Australia’s New Government to Review Boundaries, Regulations of MPAs Designated in 2012

The new Coalition Government of Australia, elected by national vote on 7 September, has announced its intent to review the boundaries and regulations of most of the nation’s representative system of MPAs – namely the 33 sites that were designated in 2012 by the prior Labor Government. Those designations increased the national system of MPAs from 27 sites to 60, expanding the system to a total of 3 million km² (MPA News 14:3 and 14:1). The sites include the 1-million km² Coral Sea Marine Reserve, of which roughly half is no-take.

The planned review of the new marine parks is just the latest development for these sites. Their designation one year ago followed a series of public consultation processes conducted by the Labor Government amid strong support from conservation organizations and opposition from several fishing industry groups, the latter of which asserted the MPAs would cost revenue and jobs.

"Imposed without fair or adequate consultation"

The new Government is led by Prime Minister Tony Abbott; the environment minister is Greg Hunt. They say the MPAs were designated without proper consultation of industry, and that this must be amended before the sites are implemented further.

"The Coalition Government will as soon as is practicable suspend and review the flawed management plans for marine protected areas that were imposed without fair or adequate consultation," Hunt told MPA News. "We will make the decision-making process much more inclusive with the establishment of a Bioregional Advisory Panel for each of the five marine bioregions. To aid transparency in the decision-making process, we will also make public all peer-reviewed scientific evidence of threats to marine biodiversity within the marine protected areas." The membership of the advisory panels has not yet been announced.

Hunt says it is too soon to say whether the Government would support changing the management plans of the sites to allow fishing throughout their waters. "We will consider all factors of this issue very carefully," he says. "A sustainable fishing industry is an integral part of a strong primary producing sector, and a 'lock up' mentality is not necessarily the best way to protect our marine life. The biggest supporter of environmentally responsible fishing practices is the fishing industry itself because they don't want to harm the environment that provides them with a living." He says the nation's future direction on MPAs will be based on appropriate science, appropriate consultation, and a balanced outcome.

Reactions

Bob Pressey, a professor of conservation planning at James Cook University in Queensland, was critical of the new MPAs when they were designated in 2012 (http://theconversation.com/australia-new-marine-protected-areas-why-they-wont-work-11466). He called them "residual" and suggested they were planned with a greater focus on avoiding any impact to the fishing industry - concentrating the no-take areas in relatively unfished offshore waters - rather than on real biodiversity conservation. Still, he says, that may be preferable to what is to come.

"The new Commonwealth MPAs certainly contributed little to marine conservation," says Pressey. "Potentially, though, things could get worse - in practice and in principle. In practice, the few no-take zones that offer real protection to species and ecosystems that would otherwise be exploited could be removed or reclassified to allow extraction. In principle, scientists and anyone else concerned about the future of Australia's marine biodiversity should be resisting the notion that MPAs can be changed with each new Federal Government. That would undermine the confidence of both conservationists and industry, making MPAs completely meaningless. Before the election, there was a clear emphasis [by the Federal Coalition] on garnering votes from the recreational fishing lobby and others who saw the new MPAs as a threat. None of this gives confidence that a more effective system of MPAs will come from the promised review."

Imogen Zethoven, director of the Coral Sea Campaign for The Pew Charitable Trusts, lauded the new MPAs when they were announced last year. She says criticism of the prior public consultation efforts as inadequate is untrue.

"The marine planning process involved six phases of public consultation: the release of biophysical profiles of each marine region; the release of maps for further assessment of potential reserves sites; the release of draft reserves; the proposal to proclaim reserves; the intent to develop management plans; and draft management plans," says Zethoven. "All stakeholders had extensive opportunities to comment. During the consultation about the draft reserves, the federal government held 245 targeted stakeholder meetings and 34 regional community information events. All up, the consultation process resulted in more than 750,000 public submissions."

Zethoven says previous Coalition governments in Australia had a history of marine protection, including designating the extensive network of no-take zones in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and the highly protected Heard Island and McDonald Islands Marine Reserve. She hopes the new Government will build on that legacy.

At least for now, time may be on the side of the MPAs legislatively. The marine park management plans passed the House of Representatives earlier this year, and will be automatically tabled in the Senate on the first sitting day of the new Parliament (late October or early November 2013). Although the new Government was sworn in already, the composition of the Senate does not change until July 2014 and the majority of current senators support the plans, says Zethoven. Therefore, the management plans could pass through the Senate in the coming months, she says - although what would happen to them after July 2014 would be another question.

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