky shores, where restrictions on recreational fishing have been temporarily lifted, are vital for many fish communities. These areas are also likely to be the most heavily exploited due to ease of access by fishers. The most recent data indicates that recreational fishers take a quarter or more of the catch in 11 of the state's top 20 harvested species including those commonly found in beach/headland habitats such as whiting, flathead, bream, luderick, tailor, snapper, kingfish and leatherjackets.

To suggest, as the government is doing, that risk and threat assessment in combination with fisheries management are sufficient for marine conservation, fails to understand the fundamental difference between the management of resource exploitation and the conservation of biodiversity. The latter seeks to preserve habitats and species in a natural state while the former seeks to optimize harvest. Thus even when done perfectly, management of resource extraction cannot deliver the marine conservation benefits that a network of marine parks with sanctuary zones can provide.

The signatories to this statement urge the NSW Government to reinstate the protection levels for sanctuary zones by no longer allowing recreational fishing of any form within them, and to work with the marine science community to establish a scientific research program that targets knowledge gaps and supports evidence-based decisions about marine conservation planning.

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