MPA Update: Council Releases Final Report on MPAs in Victoria

The Australian state of Victoria should set aside more than 6% of its waters in a network of "highly protected" (no-take) areas to safeguard spawning sites and other important habitats, according to the final report of an advisory council to the state government. Currently, 0.05% of Victorian waters serve as no-take areas.

The report, produced by the Environment Conservation Council (ECC) of Victoria, marks the culmination of an investigative process begun in 1991 by a preceding council. The ECC advises the Victorian government on the use of public lands; its investigation came at the government's request. Its final report incorporates stakeholder responses to a draft that the ECC released in December 1999 (MPA News 1:5).

The ECC report names sites suitable for the creation of 13 "marine national parks" and 11 smaller "marine sanctuaries". The marine national parks and marine sanctuaries would be no-take areas and would cover 630 sq. km -- 6.2% -- of Victoria's marine environment. In addition, the ECC has recommended the creation of 18 "special management areas" requiring a lower level of protection, and 12 "marine aquaculture zones".

[Editor's note: The ECC's final suggested number of marine national parks, special management areas, and marine aquaculture zones differs slightly from the number recommended in the December 1999 draft report.]

Economic impact

The ECC estimates the annual value of commercial fisheries in the recommended marine national parks and marine sanctuaries to be approximately AU $7 million (US $3.6 million), with most of the value derived from abalone fishing. The report suggests that if foregone catch could not be harvested elsewhere, the potential job loss as a result of the new no-take areas could be around 0.3% of all employment in towns located near the no-take areas.

However, the ECC expects that individual incomes would be reduced rather than jobs lost. The net effect on a town's economy is not expected to be significant, according to the report. "On balance, the ECC believes that the environmental outcomes will, in the medium term, outweigh the possible initial economic and social costs," writes the council, adding that the government could take adaptive measures to assist groups suffering as a result of the no-take areas.

Although the no-take recommendations have raised concerns among proponents of multiple-use approaches to marine management, the council states that the no-take areas in fact represent "a central component" of multiple use planning and management, with some areas set aside specifically for conservation the same way that other sites can be set aside for aquaculture, recreation, or commercial fishing.

Several organizations expressed their support for the final report's recommendations. Amanda Martin, director of the Victorian National Parks Association, said, "Victoria now has the opportunity to lead the world in establishing a comprehensive and representative system of marine national parks."

The Victorian arm of the Australian Marine Sciences Association (AMSA), a national professional organization for marine scientific research, also voiced its approval. "Marine national parks are insurance for sea life, insurance against overfishing, and insurance from imprecise fisheries science and management," said Gary Poore, an AMSA spokesperson.

For more information:

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Box: ECC final report is online

An electronic copy of the Environment Conservation Council's report, *Marine Coastal & Estuarine Investigation: Final Report*, is available online, at http://www.nre.vic.gov.au/ecc/marine/report2000.htm