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Council Calls for Several New No-Take Reserves in Australian State of Victoria

An advisory council to the Australian state of Victoria has released a draft recommendation that the state create a system of "highly protected" marine areas (i.e., no-take reserves) to protect fish breeding areas and other key habitats. The draft recommendation, if followed, would increase Victoria's total no-take area from 0.05% of the state's waters to over 6%.

The Environment Conservation Council (ECC) of Victoria offered the recommendation in a draft report, which is now open for public comment. The ECC advises the Victorian government on the use of public lands, with the goal of balancing the competing needs of resource users and the environment.

Specifically, the ECC's draft report names sites suitable for the creation of 12 "Marine National Parks", 11 "Marine Sanctuaries", and 15 smaller "Marine Special Management Areas". [For definitions of each of these terms, please refer to the box at the end of this article.] The Marine National Parks and Marine Sanctuaries would be no-take reserves, and, as recommended by the ECC, would cover 630 km² of Victoria's marine environment.

The draft report's public comment period ends 25 February 2000. The ECC will offer its final recommendation to the state government on 30 June 2000.

Reaction

Environmental NGOs offered their support for the direction of the draft recommendation, though they had hoped for a larger percentage of Victoria's waters to be set aside as no-take reserves.

"We hoped to get 12-15% protected, but 6% is a good start," said Amanda Martin, director of the Victorian National Parks Association, which led NGOs' efforts on this issue. "It will still be a major battle to ensure that the government accepts this figure. Our recreational and commercial fishers are up in arms."

To solicit public input, the ECC has held more than a dozen public meetings across the state, where 25% of the nation's human population resides. Shane Dwyer, ECC executive director, said views at the meetings had ranged from strong support for the draft recommendation to absolute opposition, although the meetings as a whole had generally carried a negative tone.

"While there are arguments for reserving more than 6%," said Dwyer, "the [ECC]'s view is that the current recommendations provide a reasonable balance when coupled with good management practices in the remaining area. Given the difficulties in getting to this stage, it is likely to be some time before the matter [of increasing the percentage] is revisited." Dwyer added that the ECC had never pursued a particular target percentage.

The ECC estimates that the value of Victorian commercial fisheries in the recommended Marine National Parks which would constitute the bulk of the new no-take areas -- is approximately Aust \$5.5 million/year (US \$3.45 million/year), based on historical yields. That would represent 5%-10% of the state's various fisheries. In its report, the ECC also recommends creation of a system of 15 "Marine Aquaculture Areas", totaling about 125 km², to boost regional economies.

No-Take Reserves, Not Multi-Use Zoning

The proposed protected areas would be managed by the Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE), according to the ECC. Fisheries Victoria would have a role in enforcement of the no-take provisions and the overall management of fisheries within the protected areas.

The ECC intended for its site selection to be representative of the state's five marine bio-regions, sampling the habitats that occur in each one. Dwyer said that several groups and individuals had nominated sites for consideration, though the nominations had not constituted a formal process. The ECC modified its list of sites to take account of various factors, including socioeconomic matters (e.g., impact on fishing), access, educational opportunities, shipping, and overall balance. There was no scoring system used to rank sites.

The ECC's draft recommendation departs from recommendations made in the mid-1990s by the Council's predecessor, the Land Conservation Council (LCC). The LCC had proposed the creation of large multi-use marine parks (covering up to 20% of Victoria's waters) with, in almost all cases, a no-take core.

The ECC now states in its draft recommendation that it "is persuaded that large multiple-use marine parks, in which fishing and harvesting and extractive uses are permitted in most of the zones, send confusing messages to the community about the purpose of the parks. In order that the purpose of the parks can be clearly communicated and the management regime simply explained and implemented, a system of highly protected marine national parks is proposed. Monitoring of the performance of the parks will also be simplified."

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ECC Draft Report Is Online

An electronic copy of the Environment Conservation Council's draft report is available online, at <http://www.nre.vic.gov.au/ecc/index.htm>.

Glossary of ECC Terms

Below is a glossary of terms, excerpted by MPA News, from the Environment Conservation Council's draft report *Marine Coastal & Estuarine Investigation: Draft Report for Public Comment*:

Marine National Parks are highly protected areas which contribute to a system representing the range of marine environments in Victoria, and in which no fishing, extractive or damaging activities are allowed. There are no restrictions on access, and activities such as recreation, tourism, education and research are encouraged. [Editor's note: The draft report is unclear on the legislative process by which the state of Victoria would establish a national park.]

Marine Sanctuaries are smaller highly protected areas designated for protection of their special natural values, in which no fishing, extractive or damaging activities are allowed.

Marine Special Management Areas are smaller areas designated (formally through legislation or through other management arrangements) for protection of their special natural values, in which fishing and other uses are generally allowed.

The ECC draft report also calls for the renaming of five large, existing multi-use marine areas as **Marine Conservation Parks**.

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