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Marine scientists affirm support for NSW marine parks

Marine scientists across NSW and interstate are concerned at the amount of misinformation circulating in the debate on Marine Parks in New South Wales.

More than sixty of NSW's prominent marine scientists have signed an Australian Marine Sciences Association (AMSA) position statement calling for the State Government to honour its word in establishing parks to conserve the State's marine life.

President of the NSW Branch of AMSA, Associate Professor Bill Gladstone said, "AMSA believes that marine parks, which include no-take sanctuary zones, are essential to achieving this."

"The enormous benefits of marine parks and no-take sanctuary zones for marine life and coastal communities have been demonstrated in scores of scientific studies from Australia and overseas. There is no reason to delay any longer the establishment of a comprehensive state-wide system of marine parks for NSW," Professor Gladstone said.

Sydney Institute of Marine Sciences Research Director, Professor David Booth, said the marine and estuarine environments of NSW were rich in biodiversity but at profound risk from human activities.

"Alteration of catchments causing change in the quality and quantity of water flowing to the sea, pollution, commercial and recreational fishing, coastal developments, shipping and recreational boating, introduction of exotic marine species, and human-induced climate change are causing havoc with our marine ecosystems," Professor Booth said.

"Misinformation on the evidence for, the value of, and the size of Sanctuary (no-take) areas currently circulating in the media is of concern. A major misconception is that large areas of the coast are 'locked up' when in fact fishing is prohibited in less than 7% of NSW coastal waters to protect areas of high biodiversity.

"This figure is well below world standard, which recommends at least 20% of marine habitat be protected from activities such as fishing."

Professor Booth said, "Another spurious claim is that there is no evidence for the effectiveness of marine parks to protect biodiversity and fished stocks. In fact, over 300 recent studies in Australia and overseas have affirmed the effectiveness of marine no-take areas, and some have shown fishery benefits."

Associate Professor Gladstone and Professor Booth agreed scientific research and measurement had shown that the establishment of marine sanctuaries is typically accompanied by an increase in the abundance and size of marine species, increased breeding rate in many species, and improved health of marine ecosystems.

Associate Professor Gladstone said that, "There is widespread community support for some level of marine protection. Recent business and resident surveys in the Solitary Islands and Jervis Bay Marine Parks found that more than 80% of people supported the marine parks and their sanctuary zones.

"Importantly, the levels of support for both marine parks were similar among anglers and non-anglers. Commercial and tourist business has grown substantially in both marine parks," he said.

Professor Booth said, "Sanctuaries also provide us with opportunities for education and research in natural, undisturbed settings, better understanding of marine ecosystems and opportunities to profit from non-extractive forms of recreation such as eco-tourism, benefiting regional communities.

"With fish stocks collapsing all around the world, there is no more time to waste in setting up an effective marine park system in NSW and vital sanctuary zones. We will not let the Rees government off the hook on this one," he said.

Further Information and Interviews:

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