

MPA NEWS



Published on MPA News (<https://mpanews.openchannels.org>)

Review Panels Release Assessments of Australia's National MPA System

In 2012, Australia's ruling Labor Government at the time [designated an extensive system of Commonwealth Marine Reserves](#), increasing the nation's MPA system from 27 sites to 60 and covering more than 3 million km² in total. Described by the Government as the most comprehensive marine park network worldwide, the system included the new Coral Sea Marine Reserve, a nearly 1 million-km² area of which half would be no-take.

The following year, a new Coalition Government was voted into power. The new leaders had campaigned against the reserve system, suggesting it had been imposed without fair or adequate consultation with industry. In response they instituted a review process to reassess the science and zoning of the new reserves. While the review process proceeded, the boundaries of the reserves remained but their management plans were effectively in limbo: their regulations remained as they were prior to designation.

The findings of the two review panels — a bioregional advisory panel and a scientific panel — were finally released in September 2016. Their reports are [here](#). The Director of National Parks is now using the reviews' recommendations, as well as feedback from an [additional public consultation on the reports](#) (ending 31 October), as the basis for preparing new draft management plans for the reserve system.

What the review panels said

In an [essay in The Conversation](#), chairs of the two review panels summarize their main recommendations, which include putting more conservation features — such as seafloor types, canyons, reef, slope, and shelf — in no-take protection. But the reviews also propose a reduction in no-take zones in the Coral Sea, from about 50% to about 41%, and that has drawn criticism from conservation groups and some academics.

Bob Pressey, a professor in conservation planning at James Cook University, says the reviews were a political process to weaken an MPA system that was already skewed toward avoiding areas popular with fishers. Under the reviews, "Fishing has expanded and 'conservation' in general further forced to the residual margins where no-take zones actually make no difference," he says. "The key lessons are that area and, to some extent, representation of features such as bioregions or seafloor types have been mistaken for measures that reflect conservation progress. They do not." He and colleagues wrote an essay with their thoughts on the Coral Sea recommendations, available [here](#).

Industry has expressed frustration with the rezoning proposals as well. The Australian Recreational Fishing Foundation says the reviews [are unnecessarily locking out anglers](#) from Australian waters and are not based on science. And a prominent commercial fishing company that targets tuna and swordfish in the Coral Sea says a Coral Sea closure beyond 20% [is unfair to business](#).

Environment Minister Josh Frydenberg says the Government anticipates new management plans for the national system will be finalized by mid-2017.

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