



ORIMA

Independent Evaluation of the Implementation of Marine Park Management Plans: Final report on overall findings

**Director of National Parks
Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the
Environment and Water**

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ORIMA pays respect to First Nations peoples past and present, their cultures and traditions and acknowledges their continuing connection to Land, Sea and Community.



The ORIMA Research team would like to acknowledge and thank all the participants from across Australia who were involved in the research. Their willingness to share their experiences, engage in open and honest discussions, and reflect on strategies for improvement was critical to informing the research findings presented in this report.

This important research project was commissioned by the Director of National Parks, Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water.



*ORIMA Research is privileged to have had our First Nations Community Interviewer artwork completed by **Tristan Pwerl Duggie**. The artwork depicts ORIMA Research's core values of conducting work in an ethical manner with honesty, integrity, respect, and humility. The painting represents ORIMA's First Nations Community Interviewers humbly visiting the country and Community of other First Nations Peoples, sitting courteously with, listening with integrity, and respectfully sharing the views and thoughts of First Nations Peoples.*

Contents

1.	Executive Summary	4
2.	Introduction	10
2.1.	Background	10
2.2.	Project objectives.....	11
2.3.	Methodology.....	11
2.4.	Understanding this report.....	14
3.	Overall effectiveness of Management Plan implementation.....	16
3.1.	Overall findings	16
3.2.	Findings relating to specific programs across the five management plans.....	19
4.	Overall findings about the design of the management plans	30
4.1.	Overall appropriateness of plan design and structure	30
4.2.	Performance monitoring, reporting and review mechanisms	33
4.3.	Suggestions to improve management plan design.....	34
5.	Overall findings about the effectiveness of zoning.....	37
5.1.	Overall perceptions of zoning effectiveness.....	37
5.2.	Stakeholder perceptions of compliance with zoning regulations	39
6.	Alignment with external regulatory and management settings.....	41
6.1.	Overall findings in relation to alignment with external regulatory and management settings	41
7.	Overall findings about implementation mechanisms	43
7.1.	Balance of implementation mechanisms.....	43
7.2.	Benefits and limitations of grants.....	43
7.3.	Benefits and limitations of direct investment	45
8.	Overall effectiveness of AMPACs	47
8.1.	Overall perceptions of AMPACs.....	47
8.2.	Barriers, challenges and constraints to effective input	48
8.3.	Alternative models.....	50

8.4. Suggestions for improvement.....	51
9. Conclusions and key implications for future plan development	54
9.1. Conclusions	54
9.2. Key implications for future plan development	55
APPENDIX A: Performance assessment tools.....	57

1. Executive Summary

EVALUATION BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the implementation of the five expiring Management Plans for the Temperate East Marine Park Network, South-west Marine Park Network, North Marine Park Network, North-west Marine Park Network, and the Coral Sea Marine Park.

The evaluation was commissioned by the Commonwealth Director of National Parks, under Parks Australia and the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW), to review the progress made over the past eight years of the current Management Plans (2018–2028) and to inform the development of the next 10-year Management Plans (2028–2038).

The evaluation adopted a multi-phased approach to ensure a comprehensive and systematic assessment of the Management Plans. Key components of the methodology included:

- **Development of an evaluation framework:** ORIMA developed evaluation frameworks through an iterative process of drafting, consultation, and refinement. This included targeted workshops with Parks Australia, the Australian Marine Parks First Nations Reference Group, and the Australian Marine Parks Advisory Committees (AMPACs). The frameworks identified two core evidence sources: documentary evidence and stakeholder engagement.
- **Documentary evidence review:** key documents and data were reviewed to assess the implementation of the Management Plan actions and outcomes. Evidence included administrative data provided by Parks Australia and publicly available information.
- **Stakeholder and First Nations engagement:** a total of 195 stakeholders and First Nations peoples participated in the evaluation through 82 in-depth interviews and 15 workshops. Participants included Parks Australia staff, government agencies, industry and community groups, researchers, and First Nations partners. A flexible and culturally responsive approach was adopted to ensure meaningful engagement, including face-to-face and online sessions.

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS OF MANAGEMENT PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

The evaluation found that the implementation of the five expiring Management Plans **demonstrated positive progress** across all networks, with key achievements including the development of robust frameworks and policies, significant advancements in ecological baseline data collection, effective use of technologies, and strengthened collaboration with stakeholders and management partners, including First Nations communities.

However, a range of **challenges were also identified**, including the remote and offshore nature of many of the marine parks, which complicated management efforts and made community engagement more difficult. Gaps in socio-economic and community awareness data further hindered the ability to fully understand and address the broader impacts of marine park management. Difficulties in balancing ecological, social, and economic values were also evident, with some stakeholders expressing concerns about the prioritisation of competing interests. Engagement with First Nations peoples was not consistently effective, with some partners raising concerns about being excluded from decision-making processes. Some other stakeholder groups also expressed a desire for more effective and comprehensive engagement. Additionally, limited broader community education, communication, and engagement were identified as key gaps, alongside challenges in the effectiveness of Australian Marine Park Advisory Committee (AMPAC) process.

To improve the next cycle of Management Plans, findings from this evaluation suggest Parks Australia should **prioritise early and inclusive engagement** with First Nations partners, **address data gaps** in socio-economic and marine park awareness, and **enhance public communication and education** to build greater understanding and support. Strengthening the evidence base for decision-making, clearly communicating the rationale for management decisions, and ensuring a balanced focus on ecological, social, and economic values should further enhance the effectiveness of plan implementation.

OVERALL FINDINGS ABOUT THE DESIGN OF THE MANAGEMENT PLANS

The evaluation found that the Management Plans were **generally well-structured and provided a logical framework** for marine park management. **Adaptive management principles** enabled some flexibility to address emerging risks and priorities. However, **several limitations** were also identified, including:

- **Broad and insufficiently tailored design** – some stakeholders felt the management plans were too generalised, reducing their relevance and effectiveness, particularly for implementing place-based actions. Additionally, stakeholders questioned whether all program areas were relevant across all networks and parks (e.g. the Tourism and Visitor Experience Program).
- **Overly prescriptive elements** – while the plans provided detailed guidance, some actions were felt to be overly rigid and prescriptive, which limited the ability of Parks Australia to adapt to changing circumstances or emerging priorities. This was felt to hinder the capacity to effectively respond to unforeseen challenges or to tailor actions to the specific needs of individual parks and networks.
- **Lack of ability to effectively measure outcomes and effectiveness of actions** – outcomes were not all clearly measurable over the lifespan of the plans, making it difficult to assess progress or determine the success of actions. Stakeholders highlighted that vague, ambiguous, or poorly defined actions and outcomes, combined with the absence of clear timeframes for completion, complicated monitoring and review processes. In addition, it was felt that in some cases, the actions outlined in the plans were not well-aligned with the intended outcomes, making it difficult to achieve the desired results.
- **External impacts** – the plans primarily focused on activities within marine park boundaries, which was felt by some stakeholders to overlook the impacts of activities occurring outside these boundaries. For example, resource extraction and industrial activities in adjacent areas were felt to be negatively affecting marine park values, without appropriate recourse. Some stakeholders emphasised the need for stronger protections and enhanced collaboration across jurisdictions to effectively address these external pressures and safeguard marine park ecosystems and values.

To **improve the effectiveness of future Management Plans**, it is recommended that program areas be better tailored to the specific values, pressures, and needs of individual marine parks to ensure actions are relevant and impactful. Reducing prescriptiveness and enhancing flexibility within the plans will allow Parks Australia to better adapt to emerging risks and priorities, such as climate change and new technologies. Incorporating measurable targets and clearer program logic will improve the ability to assess progress and ensure actions are aligned with intended outcomes. Additionally, where possible seeking to strengthen protections against external impacts on marine park values, including activities outside park boundaries, will help to ensure the ecological, social, and cultural integrity of these areas – as well as the integrity of marine park management.

OVERALL FINDINGS ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ZONING

Zoning was widely recognised as an essential tool for balancing conservation objectives with sustainable use, providing a framework to regulate activities and protect marine ecosystems. However, stakeholders raised several concerns about its design and implementation, highlighting areas for improvement.

- **Zoning restrictions and placement** – some stakeholders questioned whether zoning restrictions were appropriately designed to achieve conservation objectives. Concerns were raised about the allowance of certain activities, such as oil and gas exploration, within marine parks, which some felt undermined the purpose of protected zones.
- **Unintended consequences** – while zoning restrictions inherently limited access to certain areas, some stakeholders noted feeling that these restrictions had unintended negative impacts. Commercial fishers expressed concerns about significant limitations on their industry, particularly in areas where restrictions were perceived as lacking a robust evidence base for conservation need. A few recreational fishers also felt ‘no-take’ zones created restrictions for vessel movement through these zones, which they reported had inadvertently limited access to fishing grounds beyond these zones. However, Parks Australia staff clarified that transiting through these zones was generally permitted (except in sanctuary zones), suggesting that this concern may have stemmed from a miscommunication or knowledge gap.
- **Perceived lack of consultation in zoning development** – some stakeholders, including First Nations peoples, fishers and other key user groups, felt they had not been adequately consulted during the development of zoning arrangements (which occurred prior to the commencement of the 2018 Management Plans). Transparent and inclusive consultation processes in future zoning reviews were recommended to ensure diverse perspectives are considered and to foster greater trust and support for zoning decisions.
- **Limited monitoring and evidence** – zoning decisions were not always perceived to be based on robust scientific evidence, and stakeholders highlighted a lack of perceived sufficient monitoring to assess the effectiveness of zoning in achieving conservation outcomes. This lack of evidence made it difficult to evaluate whether zoning was meeting its intended objectives. However, Parks Australia staff noted that the zones were intended to support longer term changes and improvements, which may not be measurable within eight years (i.e. since the management plans were established).
- **Lack of flexibility** – stakeholders noted that zoning restrictions were often overly rigid and did not account for localised needs or changing circumstances. They suggested that future zoning frameworks could incorporate more targeted and adaptable restrictions, such as seasonal closures, species-specific protections, or gear-specific regulations, to better balance conservation objectives with sustainable use and address the unique needs of different areas and activities. Additionally, some stakeholders felt that there should be the ability to refine boundaries and restrictions based on new information as it becomes available, ensuring zoning decisions remain adaptive and evidence based.
- **Confusion about regulations** – inconsistencies in zone colours and descriptions between Commonwealth and state/ territory marine parks were noted as creating confusion for park users, making it difficult to understand and comply with regulations. This was particularly challenging for those operating across multiple jurisdictions, such as fishers and tourism operators.

To address these concerns, stakeholders recommended **strengthening the evidence base for zoning decisions** by prioritising robust scientific data collection and ongoing monitoring to assess

effectiveness and refine boundaries as needed. Improved communication and consultation about zoning regulations, including their purpose and the evidence supporting them, would help build trust and understanding among park users. Stakeholders also suggested exploring more flexible and nuanced zoning approaches to better reflect local needs and reduce unintended consequences. Finally, where possible enhancing alignment of zoning requirements across jurisdictions would help address inconsistencies and improve compliance, particularly for those operating across multiple marine park areas.

ALIGNMENT WITH EXTERNAL REGULATORY AND MANAGEMENT SETTINGS

The evaluation found that while there was **general consistency between Australian Marine Park (AMP) regulations and adjacent marine parks**, some differences created challenges for stakeholders and park users, namely:

- **Differences between Commonwealth and state/ territory marine parks** created confusion for park users, making it difficult to understand and comply with requirements.
- **Difficulties navigating the need for multiple permits** across jurisdictions, with some feeling the system was overly bureaucratic and burdensome.
- **Fragmented management of ecosystems**, for example, zoning split across some reefs and the lack of protections in adjacent areas – which was found to hinder holistic conservation efforts.

To address these challenges, stakeholders recommended, where possible, improving the alignment in regulations across marine protected areas to simplify compliance for park users. Clearer communication about differing regulatory and licensing requirements across jurisdictions would also help stakeholders navigate the system more effectively. Additionally, strengthening collaboration with state and territory governments and other relevant agencies would support a more integrated and holistic approach to managing cross-jurisdictional impacts on marine park values.

OVERALL FINDINGS ABOUT IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISMS

The evaluation **assessed the effectiveness of grants and direct investment** as mechanisms for implementing management plans. Both mechanisms were found to have distinct strengths and limitations, that is:

- **Grants** – grants were recognised as supporting collaboration, partnerships, and innovation, as well as providing economic benefits and enabling independent research and evaluation. However, challenges were identified, including poor alignment with management plan objectives, barriers for First Nations communities and smaller operators due to complex administrative requirements, limited capacity to navigate application processes, the competitive nature of grant funding, and short funding timeframes that limited the ability to support longer-term projects.
- **Direct investment** – direct investment was felt to be beneficial in ensuring funding was directly tied to specific management plan actions and outcomes, allowing Parks Australia to maintain greater oversight and control over priority activities and the appropriateness with which these were conducted. It was also seen as an effective mechanism for supporting First Nations capacity-building and fostering longer-term relationships (including facilitating the continuation of effective and impactful projects). However, stakeholders also noted there could be challenges to securing funding for direct investment initiatives, as it was perceived to require greater and more sustained financial commitment.

To optimise implementation mechanisms, the evaluation findings suggest that Parks Australia should **continue to utilise both grants and direct investment**, with consideration given to **enhancing the use of direct investment** to ensure stronger alignment with management plan priorities and outcomes. Projects and actions under each mechanism should be clearly tied to the overarching goals of the management plans. Barriers to participation in grant programs, particularly for smaller organisations and First Nations communities, should be considered and addressed where possible, such as by reducing administrative burden, simplifying application processes, and ensuring greater accessibility. Furthermore, providing longer-term funding certainty and streamlining administrative requirements would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of both mechanisms, which should support more consistent and impactful delivery of management plan objectives.

OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS OF AMPACS

Australian Marine Park Advisory Committees (AMPACs) **were recognised as valuable for providing external expertise and diverse perspectives**. However, their effectiveness was limited by several barriers:

- **Minimal opportunities for input** – meetings were often perceived as primarily informative, with limited opportunities for members to provide advice or contribute to decision-making. While AMPAC meeting minutes showed that updates members were invited to provide input on some topics during meetings¹, the feedback from stakeholders suggests that there was a desire for greater or more meaningful opportunities for engagement.
- **Lack of follow-up** – members reported not feeling informed about how their input was used, leading to frustration and reduced confidence in the process among these participants. While AMPAC meeting minutes showed action items from previous meetings were addressed at the start of each session², the feedback from members suggests that there was a desire for more detailed or tangible feedback in relation to how their advice had been used.
- **Unclear goals and expectations** – a few AMPAC members felt that there was a lack of clarity about their role and the objectives of the committees (i.e. that the committee's primary focus was to provide advice on implementing the management plan), which hindered their ability to provide meaningful input. While Parks Australia staff noted that this information was outlined in the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the AMPACs, this suggests that there may be greater scope to raise member's awareness of this information or communicate about the role of AMPACs and expectations of members in other ways.
- **Member turnover** – high turnover among members limited continuity and the ability to build historical context and institutional knowledge.
- **Resourcing constraints** – Parks Australia staff reported challenges in supporting AMPACs due to limited staff and budgetary capacity as well as limited availability of members to respond to communications or requests which affected the frequency and quality of engagement.

To improve the effectiveness of AMPACs, Parks Australia should seek to set clear goals and expectations for the committees and their members, ensuring that their roles and objectives are well-defined. Communication with AMPAC members could be enhanced through regular updates, clearer requests for advice and feedback on how their input has been used to inform decision-

¹ Various AMPAC meeting minutes and meeting papers: Internal documents

² Various AMPAC meeting minutes and meeting papers: Internal documents

making. However, Parks Australia should carefully consider resourcing constraints when implementing changes, ensuring that any improvements to communication and engagement are balanced with available staff and budgetary capacity. While there was clear appetite for greater engagement among many AMPAC members, the capacity of members as volunteers should also be considered.

CONCLUSIONS

The **evaluation found that the current management plans have made significant progress** in achieving their objectives, particularly in areas such as ecological data collection, authorisations, assessments and compliance, and stakeholder collaboration. However, challenges remain, including gaps in socio-economic and community awareness data, difficulties in balancing ecological, social, and economic values, and limitations in engagement with First Nations partners and the broader community. Issues such as zoning design, alignment with external regulatory settings, and the effectiveness of implementation mechanisms and AMPACs were also identified as areas with opportunities for improvement.

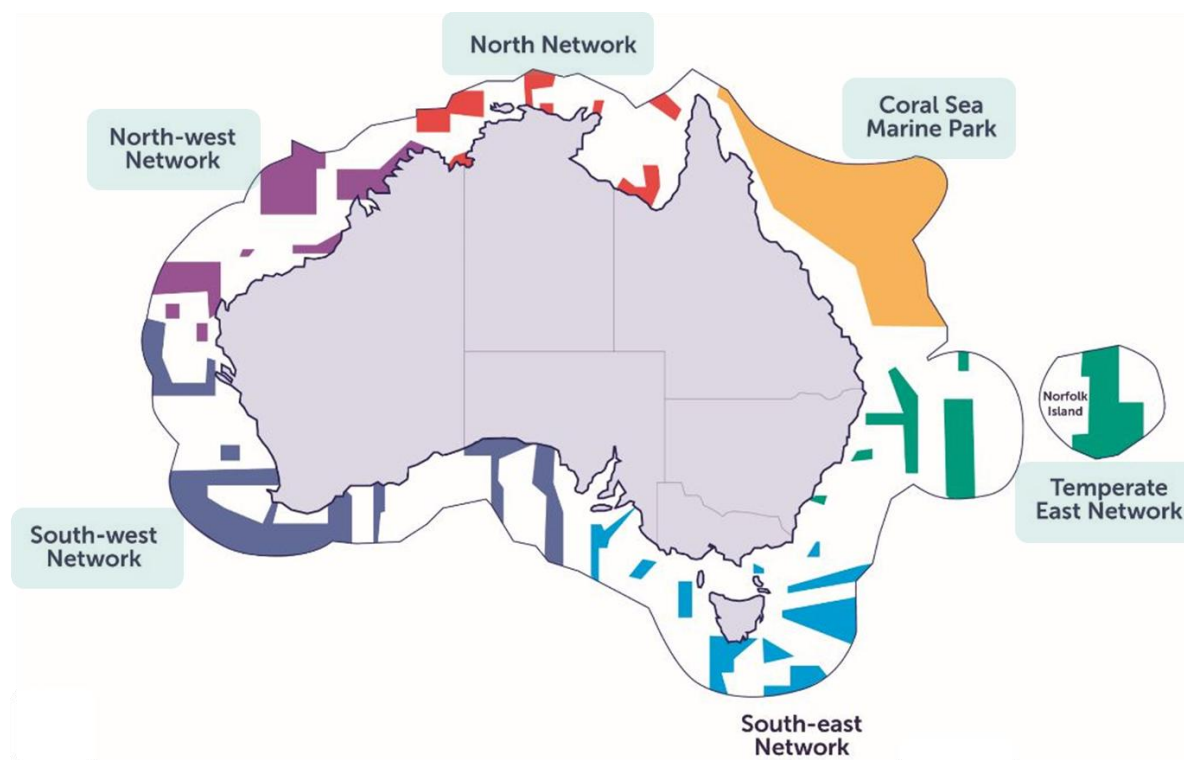
To **build on learnings from the current plans and enhance effectiveness, adaptability and inclusivity for the next cycle** of management plans, Parks Australia should prioritise early and meaningful engagement with First Nations partners, ensuring their perspectives and Cultural Knowledge are embedded into decision-making through co-management approaches. Strengthening the evidence base for decision-making and improving communication and transparency with stakeholders and the broader community should help to strengthen trust and collaboration. Tailoring program areas to the specific values and pressures of individual parks, enhancing flexibility in management approaches, and addressing barriers to participation in grant programs will further support the delivery of impactful and inclusive outcomes.

2. Introduction

2.1. Background

To safeguard the health of Australia's waters, and the variety of ocean life that inhabits them, the Australian and state and territory governments designate Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) – regions of the ocean where human activity is restricted and regulated to protect marine life and ecosystems. Over half of Australia's waters are protected within MPAs, placing Australia as a world leader in marine protection (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Australian Marine Park Networks



The Commonwealth Director of National Parks (the Director) sits within Parks Australia and the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy the Environment and Water (DCCEEW). One of the Director's roles is to manage MPAs (and all other Commonwealth reserves) in accordance with the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). The EPBC Act mandates the preparation of 'Management Plans' to guide the governance and regulation of MPAs, to be renewed every ten years. These plans contain a range of 'management programs', each of which covers a number of priority areas listing planned outcomes and specific actions to be undertaken in the pursuit of these outcomes.

The Management Plans for the four Australian Marine Park (AMP) networks and the Coral Sea Marine Park (as shown highlighted in teal in Figure 1) are scheduled to expire in mid-2028, requiring the completion of two processes beforehand:

1. **An independent evaluation of the implementation of the five 2018 Management Plans** – providing a retrospective look at how the Plans have been implemented in practice since 2018.
2. **The preparation of new Management Plans for the next 10-year cycle (2028-2038).**

ORIMA Research was commissioned to conduct the independent evaluation of the implementation of the current Management Plans. The evaluation drew on a range of evidence sources, including a

review of collated documentary evidence provided by Parks Australia and engagement with a range of stakeholders as well as First Nations peoples. The outcomes of this evaluation, alongside a range of other consultations and activities, will contribute to the second process – the development of new Management Plans for the next 10-year cycle.

2.2. Project objectives

The overarching aim of the project was to **conduct an independent evaluation of the implementation of the five expiring Management Plans** (with this report focusing on the overall evaluation questions). More specifically, the evaluation sought to:



Facilitate the generation of collectively agreed evaluation frameworks, and methods for evaluating the Management Plan program's implementation.



Engage with stakeholders and First Nations peoples to understand and define their metrics of satisfaction with the implementation of the plan.



Address a range of key evaluation questions, with a key focus on assessing the performance of planned actions listed in each management program and progress towards the intended outcomes to assign completion status, trend and effectiveness ratings.



Provide recommendations to inform the preparation of the next Management Plans (including but not limited to recommendations for goals, desired outcomes and actions).

This evaluation forms just one part of the review of the expiring management plans and development of new plans. Key directions for the review were outlined prior to the evaluation (including ensuring 30% of Australia's ocean is highly protected and limiting intensive activities). Subsequent statutory review processes are also planned.³

2.3. Methodology

The methodology for this project adopted a multi-phased approach as depicted in Figure 2, incorporating sequential stages to ensure a comprehensive and systematic evaluation process.

Figure 2: Methodology Overview



³ Review of the 2018 Australian Marine Park management plans:
<https://australianmarineparks.gov.au/management/consultations-reviews/review-2018-australian-marine-park-management-plans/>

2.3.1. Development of evaluation frameworks

The evaluation frameworks were developed through an iterative, structured process of drafting, consultation and refinement. Initial development was led by ORIMA, whereby a draft framework was developed based on each of the network Management Plans and program logic. This was followed by a series of targeted workshops with Parks Australia, the Australian Marine Parks First Nations Reference Group and Australian Marine Parks Advisory Committee (AMPAC) members. Written feedback from AMPAC members was also provided and incorporated where relevant. This process ensured the frameworks were methodologically robust, contextually appropriate and aligned with stakeholder expectations.

The evaluation frameworks identified two core evidence sources:

- **Documentary evidence** – sourced through administrative data provided by Parks Australia and a desktop review conducted by ORIMA Research.
- **Stakeholder and First Nations peoples engagement** – undertaken by ORIMA Research.

2.3.2. Desktop review

During the desktop review process, key documents and data sources were collected as evidence to assess the implementation of the Management Plan actions and outcomes for each network. Some documents and data sources were supplied by the Parks Australia project team while others were sourced via desktop searches of publicly available information.

Documentary evidence that directly demonstrated the fulfilment of actions and outcomes was prioritised in the desktop review (e.g. policy documentation, official reports or media activities). Where direct evidence was absent or insufficient, indirect evidence was also used (that is, references to activity conducted to fulfil actions and outcomes without clear evidence of the activity itself, such as AMPAC meeting communiqués noting discussion of activities conducted to fulfil actions and outcomes; or self-reported evidence in self-assessment documents). Key findings and evidence points were recorded against the evaluation framework and reviewed to build an initial evidence base for the evaluation of actions and outcomes. For actions and outcomes where insufficient evidence was provided, requests for data were compiled and submitted to Parks Australia.

ETHICS ASSESSMENT AND APPROVAL

Prior to the commencement of the external stakeholder engagement, the project was submitted for review by the ORIMA Research's NMHRC approved Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) to ensure the evaluation was conducted in an ethical, safe and culturally responsive manner. Ethics approval was granted on 4 February 2026: HREC Reference Number 0012026.

2.3.3. Stakeholder and First Peoples engagement

TARGET AUDIENCE

The target audience for the engagement was stakeholders and First Nations peoples with experience or expertise relevant to either marine parks nationally or by each network.

The following stakeholder groups were targeted for engagement:

- Parks Australia staff
- Government agencies (both federal and state/ territory agencies)
- Industry and community groups, such as:
 - Commercial fishing industry representatives
 - Recreational fishing and boating groups

- Tourism operators
- Conservation/ environmental organisations
- Industry representatives (including from shipping, offshore energy and space/ technology industries)
- Researchers and data custodians, and
- AMPAC members and members of the Australian Marine Parks First Nations Reference Group.⁴

In addition, engagement was conducted with First Nations peoples and partners, including Traditional Owner groups and stakeholders who were able to speak about Sea Country as relevant to the evaluation.

SAMPLE DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Comprehensive stakeholder mapping was undertaken based on the findings from desk research on relevant individuals and organisations, and consultation with Parks Australia staff, AMPAC committee members and members of the Australian Marine Parks First Nations Reference Group.

Stakeholder engagement was conducted between 26 February and 14 May 2026. A total of **n=195** stakeholders and First Nations peoples participated in the evaluation of the five expiring Marine Park Management Plans, via **82 in-depth interviews** of up to one hour⁵ and **15 workshops** of up to two hours in duration.⁶

ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

To support the discussions, ORIMA developed a comprehensive discussion guide aligned with the evaluation objectives. A flexible and adaptive approach was applied during discussions to ensure the collection of meaningful data and insights, while also allowing stakeholders the opportunity to share their views and perspectives. It was important to establish which evaluation questions were most applicable to each participant. To assist with this, participants were invited to complete a short questionnaire ahead of their interview or workshop to nominate the scope and areas of their involvement in marine parks, as well as to provide initial feedback in relation to relevant management program areas.

Most sessions were conducted online. However, stakeholders were also given the opportunity to participate in face-to-face sessions in Perth, Darwin and on Norfolk Island. While face-to-face sessions were offered in Adelaide, Cairns and Sydney, stakeholders in these locations chose to engage online instead.

ASSUMPTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

In conducting this evaluation, a range of assumptions were made, and several potential research limitations were identified. While action has been taken to ensure the robustness of any assumptions and minimise the impact of potential limitations on the evaluation, these should nonetheless be considered when interpreting the findings:

- **Accuracy of documentary evidence** – the evaluation assumes that administrative data and documentation provided by Parks Australia accurately reflect the timing, scope and completion of reported outputs.

⁴ AMPAC and First Nations Refence Group members were also consulted during the project establishment and evaluation framework development stages as advisory groups for the project.

⁵ In a small number of cases, stakeholders elected to complete their interview by providing feedback in writing.

⁶ Workshop (WS), n=up to 10 people; In-depth interview (IDI), n=up to 3 participants)

- **Representativeness of consulted stakeholders** – based on the stakeholder mapping conducted, it is assumed that the engaged stakeholders reasonably reflect the diversity of perspectives across user groups, jurisdictions and regions across the networks and parks. Where key stakeholder groups were unable to be engaged as part of the evaluation, this has been noted in the limitations section below.

The following **potential research limitations** were identified:

- **Some limitations in the coverage of stakeholder participation** – the stakeholder engagement process faced challenges in ensuring comprehensive representation, with certain groups underrepresented due to factors such as lack of availability to attend sessions, being on leave during the research period, or not responding to participation requests.
- **Reliance on stakeholder perceptions due to data gaps** – in the absence of consistent, outcome-level monitoring data across program areas, some parts of the evaluation relied more heavily on stakeholder perceptions and qualitative evidence to assess implementation effectiveness and outcomes.
- **Variability in data availability across networks** – the availability and quality of documentary evidence varied between program areas, limiting the ability to assess implementation consistently.

2.4. Understanding this report

NOTES ON INTERPRETATION

- All acronyms used in this report have been specified the first time they are used in each chapter.
- When the term ‘stakeholders’ is used, it refers to all types of stakeholders consulted in the project. When findings pertain to a specific group of stakeholders only, this has been specified (e.g. AMPAC members, Parks Australia staff, First Nations peoples and partners).
- The terms ‘none’, ‘a few’, ‘many’, ‘most’ and ‘all’ have been used to refer to the proportion of stakeholders consulted who expressed a certain opinion or perspective. These terms are defined in the ‘Stakeholder engagement metrics’ section of Appendix A.

OVERALL EVALUATION QUESTIONS

This report aims to provide **overarching answers to key evaluation questions** developed to guide the assessment at the whole-of-plan level. These questions were initially drafted by ORIMA and refined through consultation with Parks Australia, the Australian Marine Parks First Nations Reference Group, and AMPAC members. The key evaluation questions were:

1. **Were the management programs in this Management Plan implemented effectively?** (Including the extent to which Management Plan actions and outcomes were achieved).
2. **To what extent was the design of the Management Plans effective?** (Including level of detail, whether effective monitoring, reporting and review mechanisms were in place, adaptability to emerging risks and priorities).
3. **To what extent do stakeholders perceive the activities occurring in zones to be consistent with zone objectives,** at an overall level?
4. Based on stakeholder perceptions, **how well aligned was the implementation of the plans with external regulatory settings and management activities?**
5. **To what extent do stakeholders perceive that there was an effective and efficient balance between the use of grants and other implementation mechanisms** in addressing Management Plan objectives?

6. What lessons can we learn for future Management Plans?

Together, they provide a framework for synthesising findings across programs and plans.

This report should be read alongside the individual Management Plan evaluation reports for the Temperate East Network, South-west Network, North Network, North-west Network and the Coral Sea.

Quality and Compliance Statement

This project was conducted in accordance with the international quality standard ISO 20252, the international information security standard ISO 27001, as well as the Australian Privacy Principles contained in the Privacy Act 1988 (Cth). ORIMA Research also adheres to the Privacy (Market and Social Research) Code 2021 administered by the Australian Data and Insights Association (ADIA).

3. Overall effectiveness of Management Plan implementation

*This chapter outlines the findings on the **overall effectiveness of management plan implementation across the five expiring plans**. It begins with a summary of key findings, highlighting strengths and challenges identified during the evaluation. This is followed by a comparative assessment of the seven management programs across the five plans. For more detailed findings relating to the implementation effectiveness across the different parks, please refer to each individual marine park network/ marine park report.*

3.1. Overall findings

Overall, positive progress in implementing the actions and achieving the intended outcomes was demonstrated across management programs for each of the networks in-scope for this evaluation.

The evaluation identified a **range of strengths and achievements** in relation to the overall implementation of the management plans across networks, including the following:

- **Development of robust and structured frameworks, strategies and policies** – such as the ‘Communication, Education and Awareness Strategy’ and the ‘Australian Marine Parks Assessment and Authorisations Policy’, both of which provided clear guidance for implementing effective actions throughout the duration of the plan.
 - However, the ‘First Nations Engagement and Cultural Heritage Strategy’ was noted as not having been completed, and the ‘Australian Marine Parks Science Strategy’ was subsumed into a broader science strategy, with stakeholder feedback suggesting that clearer strategies could go some way to assisting in overcoming shortcomings in these program areas.
- **Progress in ecological baseline data collection** – which provided critical insights into the natural values and pressures across the Networks. These data also supported evidence-based decision-making and adaptive management, ensuring actions were informed by robust scientific evidence where possible.

“There have been a lot of great individual programs that have given good information to inform the next review, and the next stage of the management plans. We have enough information and partnerships – scientific, community and governmental – to develop the suite of parameters to continuously monitor moving forward. I think that’s the goal of where we want to get to.” – Stakeholder, South-west Network”

- **Collaboration and partnerships with First Nations communities, the science community, private enterprise and government agencies** – it was noted that there had been improvements in communication and collaboration with a range of stakeholders and organisations to support the management plans’ implementation, which had been beneficial for enhancing the effectiveness of implementation. Some examples noted through the evaluation included partnerships with Norfolk Island stakeholders in the Temperate East Network, tailored engagement efforts with the Kimberley Indigenous Saltwater Advisory Group (ISWAG) in the North-west Network, and collaborations with the National Environmental Science Program (NESP) and the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS). Additionally, partnerships to extend the reach of management activities (e.g. collaborative compliance, surveillance and enforcement activities) were also found to support achievement of management plan actions and outcomes with the resources available to Parks Australia.

In the North network, First Nations partners highlighted the following effective elements of Parks Australia's culturally responsive and appropriate engagement efforts:

- **Regular, respectful and informative face-to-face meetings on Country**, including in remote areas where some Traditional Owner groups resided.
- **Regular communication with trusted community representatives and leaders**, who were able to convey information to and from community on a more dynamic basis.
- An **emphasis on establishing sustainable, longer-term relationships with Traditional Owner groups** to ensure long-term success in engagement.
- **Flexible timeframes** to account for the necessary 'trust building' phase of any meaningful engagement with Traditional Owner groups.
- An emphasis on **shared priority for protecting ecological, social and cultural values**.

"We have meetings [with Parks Australia] here on Country... they bring the right lot of Mob to come and talk about the upcoming issues, and they will go out with the boys to a particular site to do what needs to be done. We can only thank them for making the time and effort and budget to come and do the meetings. Some agencies out there don't have the budget or time to come out and discuss the up-and-coming matters with Traditional Owners. To make it a bigger, better coastline, it's about working together and holding hands." – First Nations partner, North-west Network"

- **Effective use of innovative technologies** – including Autonomous Underwater Vehicles (AUVs), Baited Remote Underwater Video Systems (BRUVS), and drop cameras, which were found to be effective in collecting high-quality ecological data and advancing marine science capabilities.
- **Effective assessments, authorisations and compliance activities** – supported by the timely implementation of a range of policies, procedures and partnerships to support achievement of the relevant management program areas. For example, the introduction of Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) and targeted enforcement operations were felt to have increased overall compliance, demonstrating the success of the application of risk-based approaches and innovative technologies.

However, a number of **limitations** were also identified through the evaluation, including:

- **Remote and offshore nature of many of the marine parks** – the isolated and deep-sea nature of many of the parks made certain elements of implementation challenging, particularly for tourism, monitoring, compliance, communication and stakeholder engagement. Limited accessibility coupled with resource constraints further hindered management of these parks. In the North Network, dangerous fauna was also noted as a challenge for implementation, particularly for tourism, monitoring, and compliance program areas.
- **Engagement with Traditional Owners, First Nations partners, organisations and users was not fully effective** – while a range of efforts were identified to meaningfully engage First Nations peoples (as noted above), it was felt by some First Nations partners that meaningful collaboration and best-practice co-management approaches were not always adopted, which reduced the ability of First Nations peoples to contribute their Cultural Knowledge and expertise to marine park management. First Nations partners wanted to be engaged earlier in the process, ideally prior to project commissioning, to ensure their priorities were embedded in decision-making.

A few First Nations partners also reported that activities were not always inclusive of all relevant First Nations partners or Traditional Owners with the necessary Cultural and Sea Country Knowledge. For those who felt excluded, the impacts were significant, with a few reporting that they felt "silenced" and excluded from managing their Sea Country – a cultural responsibility

they carried for their ancestors and future generations. Challenges in addressing contested areas and balancing the interests of different groups was acknowledged through the evaluation. To address these challenges, those who participated in the engagement suggested the use of up-to-date, impartial mapping of relevant groups and partners, clear communication between Parks Australia staff and community members, and the establishment of informal engagement avenues with First Nations peoples, to enable inclusive participation.

- **Gaps in data for some program areas** – limited visibility of progress, including reviews and outcomes, was identified as a barrier to assessing the effectiveness of the Management Plans. Across the parks and networks, stakeholders noted that the lack of scientific data available at the time the plans were established constrained the extent to which decision-making could be evidence-based. In addition, the limited collection of specific data, such as socio-economic data and marine park awareness and perceptions data hindered a comprehensive understanding of progress and/ or the ability to assess the broader impacts of marine park management (whilst also reducing the ability to make informed decisions that balanced environmental, social and economic outcomes). Addressing these data gaps will be critical to ensuring accurate measures of the management plans' implementation and outcomes can be achieved going forward.
- **Appropriately balancing protection of ecological, social and economic values** – the evaluation found that balancing competing stakeholder interests will be an ongoing challenge, with a range of diverse views identified in relation to the balance of protection for ecological and other values. For example, some stakeholders felt that additional work was required to effectively protect ecological values (e.g. to support greater protection of biodiversity). However, others felt that the management plan and associated zoning restrictions were overly restrictive (e.g. requiring challenging authorisations processes for simple and non-invasive scientific activities such as water sampling or restricting fishing activities in areas where these activities were not felt to compromise marine park values). While balancing competing stakeholder perspectives will be an ongoing challenge, clearly and transparently communicating the evidence-based rationale for management decisions should go some way to addressing these concerns. They reported limited opportunities for meaningful communication and collaboration, which reduced their ability to contribute to marine park management.

"While the research has not been exclusively about finding more things to protect, it has been predominantly oriented toward ecological values, biodiversity characterisation, pressures, and management-effectiveness tied to natural values. Social and economic research is important and has been present, but it appears smaller in volume, later in timing, and more foundational or benchmark-setting than mature, long-running, outcome-focused monitoring. On that basis, I would characterise the last ten years as ecologically led rather than genuinely balanced." – Stakeholder, South-west Network

- **Limited effectiveness of the Australian Marine Park Advisory Committee (AMPAC) process** – AMPAC and network committee members as well as Parks Australia staff raised concerns about the effectiveness of the current advisory committee model, with stakeholder feedback suggesting the committees may not be achieving their intended role in contributing to marine park management. However, the need for ongoing and in-depth engagement with a range of stakeholders was acknowledged, suggesting that a more inclusive and collaborative approach could better capture diverse stakeholder perspectives for consideration in decision-making processes (see Chapter 8 of this report for more detail).

"I think it's important to maintain the process of consultation, and the opportunity for input is probably even more important to maintain. Having the opportunity to touch base is an important trust factor. Keeping the committee in place is important and having review processes in place for community to see." – Stakeholder, North Network

- **Limited communication and engagement with the broader community** – while efforts to engage specific stakeholder groups were noted, the evaluation found that broader community engagement remained an important gap. Many stakeholders highlighted the need for increased public awareness and education about marine parks, including their purpose, management, and benefits. It was felt that improved outreach and communication strategies targeting broader park users and the general public could help foster a greater understanding of marine park values, build support for management decisions, and encourage community participation in conservation efforts.

3.2. Findings relating to specific programs across the five management plans

The specific program grades indicated positive progress overall, with variations observed across different networks, parks, and program areas. The evaluation found that these differences were largely driven by variations in the allocation of priorities, resources and efforts across the networks and parks. However, some were also attributed to unique circumstances within specific networks or particular strengths and challenges experienced during implementation.

3.2.1. Communications, Education and Awareness Program



The evaluation of the Communication, Education and Awareness Program across the five marine parks revealed some overall progress, with the program outcomes consistently rated as ‘partially met’ and actions assessed as ‘good with some concerns’ across most networks. While several planned actions were completed or ongoing, a significant proportion were only partially completed, reflecting common challenges such as the remoteness of many marine parks and difficulties in effectively communicating with the broader community.

"I know all the marine parks are set up with good, sound reasoning. But it's not always easy to communicate that, not only to Indigenous groups or the Board, but the wider public as well. I just don't think there's been any great effort made. It's been 'plonk, you have a marine park now', and nothing beyond that." – Stakeholder, South-west Network

"I think it's about taking on a more collaborative approach [to communication] with other management and science agencies and institutes, state and nationally. We don't all want to be working in silos.... What can other government and non-government agencies bring, how can we have conduits for that information to be provided, and then where are the knowledge gaps and how can we support funding to address the knowledge gaps? – Stakeholder, North-west and South-west Networks

"I think the number one thing [for Parks Australia] is to stay connected to their user group audiences like rec fishers, through their trusted knowledge holders like OzFish or Australian Recreational Fishing Foundation – the peak bodies. We're quite often in there bridging that gap between something that

the government has legislated and then what happens in reality, on the ground, and what the community thinks about that.” – Stakeholder, Across all parks

Key differences in program implementation were observed across the networks:

- South-west Network – demonstrated efforts to engage the broader public through collaborative initiatives, such as the Marine Discovery Centre at Busselton Jetty.
- Temperate East Network – effectively engaged specific groups, such as recreational fishers, and built relationships with stakeholders on Norfolk Island through targeted resources and educational efforts.
- North-west Network – achieved successes in targeted communications at key sites like Ningaloo Reef, supported by online resources and partnerships with organisations such as Recfishwest.
- North Network – Parks Australia’s culturally appropriate communication with First Nations peoples was widely commended.
- Coral Sea Network – although the program was reported to be a lower priority by Parks Australia staff, collaborations with Cairns Aquarium and James Cook University (JCU) were highlighted as effective in delivering engagement activities.

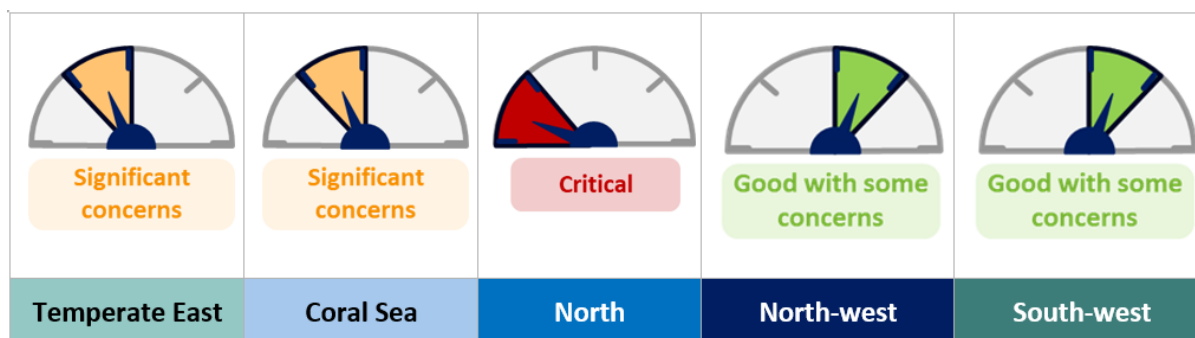
While the communications program was broadly effective across the parks, the evaluation identified significant opportunities to enhance the communication of management plans, zoning, progress, and the evidence and rationale behind decision-making. Strengthening transparency through improved communication and engagement was considered critical for building trust, understanding and support for marine park management.

There was a clear appetite for further information among more engaged members of the public, with several stakeholders expressing a willingness to assist in sharing and disseminating this information. However, building understanding and awareness among the broader community was identified as a key gap, with stakeholders suggesting that clearly measuring and tracking this awareness (e.g. through a general population survey) would be valuable to better understand public perceptions and inform future communication strategies.

"There is a massive lack of education and community awareness building across the board. I see absolutely no evidence of it. Education is the absolute key to all of this. People need to know what is going on. The vast majority of people in NSW never get in the water... there is a need for people to understand what is going on down there.” – Stakeholder, Temperate East Network

Additionally, stakeholders noted that some of the actions in this management program were “unrealistic” or challenging to achieve, particularly given the public’s limited engagement in offshore marine parks (e.g. the action ‘Maximise the use of new technologies and partnerships (including with schools, universities, museums and non-government organisations) to inspire people of all ages to become involved in marine park management and protection’), and suggested refining actions in the future to be better tailored to the unique context of the marine parks.

3.2.2. Tourism and Visitor Experience Program



The evaluation of the Tourism and Visitor Experience Program across the five marine parks revealed mixed progress, with outcomes ranging from ‘not met’ or ‘unknown’ in some networks to ‘substantially met’ in others. While several planned actions were completed or ongoing, many were only partially completed or not commenced – largely noted as being due to the limited tourism opportunities in certain parks.

The North-west Network demonstrated notable strengths, with effective collaboration and partnerships with state and local tourism authorities and operators facilitating the promotion of tourism opportunities and supporting data sharing for monitoring activities. In the South-west Network, efforts focused on ‘onshore’ visitor engagement, including through the exhibition at the Marine Discovery Centre at Busselton Jetty and the information installation at Flinders Chase Visitor Centre on Kangaroo Island.

"Busselton Jetty received a grant for an interpretive centre, a Marine Discovery Centre. That was a strategic project for Parks, as Busselton is the closest proximity to a national park zone in all of the networks. It was an over-the-horizon type experience they were looking for, and it was a really good project. The Discovery Centre used footage collected under other parks grant programmes from the Perth Canyon through to Geographe and down to the South-west corner." – Stakeholder, South-west Network

The Temperate East Network provided a positive example of First Nations involvement through the ‘Sharing our Sea Country’ project, where relationships with the Ngiyambandigay Wajaarr Aboriginal Corporation extended beyond the project period.

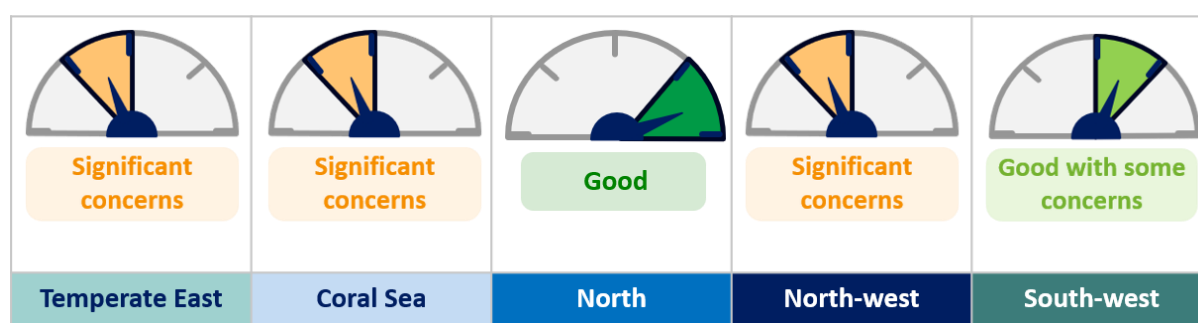
In contrast, the Coral Sea Marine Park and North Network faced challenges due to limited tourism potential and visitation opportunities. In both areas, the program was determined as a lesser priority, with its relevance to the network’s values assessed as more limited (in the case of the North Network, this decision was made based on advice from the North Marine Park Advisory Committee [NMPAC]). However, collaboration with Cairns Aquarium in the Coral Sea Marine Park was recognised as an innovative way to engage the community without relying on direct visitation. Through the evaluation, some tourism stakeholders suggested that Parks Australia could enhance its engagement and collaboration with operators by fostering stronger relationships and more actively encouraging eco-tourism opportunities.

"We are a nation surrounded by water, so the potential to share the natural and cultural values of these Marine Parks is really high. [Parks Australia] need to maintain a really strong and close relationship with [tourism] operators, because they're the ones telling the story. It's not just their business, it's their whole life, it's their lifestyle, so there is no better ambassador for Marine Parks than the operators in the marine parks every single day." – Stakeholder, Temperate East Network

"Fundamentally, the strategy is about managing tourism impacts in a quite a passive way, as opposed to planning for sustainable tourism outcomes... there is not a lot of blue sky thinking" – Stakeholder, North-West Network

However, many stakeholders questioned the prominence and focus placed on tourism as an individual program area within the management plans. It was suggested that some outcomes attributed to tourism, such as raising awareness of the natural and cultural values of marine parks, could be more effectively achieved through broader communication and engagement efforts targeting the general public. Additionally, stakeholders noted that certain social and economic benefits associated with marine parks were not unique to the tourism industry and could also be achieved through other sectors, such as commercial and recreational fishing opportunities. Some stakeholders also questioned the alignment of the program with the broader values of marine parks.

3.2.3. Indigenous Engagement Program



The evaluation of the Indigenous Engagement Program across the five marine parks and networks revealed the largest range of results of any of the program areas, with outcomes ranging from 'critical' to 'fully met'. While several planned actions were completed or ongoing, many were only partially completed or not commenced, reflecting challenges such as the complexity of implementing culturally responsive engagement across diverse and remote regions.

The North Network demonstrated the strongest outcomes, with the program rated as 'good' and its implementation widely commended by First Nations partners and non-Indigenous stakeholders. Parks Australia's deliberate, time-rich approach to engagement, including regular face-to-face meetings on Country and ongoing communication with trusted community leaders, was highlighted as a key strength of the North Network, building trust and strong, meaningful relationships.

"[Parks Australia] have helped us in a lot of ways. They supported us to set up a corporation through funding, and also consulting help with a Healthy Country Plan. They have had big meetings on Country, and a lot of workshops on Country and in community. They'll go out and talk to 60 people, listening, asking questions, and we also always have catchup meetings on Teams and are always talking together" – First Nations partner, North Network

The South-west Network was rated as 'good with some concerns', with stakeholders acknowledging the respectful and culturally responsive approach of Parks Australia staff. However, some stakeholders expressed dissatisfaction with the level of consultation and collaboration, noting that engagement was not always sufficient to ensure meaningful involvement. Additionally, some First Nations participants reported feeling excluded from management decisions despite being recognised as Traditional Owners, which limited their ability to contribute their Cultural Knowledge and expertise to marine park management.

"We wanted more than just an acknowledgement of Country, which is standard stuff, but real understanding of the significance of Traditional Owners. We represent the peoples living along the coast and how they interact with their marine environment. We don't feel there was any great acknowledgement of that, we don't feel there's been a lot of consultation. We didn't have Parks Australia staff here talking to Elders... we would love to do things collaboratively, but the opportunity hasn't been presented to us." – First Nations partner, South-west Network

The North-west Network was assessed as having 'significant concerns', with outcomes rated as 'partially met'. Stakeholders noted positive examples of culturally responsive engagement, such as meetings held on Country and support for Ranger groups. However, concerns were raised about the accessibility of funding and the need for Traditional Owners to take a proactive approach to secure their involvement in marine park management. This was seen as a barrier for some groups, who may lack the resources or capacity to engage effectively.

"We had to apply for funding to essentially get a foothold to be a part of that management. It took a pro-active approach to get involved in management. If you're a [Traditional Owner] group who hasn't made that application, you could go many years without ever really engaging with Parks Australia at all, and therefore not getting involved in management of your Country at all" – First Nations partner, North-west Network

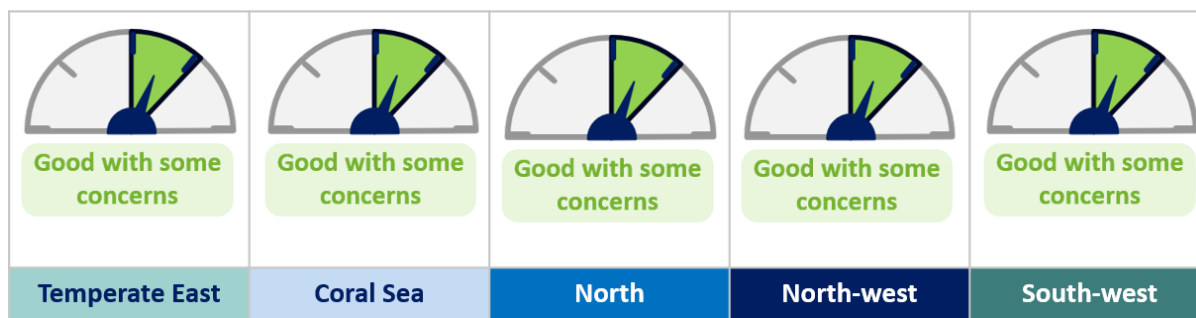
The Temperate East Network was similarly assessed as having 'significant concerns', with outcomes rated as 'partially met'. While efforts to engage First Nations peoples through initiatives such as training and support for Ranger groups and the development of educational resources were noted, stakeholders felt that these efforts were insufficient to ensure meaningful collaboration and co-management.

The Coral Sea Marine Park also faced challenges, with the program rated as having 'significant concerns and outcomes assessed as 'partially met'. Feedback from First Nations partners was limited, but Parks Australia staff reported positive initial steps in building relationships with the Meriam peoples of Murray (Mer) Island, supported by the establishment of a dedicated First Nations engagement role. However, a Traditional Owner from this community reported limited awareness of, or engagement with, these efforts to date.

"Enough is enough. If you want to walk in our waters, if you want to do research in our waters, you have to tell us first... Come face-to-face, and we will make a common agreement. Don't make decisions without the Traditional Owners, make decisions with Traditional Owners and hear what they have to say." First Nations partner, Coral Sea

Across the networks, opportunities were identified to embed early engagement with First Nations communities and ensure culturally responsive and adequate engagement practices. Stakeholders emphasised that genuine co-management of the parks should be prioritised, rather than focusing solely on engaging First Nations partners on decisions already made by Parks Australia. While some networks demonstrated promising examples of collaboration and relationship-building, significant gaps were identified in others. Addressing these gaps will be essential to enabling First Nations peoples to contribute their Cultural Knowledge and expertise to marine park management in a manner that fully respects their rights, responsibilities, and connection to Sea Country.

3.2.4. Marine Science Program



The evaluation of the Marine Science Program across the five marine parks and networks revealed relatively positive progress. Program outcomes were consistently rated as ‘partially met’ and actions assessed as ‘good with some concerns’ across most networks. While several planned actions were completed or ongoing, many were only partially completed.

Key strengths and achievements were identified across all networks, particularly in the establishment of baseline ecological datasets. Significant progress was made in enhancing understanding of ecological values, with stakeholders and Parks Australia staff highlighting a substantial increase in ecological knowledge since the plans began. Across most of the networks, however, less progress had been made in the establishment of social and economic datasets (although it was noted that more progress had been made in the South-west Network than in others). Additionally, in the North Network, stakeholders noted that approaches to addressing this need were sometimes perceived as ‘ad-hoc’ and opportunistic, rather than being tailored to the context or management priorities of the network.

“I don't think that [Parks Australia] have got a good baseline for future management, to be honest. I think that, particularly for the North Network, there was hardly any data available to start with, so they've done really well with the money that they've had, but we really need to see a synthesis of that data, which hasn't been done yet with all the data they've got.” – Stakeholder, North Network

Collaboration emerged as a consistent strength across the networks. Parks Australia were felt to have successfully built partnerships with research institutions, government agencies, First Nations partners, and marine park users to progress program actions. These collaborations were noted as instrumental in maximising data collection and improving understanding of marine park management. However, stakeholders noted that while Parks Australia has been effective in engaging with the scientific community, broader interaction and communication of findings to other stakeholders (including those in the commercial and recreational fishing sectors) and the general public remained limited. This was seen as a missed opportunity to build wider understanding and support for marine park management.

“I think the [Parks Australia] team have increased knowledge of baselines, but it's a niche community that are aware of the work they are doing. Parks are good at communicating with marine scientists, but it would be good for broader stakeholders to know what's going on... [through] a document that anybody can interact with, or they could hold a workshop presenting what they have learned in the programs they have been running” – Stakeholder, North Network

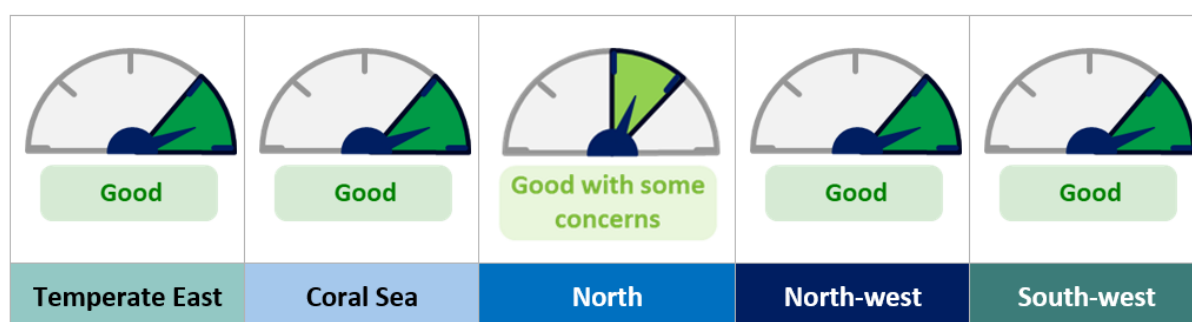
The evaluation also highlighted the need for a more adaptive approach to management, with stakeholders emphasising the importance of using new information to refine zoning, permitted activities, and management actions to ensure the program remains responsive to emerging challenges and opportunities. Clearly communicating how data supports adaptive management

should also help to support understanding and positive perceptions of evidence-based decision-making.

"We need to be adaptive and nimble and with new information – refine, redraw and refresh the zoning, permitted activities and management actions within/across the network" – Stakeholder, South-west Network

Opportunities for improvement noted through the evaluation include strengthening knowledge brokering to ensure data is synthesised and shared effectively, expanding monitoring efforts to address gaps in ecological, social and economic baseline data, and improving communication with stakeholder groups and the broader community to enhance transparency and engagement.

3.2.5. Assessments and authorisations program



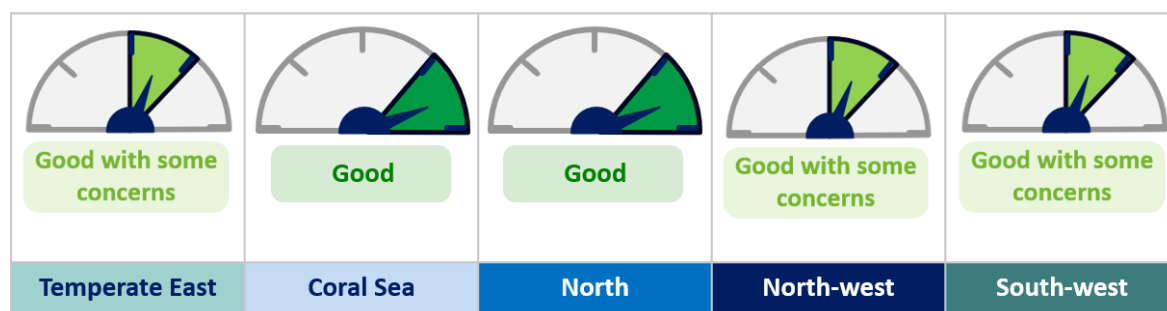
The evaluation of the Assessments and Authorisations Program across the five marine parks and networks revealed consistent progress, with the program actions generally rated as 'good' and outcomes assessed as 'fully met' in most networks.

Key strengths and achievements were identified across all networks. These included the development of timely and clear policies, processes, and procedures to support the implementation of planned actions, as well as the introduction of an online portal for submitting applications (which was noted as improving the ease and efficiency of the application process for park users). Tailored and flexible approaches to assessing authorisation applications were also highlighted as a strength, with Parks Australia staff demonstrating a willingness to adapt conditions and processes to ensure they remained fit for purpose.

"I think we are aware of and continually thinking about not being rigid in our processes and updating our conditions when need be. I think we have a lot of conversations with other agencies or applicants, when need be, and we're definitely willing to update our conditions when it's appropriate... So, I think we've done a good job from my perspective of our authorisations remaining fit for purpose" – Parks Australia staff member

However, some challenges were noted in the implementation of this program. In the Temperate East Network, stakeholders reported a lack of clarity regarding authorisation requirements for activities near Norfolk Island, particularly those crossing jurisdictions. This lack of clarity was seen as a barrier to effective implementation and compliance. Additionally, some stakeholders across networks expressed a desire for greater transparency in the authorisation process, particularly for non-standard applications or those with potential large-scale impacts. In the North Network, clarity and stability of standards was also identified as an issue. Stakeholders felt that providing clearer communication about the rationale behind decisions and creating more opportunities for feedback would improve trust and understanding of the program.

3.2.6. Parks Protection and Management Program



The evaluation of the Parks Protection and Management Program across the five marine parks and networks revealed consistent progress, with outcomes generally rated as ‘partially met’ or ‘substantially met’ and the program assessed as ‘good’ or ‘good with some concerns’. While several planned actions were completed or ongoing, others were noted as only partially met.

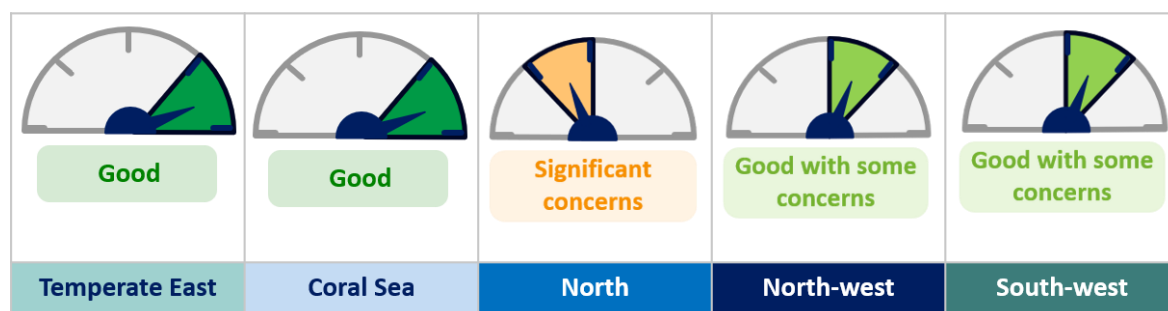
Key strengths and achievements were identified across all networks, particularly the development and adherence to tangible processes and strategies that supported the protection and management of marine parks. This included the implementation of initiatives such as the risk-based assessment and critical incident strategy. In the Coral Sea, Parks Australia staff highlighted strong collaboration with agencies such as the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA), Queensland Parks and Wildlife, and the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) in responding to incidents. Similarly, in the North-west Network, efforts to meet Australia’s obligations under international agreements, such as the Ningaloo Coast World Heritage Area, were noted as a key achievement. In the North Network, collaboration with Traditional Owners, First Nations Ranger groups, and government organisations was highlighted, with marine debris clean-up activities cited as a clear example of effective partnership in protecting marine park values.

“In the northern areas, the Indigenous Ranger program clean up area has been very successful... it really supports removal in a comprehensive way, off the northern coastline... it’s a great example of how Parks can achieve and do those programs, but it is not replicated along other areas of the coastline.” – Stakeholder, Temperate East Network

However, stakeholders across several networks reported limited awareness of the program’s activities, which may have reduced their ability to support initiatives or provide meaningful feedback. Additionally, the absence of robust empirical data to measure the impact of management actions on park values limited the ability to fully evaluate whether the program was achieving its intended outcome. Stakeholders emphasised the need for future plans to consider the inclusion of more specific, measurable, and time-bound outcomes that were directly linked to the program’s actions.

“In terms of what [Parks Australia] are doing in the Temperate East, we don’t have many islands where [marine debris] can wash up and be very visible.... What I would like to see is some way of information sharing and knowledge brokering from people who are out on those areas for when they do see those things... we are very data poor on what is actually occurring” – Stakeholder, Temperate East Network

3.2.7. Compliance Program



The evaluation of the Compliance Program across the five marine parks and networks revealed mixed progress, with the program generally rated as ‘good’ or ‘good with some concerns’, except in the North Network, which was assessed as having ‘significant concerns’ due to higher levels of non-compliance. However, it is important to note that many non-compliance incidents, particularly in the North and North-west Networks, were found to be due to instances of illegal foreign fishing (noted by Parks Australia staff as being the responsibility of the Australian Border Force [ABF] and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry [DAFF]).

While several planned actions were completed or ongoing, others were partially completed, reflecting challenges such as difficulties in measuring voluntary compliance, practical barriers to enforcement in remote parks, and gaps in education and awareness-raising efforts.

"[Voluntary compliance and self-regulation] are the fundamental unmeasurables – they are unknowns... We can't know what we have deterred. If we stopped doing everything, we wouldn't know what would change, but I have no doubt our efforts do deter people." – Parks Australia staff member

Key strengths and achievements were identified across all networks, particularly the use of new technologies to support compliance. The implementation of Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) for commercial vessels operating in or transiting through Australian Marine Parks was consistently highlighted as effective. Additionally, the trial and use of autonomous vessels, such as ‘Bluebottles’, and sound monitoring devices were noted as promising innovations to detect illegal fishing activity and enhance compliance monitoring.

"[Parks Australia] have been leading the way in the VMS space and open to sharing how they are achieving those outcomes, which is really helpful... They have these amazing bluebottle robots, and they are really effective. They are useful for voluntary compliance because they are putting fear into people." – Stakeholder, North-west and South-West Network

Effective collaborations with Commonwealth agencies were another strength of the program. Partnerships with the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA), AMSA, and the Australian Border Force (ABF) were widely recognised for their role in monitoring and enforcing compliance across all networks. In addition, such collaborations were recognised as enhancing the reach of Parks Australia's compliance activities across the broad expanse of AMPs without creating an undue strain on resources.

A range of challenges were also identified across the networks. In the North Network, high levels of non-compliance incidents highlighted the need for enhanced enforcement and monitoring efforts, though it is important to note that non-compliance in this network was primarily due to the prevalence of illegal foreign fishing in the region. Stakeholders also reported that the program's

early approach lacked sufficient focus on education and awareness-raising, which may have impacted voluntary compliance. Similarly, in the Temperate East Network, conservation stakeholders expressed concerns about recreational fishers' understanding of marine park zones and boundaries, which could lead to accidental non-compliance.

"What you're looking for in any compliance program is voluntary compliance, which is only really done through public acceptance. If people aren't aware of it or can't find the documentation, then you can't comply with it. I think if [Parks Australia] want [marine parks] to be more than lines on a map, they need more, front facing education to the public." – Stakeholder, North-west Network

"I think commercial fishers are pretty good in terms of compliance, but it's much less with recreational fishers and the charter boat industry, because you haven't got eyes on the ground. 'Nobody is going to see us anyway, so we can do what we want.'" – Stakeholder, North Network

Key implications of findings relating to the overall effectiveness of management plan implementation:



To improve the management plans for the next cycle, Parks Australia should seek to address the specific challenges and opportunities identified above, including:

- **Improving culturally responsive First Nations engagement** – ensuring that engagement with Traditional Owners and First Nations partners is inclusive, meaningful, and initiated early in the planning process. This includes embedding First Nations priorities into decision-making and adopting best-practice co-management approaches to support Cultural Knowledge and responsibilities.
- **Enhancing communication, education, and outreach** – addressing gaps in broader community awareness and understanding of marine park values, management actions, and decision-making processes. This includes developing targeted communication strategies and education initiatives to engage diverse audiences, reduce non-compliance, and build a sense of shared responsibility for marine park conservation.
- **Build on existing partnerships** – strengthen collaboration with First Nations communities, research institutions, government agencies, and marine park users to maximise program outcomes. In addition, consider the role of Australian Marine Park Advisory Committees (AMPACs) in providing external expertise and diverse perspectives (refer to Chapter 8 of this report for more details).
- **Addressing gaps in social and economic data** – prioritising the collection of socio-economic and marine park awareness data, including through tools such as general population surveys, to better understand public perceptions, awareness, and the broader social and economic impacts of marine park management. These data will help inform balanced decision-making, improve the effectiveness of communication and engagement strategies, and ensure management actions align with stakeholder and community needs.

- **Critically evaluating the relevance and prioritisation of management program areas** – ensure all program areas are underpinned by clear program logic that aligns actions with overarching outcomes. Review the relevance of program areas to ensure they are proportionate to their impact across networks and individual parks. For example, consider whether outcomes that are sought to be achieved through tourism could be better achieved through broader communication and engagement efforts (additional considerations regarding the design of the management plans are outlined in the following chapter).

4. Overall findings about the design of the management plans

*This chapter presents evaluation findings in relation to the **overall design of the Marine Park management plans**. Key aspects examined include the interaction with the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act, adequacy of detail, responsiveness and flexibility, performance monitoring, reporting and review mechanisms. It draws on qualitative feedback from stakeholders across the in-scope Marine Park Networks/ Parks.*

4.1. Overall appropriateness of plan design and structure

Overall, stakeholders acknowledged the challenges associated with striking a balance between the need to provide adequate detail to support plan implementation, while also maintaining the required flexibility for a 10-year plan covering a range of marine parks across the networks. Most external stakeholders were unable to comment on the appropriateness of the design of the management plans, as they had limited familiarity with the plans and their purpose.

Among stakeholders with greater familiarity, including Parks Australia staff and a few external stakeholders, the management plans were generally considered well-structured and effective. They were described as logical, “user friendly” and felt to contain an appropriate level of detail to guide management decisions, while maintaining flexibility to adapt to ecological and management changes over their 10-year duration. The incorporation of adaptive management principles was identified as a key factor in achieving this flexibility.

Positively, some stakeholders felt that the management plans provided an appropriate level of detail, with some describing it as their “source of truth.” Stakeholders found elements such as zoning maps and overarching rules and regulations particularly valuable for supporting compliance activities.

“The mapping and the zoning part of the [management] plans have been pretty important to us, and we’re also looking at the descriptions about the values and why it’s there, because that helps us to prioritise the restoration that we do outside of the park.” – Stakeholder, Across all parks

Parks Australia staff particularly appreciated the clarity and lack of ambiguity in certain programs, such as the Compliance Program, which was highly valued by the Compliance team for its role in supporting consistent decision-making across marine parks and networks. Parks Australia staff also generally felt the management plans provided scope for some adjustments to address emerging risks and new activities, supported by the adaptive management principles embedded within them. The management plans were perceived as broadly flexible and adaptable to changing conditions, such as environmental changes, new information (e.g. local, place-based knowledge), and the evolving needs of park users. However, other stakeholders reported being unaware of this flexibility or adaptability.

“Pretty much everything we do on a daily basis, we’d be looking at those management plans... we conduct an assessment on 100% of incidents, and every single incident gets linked back to the management plan and allowable activities.” – Parks Australia staff member

“The management plans were clearly set out with an adaptive management philosophy. So that is the thing, the whole idea is that you can pivot and allocate finite resources where they are most useful” – Parks Australia staff member

Staff also highlighted the importance of the management plans as statutory instruments under the EPBC Act, noting that their statutory nature provided a robust framework for the ongoing management of marine parks. This foundation enabled the effective delivery of management

activities and allowed staff to drive results by leveraging the specific actions outlined within the program areas. Stakeholders generally viewed the interaction between the management plans and the EPBC Act positively, with no significant issues identified.

However, several **less favourable findings were identified** regarding the level of detail, consistency and adaptability of the plans, with stakeholders and First Nations partners expressing concerns through the research that the plans:

- **Were broad and insufficiently tailored** – some stakeholders felt the management plans were too generalised, which reduced their relevance and effectiveness, particularly for implementing place-based actions. Actions and outcomes were not always tailored to the unique characteristics and priorities of individual parks, complicating both implementation and evaluation. This concern was especially pronounced among Norfolk Island stakeholders, who emphasised the need for customised management approaches to address the island’s distinct priorities. Additionally, stakeholders questioned whether all program areas were relevant across all networks and parks. For example, as previously noted the Tourism and Visitor Experience Program was seen as less applicable to remote and offshore parks, such as the Coral Sea and North Networks, where tourism opportunities were limited.
 - Additionally, the current focus on tourism as a primary industry of interest, and the perceived under-representation of other industries (e.g. commercial fishing and the seafood industry), made some stakeholders from these sectors feel that their views, opinions, and contributions were not adequately acknowledged or valued by Parks Australia, and contributed to scepticism about the management plans.
- **Contained overly prescriptive elements** – despite the broad flexibility noted above, some stakeholders and Parks Australia staff felt that the plans were overly detailed and prescriptive, limiting flexibility. Certain actions and outcomes, particularly in the Compliance and Assessments and Authorisations programs, were seen as too rigid, with prescribed partnership lists that did not always align with the practical realities of implementation and/or were not felt to be well-suited to address the relevant risks. Stakeholders suggested that future management plans could adopt an outcomes-focused approach, providing high-level guidance and clearly defined aims or objectives. Specific program actions could then be outlined in separate, supporting implementation plans rather than being embedded directly within the management plans themselves. It was felt that this approach would allow for greater adaptability and flexibility, enabling Parks Australia to respond more effectively to emerging challenges, evolving priorities, and changing circumstances, while ensuring that all actions remained aligned with the overarching goals of the management plans.

“I think they ended up being too set in stone and rigid. We’ve found adhering to what the management plan activities and actions say is impossible... the program should be refined down and the ‘how’ should be adaptive and outside the plan. With just some guidance within the plan” — Parks Australia staff member

- **Lacked the ability to effectively measure outcomes and effectiveness of actions** – it was noted by stakeholders that outcomes in the management plans were not always clearly measurable, particularly over the 10-year lifespan of the plans, making it difficult to assess progress or determine the success of actions. This was particularly evident in areas such as understanding marine park values and pressures, where stakeholders expressed uncertainty about how to effectively measure progress. Stakeholders highlighted that vague, ambiguous, or poorly defined actions and outcomes, combined with the absence of clear timeframes for completion, could complicate monitoring and review processes. To address these issues, stakeholders recommended that future plans incorporate specific, measurable, and time-bound outcome indicators.

- **Presented a misalignment between actions and outcomes** – in some program areas, stakeholders felt that the listed actions were not well-suited to effectively achieve the intended outcomes. For example, in the Parks Protection and Management Program, the broad outcome of *‘Impact of pressures on marine park values have been minimised as far as reasonably practicable’* was perceived as not being adequately addressed by the highly specific actions outlined in the plans. The evaluation highlighted the need for future plans to incorporate clearer program logic, ensuring that actions are directly aligned with outcomes and contribute meaningfully to the overarching goals of the management plans.
 - In addition, some Parks Australia staff noted that certain actions within specific programs did not always align with the roles or expertise of the staff allocated to those programs, leading to confusion and challenges in effective management. For example, communications and First Nations engagement actions were sometimes embedded within programs where staff may not have had the necessary expertise or capacity to address these elements effectively. However, external stakeholders viewed the inclusion of these cross-cutting elements within specific programs as essential for achieving broader goals and outcomes. They emphasised that integrating communications and First Nations engagement into multiple program areas, alongside dedicated programs, was critical to ensuring these priorities were consistently addressed across all aspects of marine park management.
- **Were not always perceived as being able to effectively adapt to the range of emerging risks, priorities, and contextual changes** – stakeholders felt that the plans at times struggled to respond to emerging risks and priorities, particularly during the later stages of implementation. This was attributed to the prescriptive nature of certain actions and outcomes, as well as the lack of mechanisms to account for changes in the ecological or policy environment over time. Examples cited included climate change threats, offshore wind farm development, increased use of drones for surveillance, and the emergence of bird flu as an ecological threat.

“It’s not really possible for a plan that has a 10-year life to contemplate what might change. I think it’s important that there is a mechanism by which new information, when it becomes available, is able to be considered” – Stakeholder, Across all parks

Additionally, some First Nations partners felt the plans did not sufficiently respond to evolving community priorities. They noted that when changes or decisions were made, First Nations peoples were often excluded from the process, despite their strong belief that they should have “a seat at the table” for management decisions affecting their Sea Country.

- **Had limitations in utility for some Parks Australia staff** – a few Parks Australia staff noted that the plans, in their current form, were not always practical for guiding and supporting their work. In some cases, staff reported needing to retrospectively align their activities with the plans to meet specific actions and requirements, or take a more “tick a box” approach that did not result in achieving the overall plan objectives. It was felt that incorporating more tailored consideration of park-specific needs and priorities could ensure actions were both effective and meaningful in achieving the intended outcomes.
- **Did not adequately address external impacts on marine park values** – while the management plans were broadly considered effective in protecting marine park values within the parks’ boundaries, stakeholders expressed concerns that activities occurring outside the parks’ boundaries were negatively impacting the values of the marine parks. In particular, stakeholders were concerned about resource extraction and industry in adjacent areas, which stakeholders wanted to see considered more explicitly in future plan development.

- **Inconsistently applied definitions and terminology** – some stakeholders identified inconsistencies in the application of definitions and terminology across networks, which created challenges for effective implementation. For example, variations in the interpretation of terms such as ‘drop line fishing’ led to confusion and hindered consistent management. These inconsistencies were particularly noted in relation to the South-east Network Management Plan (outside the scope of this evaluation). Stakeholders emphasised the importance of ensuring clarity and consistency in definitions and terminology across all networks (while still allowing for tailored, place-based actions to address the unique priorities and pressures of individual parks, as outlined above).

“We require detail. Grey areas are a very difficult thing for compliance... so I wouldn’t want us to back away from the detail. The South-east plan being inconsistent with the other ones creates difficulty, for example, how we define drop line fishing differently means we have to dive in and interpret that each time.” – Parks Australia staff member

- **Were inaccessible to some marine park users** – a few First Nations partners who had accessed the management plans (e.g. for their work in Ranger programs) found them to be overly “bureaucratic” and complex to navigate and use. They suggested that key, relevant aspects of the plans should be communicated in a more accessible format, with consideration given to the tailoring of these for First Nations groups and partners, to enhance understanding and applicability. The evaluation found that raising awareness of the existing management plan factsheets may go some way to addressing this need.
- **Were not perceived to be adequately grounded in science** – some stakeholders felt that parts of the existing management plans had not been developed based on scientific data due to considerable data gaps at the time of their establishment and/ or the perceived impact of political interests. Given the wealth of marine science data collected over the course of the management plans, there was a strong expectation that the new plans would be data-driven, with evidence-based decision-making clearly communicated with stakeholders.

4.2. Performance monitoring, reporting and review mechanisms

Broadly, many external stakeholders expressed uncertainty about how Parks Australia monitored, reported on, and reviewed the management plans. Many felt that improved feedback channels on the management plan’s implementation, particularly for external stakeholders such as Australian Marine Park Advisory Committee (AMPAC) members, would enhance transparency and accountability.

The evaluation identified evidence of various review mechanisms undertaken by Parks Australia, including this evaluation and periodic reviews and reporting on management plan progress. These mechanisms were seen as valuable for ensuring the management plans were implemented as intended and for informing future planning cycles. However, there was limited awareness of these reviews amongst stakeholders.

In addition, some stakeholders, particularly from the commercial fishing sector, raised concerns about the lack of independent oversight in the design and operation of the management plans, as both processes were managed internally by Parks Australia. These stakeholders also felt that there was insufficient accountability to the science and evidence underpinning the management plans, and suggested that greater transparency in how decisions were made and how evidence was applied would improve trust and confidence in the process. Improved communication about monitoring results and the use of evidence in decision-making could enhance transparency, accountability, and stakeholder engagement.

4.3. Suggestions to improve management plan design

To address the issues identified in relation to the current plans, stakeholders and First Nations partners who participated in the engagement sessions identified some key areas for improvement in future iterations:

- **Further tailoring program areas to specific park values and pressures** – many stakeholders noted that some program areas or actions lacked relevance or feasibility for certain parks. For example, the Tourism Program was often seen as overly prioritised as a standalone area, particularly for remote offshore parks where tourism was less relevant. This prioritisation was seen as potentially leading to unwarranted resource allocation, and some stakeholders suggested it would be more appropriate for the tourism program to be integrated into other program areas, such as Communications, Education and Awareness, to ensure a more balanced and context-appropriate approach.

“The way it is set out suggests that equal weight should be given across the programs, but in the Coral Sea, tourism isn’t really relevant, as [the parks] are far offshore and we have lots of island work that needs site visits, which are expensive. One of the outcomes says ‘increase visitation to marine parks’ and we have to do it for the next 10 years... but there isn’t the opportunity” — Parks Australia staff member

- **Reducing prescriptiveness and improving flexibility of some actions** – actions that were overly specific, such as naming particular agencies for Parks Australia to engage or collaborate with, were seen as problematic. Stakeholders noted that this level of detail posed risks and could be unachievable, particularly if the named agencies were unable or unwilling to engage, or if the specified agencies were superseded or underwent substantial changes in their role. It was instead felt this detail should be included in implementation plans developed to support the management plans, allowing for greater flexibility and adaptability.

“Management plans need to be adaptive, and sometimes these aren’t... if those agencies aren’t there and they’ve been replaced and superseded, then what? There probably should be more flexibility in the plans” — Parks Australia staff member

- **Addressing external impacts on marine park values** – stakeholders raised concerns that activities occurring outside park boundaries were undermining marine park values. One potential solution could involve mandating the consideration of impacts on marine park values in environmental impact assessments for activities occurring outside park boundaries but within the broader marine region and/or clarifying and strengthening protections against indirect impacts under Commonwealth law. Additionally, fostering stronger collaboration with state and territory governments, as well as other relevant agencies, could help address cross-jurisdictional impacts and ensure a more holistic approach to protecting marine park values.
- **Better defining measurable targets** – many stakeholders, including AMPAC members, felt that the management plans would benefit from incorporating specific, measurable outcomes and success indicators to improve the evaluation of management effectiveness. Some actions (e.g. ‘increasing voluntary compliance’ and ‘maximising partnerships... to inspire people... to become involved in marine park management and protection’) were seen as “too vague” to measure progress effectively. Clearer program logic that directly links actions to measurable outcomes was also seen as important to ensure that actions contribute meaningfully to overarching goals.

“There’s a marine park called Geographe... for my first three years [at Parks Australia], we had zero incidents in that park, and then we ran an operation which identified that there was a significant

amount of activity going on in that park – in one year we had [quite a large number of] incidents occur there... Since we identified that, we've put a lot of time and effort into there, and I could use that as an example where I truly believe we've had a significant increase in voluntary compliance, primarily through education, but largely through compliance actions too. That's a great success, but on paper that looks like a massive loss because if we look at the outcome for that management plan as it exists, the primary outcome is a decrease in non-compliance" – Parks Australia staff member

- **Strengthening co-management approaches with First Nations partners** – stakeholders emphasised the importance of embedding genuine co-management approaches into the plans, rather than focusing solely on engaging First Nations partners on decisions already made by Parks Australia. This includes ensuring early and meaningful involvement of First Nations groups in decision-making processes and embedding their priorities and Cultural Knowledge into the plans.
 - Some Parks Australia staff and AMPAC stakeholders also noted ongoing discussions with First Nations groups about incorporating cultural language and perspectives into the management plans. They expressed hope that this would be progressed in the next management plan cycle to better reflect the cultural significance of marine parks and the connection of First Nations peoples to Sea Country.
- **Improving communication and knowledge sharing** – stakeholders highlighted the need for better communication of monitoring outcomes, the application of data to decision-making, and the flexibility embedded within the plans. Improved knowledge brokering, including clearer communication about available data and its use as well as about the management plans themselves, would enhance transparency, stakeholder engagement, and trust in the management process.
- **Considering Australia's '30 by 30' commitment** – stakeholders noted the importance of addressing implications of potential changes to zoning arrangements under Australia's commitment to protect 30% of its land and marine areas by 2030. Future plans should clearly communicate the evidence-based need and benefits of commitment to '30 by 30' in an Australian context to ensure stakeholder understanding and support.

'[The new management plan] should be strongly upfront in supporting the 30 by 30 model that the government has ticked off on. That needs to be the gold standard, and [the current management plan] doesn't really have a statement about that" – Stakeholder, Temperate East Network

- **Aligning with state/ territory management plans** – stakeholders suggested synchronising review and renewal cycles with state management plans where possible. This would enable simultaneous consultation and communication about changes, as well as further collaboration to streamline permit applications.

Key implications of findings relating to the design of the management plans:



The evaluation highlighted that while the management plans provided a strong statutory framework under the EPBC Act and incorporated adaptive management principles, several areas for improvement were identified. To enhance the effectiveness of the next cycle of management plans, **Parks Australia should consider the suggestions outlined above**, including adopting an outcomes-focused approach to improve flexibility and adaptability, tailoring program areas to the specific values and pressures of individual parks and embedding measurable targets to strengthen monitoring and evaluation.

Additionally, prioritising early and meaningful engagement with First Nations partners, embedding Cultural Knowledge and transparent scientific data into decision-making, and improving communication and knowledge sharing will be critical to fostering trust and collaboration. By addressing these areas, future management plans will be better positioned to support adaptive management, respond to emerging challenges, and meet the evolving needs of marine parks and their stakeholders over the next 10 years.

5. Overall findings about the effectiveness of zoning

*This chapter presents findings from the evaluation in relation to **how effective zoning was in meeting management plan and zone objectives**. It draws on qualitative feedback from stakeholders across the in-scope Marine Park Networks/ Parks.*

5.1. Overall perceptions of zoning effectiveness

Stakeholders broadly recognised the need to regulate Australian Marine Parks (AMPs) to balance conservation objectives with sustainable use, and most regarded zoning as the most appropriate approach to achieve this. In particular, some Parks Australia staff felt that zoning had been effective in balancing conservation and sustainable use. For example, research from Ningaloo Reef demonstrated greater fish populations in green zones compared to other areas, highlighting the ecological benefits of zoning. Evidence of ‘spillover’ benefits, such as larger fish populations in adjacent areas, was also noted as a positive outcome.

However, zoning was widely perceived as an imperfect solution, with many stakeholders identifying concerns or areas for improvement. These concerns varied significantly across stakeholder groups, reflecting the contentious and polarising nature of zoning and the challenges of balancing competing interests.

More specifically, concerns/ areas for improvement in relation to zoning raised through the evaluation included:

- **Zoning restrictions and placement** – some stakeholders, particularly those from environmental or marine science backgrounds, questioned whether zoning restrictions were appropriately designed to achieve conservation objectives. They emphasised the need for zoning to better reflect the dynamic and interconnected nature of marine ecosystems. Stakeholders suggested that broader ecosystem impacts and activities outside protected zones should be considered in zoning decisions and environmental impact assessments. Specific concerns included:
 - The allowance of activities such as oil and gas exploration within marine parks, which some felt undermined the purpose of protected zones.
 - The impact of permitted activities (such as oil and gas exploration and potential Carbon Capture and Storage [CCS]) in areas adjacent to protected areas.

“One thing we’ve come across is the representative nature of some marine parks. An example would be the Gulf of Carpentaria National Park Zone. From my limited understanding from an incident that we managed in that area, it is largely representative of and protecting a sandy floor, so the argument’s been put forward by industry of, ‘what are you actually doing stopping demersal trawl there – that’s got nothing in it’. From an effectiveness perspective, I think that is a common question we get from operators” – Parks Australia staff member

“If you didn’t bring in the zoning of the marine parks, it probably wouldn’t make that much of a difference. They’re in such remote parts. The remote zones are 200 miles off shore, people can still fish on them, so I don’t know what benefit there is in calling that a marine park – Stakeholder, North-west Network

- **Unintended consequences of zoning** – some stakeholders highlighted unintended outcomes of zoning that they felt were inconsistent with zoning objectives. Specifically:

- Some First Nations partners noted that zoning decisions made at the start of the plans had not sufficiently considered the Cultural significance of sites, emphasising that these considerations should be prioritised and central to zoning decisions in the future, particularly as knowledge and mapping of Cultural values increased over time.
- Commercial fishers raised concerns about significant negative impacts on their industry due to increasingly limited access to fishing areas. They felt these restrictions were not always supported by a robust evidence base for conservation need.
- A few recreational fishers felt ‘no-take’ zones created restrictions for vessel movement through these zones, which they reported had inadvertently limited access to fishing grounds beyond these zones. However, Parks Australia staff clarified that transiting through these zones was generally permitted (except in sanctuary zones), suggesting that this concern may have stemmed from a miscommunication or knowledge gap.

"If there is a total ban on fishing in a zone that means fishers don't feel they can even take their boat through that zone, their access to fishing grounds beyond the zone is also limited because they can no longer get there in the shortest way, so there is sometimes loss of access in unintended ways. Losing access to a fishing ground is one thing, but losing access to another because you can no longer move through it is another thing." – Stakeholder, Across all parks

- **Perceived lack of consultation in zoning development** – some stakeholders, including First Nations peoples and fishers, expressed concerns that they had not been adequately consulted or engaged during the development of zoning arrangements (which occurred prior to the commencement of the 2018 Management Plans). This perception led to feelings of exclusion and a lack of ownership over zoning decisions, particularly among key user groups for whom zoning decision had a significant impact.. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of transparent and inclusive consultation processes in future zoning reviews to ensure that diverse perspectives are considered whilst building greater trust in and support for zoning decisions.
- **The need for more science-based decision-making and monitoring** – all stakeholder groups emphasised the importance of basing zoning decisions on robust scientific evidence and supporting them with ongoing monitoring. Many felt that zoning decisions had been initially influenced by stakeholder appeasement or political considerations rather than evidence-based planning. They highlighted the need for increased systems to measure zoning effectiveness, refine boundaries and assess impacts over time. Stakeholders expressed a strong expectation that ecological monitoring conducted during the management plans would inform future zoning decisions.

"All we've got is the zones with no evaluation of their effectiveness. We need to see if there has been benefits for the highly protected areas, and if the assumed benefits like spillover zones are supported by empirical evidence." – Stakeholder, South-west Network

- **Lack of flexibility and nuance** – many stakeholders felt that the current zoning approach was too “rigid” and could be improved by adopting a more flexible and nuanced framework. They felt that zoning should better reflect the specific needs of different areas and activities. Suggestions for improvement included:
 - Replacing blanket bans (e.g. no fishing at all) with targeted restrictions that focused on protecting particular marine park values, such as seasonal bans, restrictions on specific gear types, or species-specific protections.
 - Applying evidence-based decision-making at a more localised level, involving fishers, biodiversity experts, and Traditional Owners in collaborative planning processes.

“90 percent of the problems you think you can get out of zoning, you can solve with other tactics, like management area approaches. We can take the heat out of the room by being more nuanced with logic and setting up planning to enable nuance at a local level. You need fisherman, biodiversity experts and Traditional Owners in the room together, taking the planning to a local level.” – Stakeholder, North Network

“I personally think there’s plenty of times where the objectives of green zones could be met without zoning. Having a clear objective, and meeting with stakeholders to communicate that and consult them. It’s when you get a green zone smacked over your favourite fishing spot, and you don’t know why, that’s what I don’t like to see” – Stakeholder, South-west Network

In addition, mechanisms to adjust zoning boundaries as new information becomes available were felt to be beneficial, particularly in areas where initial decisions were made with limited knowledge of the marine environment, or the impact of decisions had been unknown. For example, stakeholders highlighted zoning in the Coral Sea where a reef was split across zones, which they felt reduced the ability to accurately track the effectiveness of zoning and park management outcomes. Stakeholders suggested that being able to adapt zoning in response to new evidence could have enhanced the management of the parks throughout the duration of the plans, ensuring zoning decisions better reflected ecological realities and supported more effective conservation outcomes.

- **Challenges understanding regulations across marine protected areas** – stakeholders noted that the effectiveness of zoning was often undermined by confusion about regulations, particularly due to inconsistencies in zone colours and descriptions between Commonwealth and state/ territory marine parks. These inconsistencies made it difficult for park users to understand and comply with zoning regulations, highlighting the need for greater alignment and clearer communication more broadly and across jurisdictions.

5.2. Stakeholder perceptions of compliance with zoning regulations

The evaluation of the Compliance Program, as reported in Chapter 3, highlighted the overall success of compliance efforts across most marine parks/ networks, with innovative technologies and strong collaborations recognised as playing a key role in supporting compliance.

However, stakeholders had limited awareness of the actual levels of compliance with zoning regulations, reflecting the challenges of accurately monitoring compliance. Most stakeholders assumed that compliance among the commercial fishing sector was relatively high, largely due to the implementation of the Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) and the lack of reported incidents of non-compliance.

In contrast, compliance among recreational fishers was perceived to be lower. A few stakeholders reported witnessing or hearing about non-compliant activities among recreational fishers in certain areas. Barriers to compliance were identified, including the complexity of mapping and understanding zone boundaries, insufficient communication about zoning regulations, and reliance on external information sources, such as the Recfishwest app. While the app was noted as a useful tool for improving awareness of zoning regulations, some stakeholders felt it was not always accurate or reliable and could be hard to access when on the water (i.e. due to connectivity challenges), which could lead to accidental non-compliance. In addition, stakeholders noted that similar tools were not widely available outside of Western Australia.

“In South-East Queensland, we have a couple of green zones, and unless you are intimately familiar with the area, it’s easy to break the law and offend zoning boundaries. One of the things that becomes difficult is that people buy map cartridges for their GPS, and different manufacturers have different ways of interpreting the maps and different ways of portraying them on the screen. When

you're in a little trailer boat, you don't have that detail, so that's one of the difficulties with these zone boundaries and what they mean to the end user.” – Stakeholder, North Network and Coral Sea

From an internal perspective, some Parks Australia staff noted evidence of compliance with zoning regulations, such as reduced instances of fishing gear being collected and alignment between gear and licensing requirements during checks.

Stakeholders expressed mixed views on whether there was sufficient communication to support awareness and understanding of zoning regulations. While some stakeholders felt people in their network(s) had been well informed, others identified gaps in communication with park users, particularly recreational fishers. These stakeholders felt that unclear and inaccessible information about zoning boundaries and their purpose contributed to lower awareness, understanding, and compliance.

“[Parks Australia] have been very effective in how they have been using [zoning], and it is very clear what the zoning is to the local population. There was tension at the beginning when talking about it, but [Parks Australia] put a lot of effort to take stakeholders on the journey... they have done a great job engaging with the population and presenting the data we had generated that explained why they were making the decisions.” – Stakeholder, Temperate East Network

Additionally, some stakeholders noted that marine park staff, such as rangers and information centre personnel, were not always equipped to answer questions about zoning regulations. However, Parks Australia staff noted that this was likely to be in reference to state/ territory rangers and information centre staff. If possible, improving communication and providing resources to these staff was suggested as a way to better support marine park users and address questions about zoning.

Key implications of findings relating to the effectiveness of zoning:



Managing competing interests among stakeholders and marine park users in relation to zoning will remain an ongoing challenge for Parks Australia. To address this, future efforts should focus on:

- **Strengthening the evidence base for zoning decisions** – incorporating robust scientific data and ongoing monitoring to refine boundaries, assess effectiveness, and ensure zoning decisions are grounded in evidence. Regular updates on the impacts of zoning and how these are being monitored will also foster greater transparency and acceptance.
- **Enhancing communication and engagement** – providing clear and accessible information about zoning decisions, including the rationale, evidence, and consultation processes. Transparent and proactive communication, particularly during any future updates to zoning boundaries, will be critical to building trust and enhancing stakeholder support.
- **Improving zoning flexibility and nuance** – exploring opportunities to adopt more targeted restrictions, such as seasonal bans, gear-specific regulations, or species-specific protections, and implementing mechanisms to adjust zones as new information becomes available.

6. Alignment with external regulatory and management settings

*This chapter presents findings from the evaluation in relation to **how well aligned Australian Marine Park (AMP) regulations and settings were with external regulatory and management settings**. It draws on qualitative feedback from stakeholders across the in-scope Marine Park Networks/ Parks.*

6.1. Overall findings in relation to alignment with external regulatory and management settings

A couple of governmental stakeholders noted that efforts had been made to maximise consistency in management settings across adjacent or nearby marine parks, such as in the case of the Coral Sea and Great Barrier Reef marine parks, or between Commonwealth and state/ territory marine protected areas. While stakeholders felt there was a degree of consistency between activities allowed in Australian Marine Parks (AMPs) and adjacent marine parks, some differences were identified.

While most stakeholders were aware that regulations and permitted activities could differ between AMPs and adjacent marine parks as they were under the control of different jurisdictions, many were not directly impacted by these differences and were uncertain whether they resulted in any significant negative consequences. However, it was noted that the broader population and general park users, who were less familiar with jurisdictional differences and less knowledgeable about which authority was responsible for marine park management, would be less aware of these differences.

For some stakeholders, these differences meant they were required to obtain multiple permits to undertake their activities or business. While some stakeholders were fully aware of this requirement and did not find navigating the different permits or licences difficult, others reported being “caught off guard” by the need for multiple permits. These stakeholders felt the system was overly bureaucratic and suggested that a more integrated licensing system, or clearer communication about the need for multiple permits, would be beneficial.

“There is confusion from people about what exemptions are needed. You could need multiple permits to go do your work, so I can see people getting frustrated” – Stakeholder, North-west and South-west Networks

Challenges understanding the regulations across marine protected areas were also noted by some stakeholders, particularly due to differences in zone colours and descriptions between Commonwealth and state/ territory marine parks. These inconsistencies could make it difficult for park users to understand and comply with regulations, particularly when operating across multiple jurisdictions.

“There is a bit of misconception about what can and can’t be done in marine parks, and how that interacts with adjacent areas. That’s one that needs to be communicated a bit better” – Stakeholder, South-west Network

However, one stakeholder also reported that targeted communications in relation to zoning differences across the Coral Sea and Great Barrier Reef marine parks had supported understanding of the changing requirements across both areas.

From the perspective of Parks Australia staff, some differences between AMPs and adjacent marine parks were noted. While many of these differences were not perceived to have significant impacts, a

few were seen as problematic due to inconsistencies in zoning, statutory authority, or protections. Specific examples included:

- In the Coral Sea Marine Park, split zoning across some reefs (e.g. activities were permitted in one half of a reef but not the other) was seen as problematic. This division was perceived to fragment ecosystems, making them harder to evaluate outcomes and manage effectively.
- In the North network, the lack of zoning and equivalent habitat protections in the adjoining Limmen Bight Marine Park area was noted as a challenge for achieving consistent protection.

Key implications of findings relating to alignment with external regulatory and management settings:



Further alignment of zone requirements across marine protected areas, where feasible, could help address inconsistencies and improve the effectiveness of marine system management.

Additionally, **clearer communication about differing regulatory and licensing requirements** across jurisdictions would support marine park users in navigating these systems, enhancing satisfaction and supporting compliance, as well as strengthening trust in management processes.

7. Overall findings about implementation mechanisms

*This chapter presents findings from the evaluation in relation to the **role and effectiveness of grants and direct investment as mechanisms for implementing AMP management plans**. It draws on qualitative feedback from stakeholders across the in-scope Marine Park Networks/ Parks*

7.1. Balance of implementation mechanisms

Overall, stakeholders recognised the importance of using a combination of grants and direct investment to achieve the diverse actions and objectives outlined in the management plans. Both mechanisms were found to have unique advantages and disadvantages, which should be carefully considered when selecting the most appropriate mechanism for specific contexts. These are discussed in detail in the sections below.

While most stakeholders were unaware of the current balance between these mechanisms, some Parks Australia staff suggested that increasing the use of direct investment could provide greater control and certainty over the delivery of management activities and outcomes. They noted that grants had been effective in the early stages of the management plans, particularly for building relationships and accelerating implementation. However, they viewed direct investment as a logical progression to ensure stronger alignment with management plan objectives and to enhance control and certainty over the delivery of management activities and outcomes.

Despite this, stakeholders acknowledged that securing funding for grants was often easier than for direct investment, as grants typically required less ongoing financial commitment. This highlighted the need to maintain a balance between the two mechanisms, as both were considered useful for achieving the full range of actions and outcomes in the management plans.

“As an NGO, it’s great to have both [grants and direct investments]. It means that if it’s a straightforward project that fits into the grant structure, then great, it can go through the standard process, but there is also an option if it doesn’t to look at a broader conversation and perhaps look at some direct investment.” – Stakeholder, Across all parks

Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of ensuring adequate and ongoing funding, regardless of the mechanism used. They noted that the long-term nature of many management plan activities, such as ongoing monitoring and infrastructure maintenance, required sustained financial support to ensure continuity and effectiveness.

7.2. Benefits and limitations of grants

Stakeholders identified the following **key benefits of utilising grants** to implement management plan activities:

- **Supporting collaboration and partnerships** – stakeholders reported that grants were effective in bringing together organisations with relevant expertise, enabling collaborative approaches to delivery.
- **Expanding networks and relationships** – Parks Australia staff noted that grants helped establish new partnerships that could support ongoing park management activities (beyond the specific grant).
- **Access to specialist expertise** – grants enabled involvement of organisations with specific technical or local knowledge, improving the effectiveness of project delivery.

- **Encouraging innovation** – grants were seen to encourage creative and innovative approaches to delivering the management plan actions and outcomes, providing Parks Australia with access to “new ideas” and methods.

“With grants, you do get innovation, you get things you don’t think about, and you get to connect with different approaches which might usually be constrained by the government doing those things. They can attract new partners and interested parties in the management of marine parks.” – Parks Australia staff member

- **Providing economic and social benefits** – stakeholders noted that grants often had positive impacts, supporting local economies and creating opportunities for First Nations groups to be involved in park management.

“We’ve had some fantastic Our Marine Park Grants that have partnered with First Nations corporations and have really helped to establish an understanding and a relationship and provide capacity and support to those corporations to then engage in the management of the parks that I don’t think would have happened if we tried to broker it directly.” – Parks Australia staff member

- **Ensuring independence in research and evaluation** – grants allowed external organisations to conduct research and deliver projects independently, ensuring that findings and outcomes were not solely judged or influenced by Parks Australia, the organisation responsible for developing the management plans. This independence was seen as important for enhancing the credibility, transparency, and trust in the research, implementation and evaluation processes.

However, stakeholders also identified the following **drawbacks and limitations of grants**, with some stakeholders also offering suggestions to improve the issues identified:

- **Poor alignment with management plan objectives** – some stakeholders felt that grants were not always well-aligned with the actions and outcomes of the management plans. For example, initial rounds of grants were perceived as somewhat politically driven, with some funding directed towards sectors most impacted by zoning rather than addressing management plan priorities. Additionally, the allocation of grants was seen to contribute to a somewhat ‘ad-hoc’ approach to research and development across different marine parks.
 - Some stakeholders suggested prioritising funding for management plan objectives, potentially through “priority calls” based on specific goals, similar to the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation model, to improve alignment.

“I think the focus of particular grant rounds were more politically driven, particularly for round one, to offset calls for greater compensation and assistance from certain sectors that were impacted by zoning.” – Parks Australia staff member

“OMPGs are heavily reliant on external funding which makes it harder for Parks Australia to push their priorities forward – the ideas are coming through from scientists. Parks aren’t in the driver seat, so it seems like there are a lot more stakeholder funding priorities rather than Parks priorities. Maybe an alternative model is that [Parks] get more specific in the priorities, goals and topics that get covered in the OMPGs” – Stakeholder, North Network

- **Barriers and opportunities for First Nations involvement** – the competitive nature of grants, combined with administrative burdens and short deadlines, created challenges for First Nations communities and organisations to participate. Additionally, the time-limited nature of grant funding was seen as incompatible with the need for longer-term, meaningful engagement and relationship-building with First Nations communities.
 - Some stakeholders suggested strengthening First Nations involvement by introducing clearer requirements in grant applications for recipients (e.g. research organisations) to

demonstrate culturally appropriate engagement with First Nations communities. This includes fostering meaningful, long-term relationships with Traditional Owner groups (where relevant) and ensuring engagement aligns with the needs and priorities of First Nations communities, rather than being treated as an “afterthought” once programs were established.

- **Barriers for smaller operators** – a few stakeholders noted that organisations needed to be relatively well-established to successfully obtain grants, making them less accessible to smaller operators or those with limited administrative capacity. These barriers were also seen to disproportionately affect First Nations communities and Traditional Owner groups, further limiting their ability to engage with grant programs.
 - To address this, a few stakeholders suggested introducing smaller, tailored grants to reduce barriers for smaller operators and enable broader participation.
- **Administrative burden** – some stakeholders involved in the Our Marine Parks Grant (OMPG) program noted that the reporting requirements were overly burdensome. While the need for accountability was recognised, the level of detail required under the OMPGs (e.g. reporting on how many days individual scientists spent in the park) was felt to be more onerous than other government-funded grants and detracted from the ability to focus on delivering outcomes.
 - Stakeholders suggested simplifying reporting processes, particularly for the OMPG program, to reduce this burden.

“Reporting for the Our Marine Park Grants is quite onerous. I understand the need for accountability for taxpayer dollars, but it’s probably gone too far. There is a lot more than 12-monthly reporting, it’s down to the number of days people spend in the park, and it becomes difficult from the science side – it’s a very high burden on the Associate Professors.” – Stakeholder, Temperate East Network

- **Short time-frames** – the limited duration of grants was seen as a barrier for projects requiring capacity-building, long-term monitoring, or research programs that depended on funding certainty.

7.3. Benefits and limitations of direct investment

Stakeholders identified the following key benefits of using direct investment to implement management plans:

- **Closer alignment with management plan objectives** – direct investment ensured funding was directly tied to specific goals and actions, allowing Parks Australia to maintain greater oversight and control over priority activities.
- **Leveraging and strengthening organisational knowledge and capacity** – by directly managing and overseeing funded activities, Parks Australia staff were able to develop a deeper understanding of marine park values, pressures, and management needs. This hands-on involvement also facilitated stronger relationships with stakeholders, including First Nations groups, researchers, and other government agencies, which further enhanced the organisation’s capacity to deliver on management plan objectives.
- **Support for First Nations capacity-building** – direct investment was highlighted as a highly effective mechanism for supporting First Nations and Traditional Owner management of Sea Country. For example, in the North Network, investment through a Federation Funding Agreement and support from Parks Australia staff enabled the Marra people to establish an Aboriginal corporation and ranger group to manage Sea Country, that was now progressing towards self-sufficiency, including undertaking fee-for-service work. This approach was

recognised as delivering long-term benefits and supporting the development of sustainable systems.

“The Commonwealth have been able to invest \$2 million over 4 years, allowing the [Marra] Ranger group to form, bring on an administration officer, and grow. It creates an opportunity to have an economy in a very remote area, it gives young people a purpose, and importantly, it’s creating a culture where Traditional Owners are getting responsibilities over all the tenures in specific areas... It’s certainly been a good way of investing for the Commonwealth, and it has allowed us to have a sustained, meaningful and cost-effective mechanism to achieve what all stakeholders want.” – Stakeholder, North Network

- **Long term nature** – some stakeholders reported that direct investment tended to be longer term in nature (when compared with grants) which could support continuity of management activities over time and/ or enable effective initiatives to continue, rather than being dependent on grant funding cycles.

However, stakeholders also noted there could be challenges to securing funding for direct investment initiatives, as it was perceived to require greater and more sustained financial commitment, making it harder to secure funding compared to grants.

Key implications of findings relating to implementation mechanisms:



Grants and direct investment were found to both be useful mechanisms for implementing Marine Park management plans. To maximise outcomes, it is important to:

- **Align the use of grants and direct investment** to the most suitable contexts and objectives for specific funding activities.
- Ensure funding mechanisms are **directly tied to management plan priorities** and outcomes.
- Where possible, **increase direct investment opportunities** to complement grants and ensure funding mechanisms are directly tied to management plan priorities and outcomes.
- **Address barriers to participation**, particularly for smaller operators and First Nations communities, by reducing administrative burdens and supporting longer-term funding certainty. By optimising the balance and design of these mechanisms, Parks Australia can enhance the effectiveness of funding activities and better support the delivery of management plan objectives.

8. Overall effectiveness of AMPACs

*This chapter discusses **the role and effectiveness of Australian Marine Park Advisory Committees (AMPACs)** in providing input into the management of marine parks. While specific findings on AMPAC members' ability to provide ongoing input are included in the network/park-specific evaluation reports, this chapter focuses on the perceived effectiveness of AMPACs as a mechanism for advice at an overall level. It also identifies barriers and challenges to their operation and presents suggestions for improvement. It draws on qualitative feedback from AMPAC members across the in-scope Marine Park Networks/ Parks, as well as Parks Australia staff.*

8.1. Overall perceptions of AMPACs

Overall, both Parks Australia staff and AMPAC members emphasised the importance of external expert input from diverse perspectives to guide the implementation of Marine Park management plans. However, the evaluation found that both groups expressed concerns about the effectiveness of the operation of the current model, as discussed in the sections below.

8.1.1. Overall perceptions from AMPAC members

Overall, most AMPAC members reported that they were grateful for the opportunity to have input into the management of Australian Marine Parks (AMPs) via the committee. Members acknowledged that no significant issues had arisen in AMPs since the committees began operating, and as a result hoped their input had contributed to effective park management. AMPAC members also noted the important role that the committees played in providing information to representatives of different industries/ park user groups, which could then be communicated via their networks. They noted that this was beneficial to both themselves as representatives of industry or interest groups, as well as Parks Australia as it provided an efficient mechanism for communicating with broader stakeholder networks.

"For me the whole [AMPAC] process has been good in that it's brought in a diverse range of stakeholders that bring different point of views, and I think that's always important and something to always ensure that the balance of different stakeholders and views. I think it's been important and appropriate." – Stakeholder, North-west Network

However, many AMPAC members also reported feeling unable to provide meaningful input into the implementation of management plans due to a range of barriers (discussed in section 8.2. below). While experiences varied, many AMPAC members expressed frustration at their limited opportunities to contribute, with some perceiving AMPACs as a "tick-the-box" exercise rather than a genuine mechanism for collaboration. Additionally, some AMPAC members noted that, as they volunteered their time to contribute to the committee (i.e. without receiving any formal remuneration), they expected the process to be as effective and efficient as possible to make the best use of this volunteered time.

"I think a lot of people who were on the original committee have left because they felt very frustrated. We are all highly expert people and we're volunteering our time. I don't think Parks Australia use us to the best advantage. We have so much to contribute, so much knowledge, so much expertise and we're not called upon to do it. We're never asked for our advice" — Stakeholder, Temperate East Network

8.1.2. Overall perceptions from Parks Australia staff

From the perspective of Parks Australia staff, AMPACs were also seen as operating ineffectively. Parks Australia staff raised concerns about the high costs associated with running the committees, which they felt were not always justified by the limited value or actionable input received (see section 8.2 below for more specific findings about the challenges and constraints faced by Parks Australia staff).

Despite these challenges, there were examples of AMPACs providing valuable input when consulted on specific issues. For instance, in the Coral Sea Marine Park, members contributed to a workshop on research priorities, while in the North network, members advised on program prioritisation to guide resource allocation. However, such opportunities were infrequent, and the twice-yearly meetings were generally not considered effective for obtaining meaningful advice. Parks Australia staff also highlighted the benefits of relationships with individual AMPAC members, noting that these connections provided access to broader networks and expertise. The ability to contact members individually for input on project-specific issues was seen as particularly useful in supporting their work.

8.2. Barriers, challenges and constraints to effective input

AMPAC members identified several barriers that they felt limited their ability to provide meaningful input into marine park management:

- **A lack of regular information and updates** – AMPAC members tended to report a "vacuum" of communication between meetings, which made it difficult to stay informed about park issues. While large amounts of information were often provided just before meetings, the lack of regular updates hindered their ability to contribute meaningfully. Additionally, many AMPAC members felt they lacked sufficient knowledge to answer several questions posed during this evaluation, highlighting broader gaps in the flow of information to the committees.

"There's not been a lot of information coming back to the AMPACs about what is out there, what education is going on and what was happening before we joined the AMPACs. I really believe we need the whole community to be involved in this." – Stakeholder, Coral Sea and Temperate East Network

- **Perceived minimal opportunities to provide advice/ input** – most AMPAC stakeholders reported that it was often unclear what specific advice Parks Australia sought from them ahead of meetings, which reduced their ability to prepare and contribute effectively. In addition, many felt that AMPAC meetings were primarily informative in nature (e.g. with Parks Australia staff providing information and updates), with less emphasis on collaborative opportunities for members to provide advice or input. While AMPAC meeting minutes showed that members were invited to provide input on some topics during meetings⁷, the feedback from stakeholders suggests that there was a desire for greater or more meaningful opportunities for engagement.
 - In particular, members expressed a desire and expectation to be engaged in relation to any unusual or "significant" events or issues affecting the AMP relevant to their committee. For example, members of the Coral Sea Marine Park Advisory Committee (CSMPAC) noted that they had expected to be invited to provide input and advice when Parks Australia was considering an application for activity which could result in marine

⁷ Various AMPAC meeting minutes and meeting papers: Internal documents

debris falling into the Coral Sea Marine Park, but had not been provided this opportunity.

- **Unclear management plan goals and lack of reporting** – most AMPAC members felt that marine park goals and outcomes were not clearly defined or communicated, and there was no reporting against these goals to the committees. This lack of clarity made it difficult for members to assess progress or provide targeted advice in-line with key priorities for the management plans. While AMPAC meeting minutes showed that updates were provided on a range of topics during meetings⁸, the feedback from members suggests that it was not clear how these updates related to specific management plan actions, outcomes and aims.
- **Lack of follow-up or reporting back on advice provided** – many AMPAC members noted that they were often not informed about how their input was used, leaving them uncertain about the value of their contributions and creating assumptions that advice was not utilised by Parks Australia staff, which in turn reduced their engagement and trust in the process. While AMPAC meeting minutes showed action items from previous meetings were addressed at the start of each session⁹, the feedback from members suggests that there was a desire for more detailed or tangible feedback in relation to how their advice had been used.

“One of the first meetings I went to we were asked to do a mini workshop where we sat down and discussed the areas where different research needs to be done. I thought that was great, it was a time where they were asking for our advice, but after that there was no follow up... was that information actually going to be used?” – Stakeholder, Coral Sea

“I’ve never seen any follow up on any advice I’ve ever given. It feels like a tick-box exercise. There’s no opportunity to request feedback on our feedback. [In contrast] for the National Parks committee, we do field trips and get to see what they have done” – Stakeholder, Temperate East Network

- **Member turnover and lack of historical context** – some AMPAC members reported high turnover among members, with many joining in the last one or two years. Analysis of membership data also indicated high turnover across committees, with around 40%-50% of previous committee members no longer sitting on an AMPAC.¹⁰ This was found to limit members’ understanding of the historical context behind management plans and decisions.
- **Lack of clarity about AMPAC members’ role** – a few AMPAC members observed that some committee members appeared unclear about the expectations and scope of their role on the AMPAC when joining. They felt that some members did not realise the committee’s primary focus was to provide advice on implementing the management plan, rather than having broader input into determining the overall direction of park management. This lack of clarity may have contributed to frustration among members, with some perceiving their ability to contribute meaningfully as limited. A few stakeholders identified these frustrations as a key factor driving member turnover (as discussed above), which could undermine the long-term effectiveness of the committees. While Parks Australia staff noted that this information was outlined in the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the AMPACs, this suggests that there may be greater scope to raise member’s awareness of this information, communicate about the role of AMPACs and expectations of members in other ways and/ or provide further clarification in relation to member expectations.

⁸ Various AMPAC meeting minutes and meeting papers: Internal documents

⁹ Various AMPAC meeting minutes and meeting papers: Internal documents

¹⁰ Figures calculated based on AMPAC membership data provided by Parks Australia (internal documentation) and listed membership online (<https://australianmarineparks.gov.au/management/partnerships/advisory-committees/>)

“What are [Parks Australia] asking us to do? Do we review applications for funding? Are they asking us to review this bit, or that bit? We do occasionally get asked to review policies on things like island use or drones, so there is that capability, but its minimal. I think we have the ability to give input, but I don’t know where it goes.” – Stakeholder, Coral Sea

- **Lack of clarity about when information should/ could be shared with member’s networks more broadly** – a few AMPAC members reported that they were sometimes unaware of when information shared via Parks Australia could be shared with others outside of the committee. These members noted that this could be challenging, as others in their network often looked to them for information related to Marine Park Management, and they did not want to withhold this information unnecessarily.
- **Concerns about member selection processes** – a few AMPAC members raised concerns about the committee’s membership, noting that some industries/ interests were over or under-represented. For example, a few members from the South-west and North Network committees expressed concerns about insufficient representation from the fishing industry. However, Parks Australia staff noted that, for the North Network, the majority of fishing industry applicants had been accepted onto the committee, making up 40% of its membership. Additionally, a few external stakeholders raised concerns about the transparency of the AMPAC member selection process, questioning how members were chosen and whether the process was sufficiently open. For example, concerns were raised by a few First Nations partners about appropriate Traditional Owner groups being excluded from relevant AMPAC committees, despite expressing interest in participation. Taken together, these findings suggest that more transparent communication with members about the process and rationale for member selection could help to help to alleviate such concern.

Additionally, the following barriers and constraints were identified by Parks Australia Staff:

- **Poor attendance at AMPAC meetings** – which was found to be a barrier to seeking meaningful advice from a range of perspectives. AMPAC meeting minutes and summaries also showed that attendance varied across AMPACS and from meeting to meeting.¹¹ In addition, Parks Australia staff noted that limited availability of time-poor members also reduced responsiveness to communications or requests outside of meetings.
- **Resourcing constraints within Parks Australia** – which was identified as a challenge that impacted the regional team’s capacity to effectively support AMPACs and their operations.

8.3. Alternative models

The evaluation explored a range of alternative formats for AMPACs, including national or regional forums covering multiple marine parks and networks or sectoral formats structured by industry/ interest groups. Broadly, the evaluation found that most AMPAC members felt that the current AMP-specific model would be the most effective compared to these alternatives. Members felt that the current structure provided an appropriately local and nuanced perspective, while still enabling discussion and debate from those in different industries/ sectors, so as to not create siloed views and advice.

“I like that as AMPACs we are appointed individually, rather than as representatives of organisations, because it allows everyone to speak freely about what their concerns are and it’s important to have those discussions and debates.” – Stakeholder, South-west Network

¹¹ Various AMPAC meeting minutes and meeting papers: Internal documents

More specifically, members identified the following drawbacks of alternate models:

- **Regional committees covering multiple AMPs** – while AMPAC members acknowledged the benefits of occasional joint meetings between members with expertise in different AMPs, they reported that the large expanse of AMPs (often covering many individual marine parks) and the difference in key values and pressures meant that regional committees would risk losing the required nuance of discussion in the limited time available for meetings.
- **A national committee** – similar to regional committees, AMPAC members felt that a broader national committee would risk losing the required nuance for the advisory body.
- **Sectoral committees** (e.g. national committees for each sector with an interest in AMPs) – as discussed above, AMPAC members highlighted the value of robust discussions between representatives from different industries or sectors during AMPAC meetings, particularly given the diverse range of strong interests and perspectives related to marine park management. Members felt that creating sectoral committees could risk siloing discussions, potentially leading to less nuanced or balanced advice that does not adequately consider the broader range of stakeholder perspectives.

Despite the above findings, a few AMPAC members felt that such models could potentially be feasible if the advice sought was at a high or strategic level, rather than being focused on specific areas. If any change were made to the structure of AMPACs, the evaluation found that clear communication about the rationale for changes and clarification of the revised scope and expectations of AMPACs would be essential to ensure members understood and supported the transition.

Members also emphasised that any changes to the future AMPAC model should address the range of barriers identified in this evaluation to ensure more meaningful input and effective operation.

8.4. Suggestions for improvement

AMPAC members identified a range of effective elements of the current AMPAC model that should be maintained, including:

- **Occasional joint committee meetings** (i.e. where two or more advisory committees attended a joint session) – which members reported had provided useful opportunities to hear and learn from approaches used in other marine parks/ networks.
- **Face-to-face committee meetings, where possible** – while AMPAC members acknowledged that face-to-face meetings were not always possible due to the time and budgetary impost on Parks Australia, most felt that the face-to-face meeting(s) that had occurred over the current management plan had been effective in building relationships between members and Parks Australia staff, and supporting more in-depth discussion of key issues.

“The efficiency and effectiveness of any advisory committee is always improved through face-to-face meetings rather than virtual meetings. It builds better and stronger relationships and a greater understanding of issue, outputs and outcomes between advisory committee members and the department/managers” – Stakeholder, South-west Network

However, AMPAC members also made several suggestions that they felt could improve their ability to provide meaningful input into marine park management, including:

- **Setting clear goals and expectations**, including in relation to:
 - Establishing and better communicating clear objectives for AMPACs as a committee and for individual members – which was suggested as being helpful to focus their contributions and improve outcomes. As mentioned above, while this information was currently available in the AMPAC Terms of Reference, feedback from members suggests

that these could be better communicated with scope for further clarification in relation to member expectations.

- The goals and objectives of individual meetings – AMPAC members felt that it would be useful to have more explicit communication of specific goals and objectives for each meeting ahead of time, so as to help them to prepare. It was also suggested that structuring meetings based on program areas within the management plans may make it easier for members to understand what had been done in relation to each program area and provide strategic input more closely tied to the management plan actions and outcomes.
- **Improved communication** – there was a clear appetite amongst many AMPAC members for more regular communications from Parks Australia (e.g. via monthly bulletins or email updates), particularly in relation to activities and progress across management program areas and key issues/ events effecting specific AMPs. In addition, the evaluation found that more clearly communicating with members what information could be shared within their networks as well as providing insight into the rationale and process for selecting AMPAC members could go some way to mitigating the barriers identified above.
- **Increased opportunities for engagement**, and assurance of **engagement on significant or 'unusual' issues** – suggestions included holding more frequent meetings with interested and available members, ensuring adequate time during meetings for consultation/ input (rather than just information sharing) and offering additional avenues for feedback between meetings (e.g. via email). In addition, some members expressed willingness to be engaged outside the AMPAC process (e.g. one-on-one) for specific topics/ questions that related to their personal area of expertise. However, as meeting attendance varied (as discussed above), making additional engagement opportunities optional and/ or targeted to relevant members may enhance value gained from these sessions.
- **'Closing the loop' in relation to advice provided** – AMPAC members emphasised the importance of 'reporting back' on how their input was used to inform decision-making, to demonstrate the value of their contributions. This could include providing feedback of progress and decisions made in subsequent meetings.

However, it was evident from the evaluation that the marine park teams' resourcing constraints, including limited staff and budgetary capacity, posed challenges to implementing these improvements. While there was clear appetite for greater engagement among many AMPAC members, the capacity of members as volunteers should also be considered. These factors may limit the feasibility of more frequent communication and engagement with AMPACs.

Key implications of findings relating to effectiveness of AMPACs:

AMPACs were found to provide valuable external expertise and diverse perspectives, but their effectiveness is currently limited by barriers such as unclear communication about committee goals, insufficient communication about management activities and how these relate to management plan actions and outcomes, and less follow-up on their input than desired. Addressing these issues is essential to ensure AMPACs can meaningfully contribute to marine park management.

Improved communication, including regular updates, clearer requests for advice, and 'closing the loop' in relation to how input has been used, would help enhance their effectiveness. Establishing clearer goals and expectations for AMPACs, both as a group and for individual members, would also help focus their contributions and improve outcomes.

Given resourcing constraints, Parks Australia should carefully balance improvements to communication and engagement with available staff and budgetary capacity.

9. Conclusions and key implications for future plan development

9.1. Conclusions

The independent evaluation of the five expiring management plans for the Temperate East Marine Parks Network, South-west Marine Parks Network, North Marine Parks Network, North-west Marine Parks Network, and the Coral Sea Marine Park (2018–2028) has highlighted significant achievements while identifying key areas for improvement.

The evaluation found that the current management plans have made substantial progress in achieving their objectives. Key achievements include the development of robust frameworks, policies, and strategies that supported effective implementation, significant advancements in ecological baseline data collection, and strengthened collaboration with stakeholders, including First Nations communities, researchers, industry, and government agencies. These achievements demonstrate the value of the management plans as a statutory framework under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act, providing a strong foundation for marine park governance and conservation.

Despite these successes, several challenges were identified that limited the effectiveness of the management plans. The plans were often perceived by stakeholders as overly generic, insufficiently tailored to the unique values and pressures of individual parks, and overly prescriptive in some areas, which restricted flexibility and adaptability. Outcomes were not always measurable, making it difficult to assess progress and determine success. Additionally, the plans struggled to respond effectively to emerging risks, such as climate change, offshore wind farm development, and new technologies. Stakeholders emphasised the need for future plans to incorporate clearer program logic, measurable targets, and mechanisms to adapt to changing circumstances.

Zoning was widely recognised as an essential tool for balancing conservation objectives with sustainable use, but stakeholders raised concerns about its rigidity, unintended consequences, and insufficient consideration of broader ecosystem impacts. Zoning decisions were not always perceived to be based on robust scientific evidence, and monitoring to assess zoning effectiveness was felt to be limited, though more longer term monitoring may be required to observe intended impacts. Improved communication about zoning decisions and their rationale was identified as critical to fostering stakeholder support and compliance. Stakeholders also suggested exploring more flexible zoning approaches, such as seasonal or species-specific protections, to better reflect local needs and reduce unintended consequences.

Engagement with First Nations peoples was not consistently effective, with some partners expressing concerns about exclusion from decision-making processes. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of embedding co-management approaches that prioritise early, inclusive, and culturally responsive engagement with First Nations communities. Broader community education, communication, and engagement were also identified as key gaps, with stakeholders calling for improved public awareness of marine park values and management actions. Addressing these gaps will be critical to fostering trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility among stakeholders and the community.

While there was general consistency between Australian Marine Parks and adjacent marine parks, differences in regulations and permitted activities created confusion for park users and highlighted opportunities to improve alignment and streamline licensing processes. Stakeholders suggested that clearer communication about differing regulatory and licensing requirements across jurisdictions would help park users navigate these systems more effectively.

Grants and direct investment were both recognised as useful mechanisms for delivering management plan objectives. Grants were valued for fostering collaboration, innovation, and

economic benefits, while direct investment was seen as effective for ensuring alignment with management plan priorities and supporting long-term capacity-building, particularly for First Nations groups. However, barriers such as administrative burdens, short grant timeframes, and challenges in securing direct investment funding were identified. These issues particularly affected smaller operators and First Nations communities. Future efforts should focus on optimising the balance between these mechanisms and addressing barriers to participation.

AMPACs were acknowledged as valuable advisory mechanisms, providing external expertise and diverse perspectives. However, their effectiveness was limited by unclear communication about committee goals, insufficient communication about management activities and how these relate to management plan actions and outcomes, and less follow-up on their input than desired. Stakeholders emphasised the need for improved communication, clearer expectations, and greater accountability to ensure AMPACs can meaningfully contribute to marine park management. Resourcing constraints within Parks Australia hindered the ability to address these issues.

9.2. Key implications for future plan development

To address these challenges and build on the successes of the current management plans, the evaluation recommends the following be considered for the next 10-year cycle:

- **Tailor program areas to specific park values and pressures** – future plans should align actions with the unique needs of individual parks and networks, avoiding overly generic approaches. The relevance and prioritisation of program areas should be critically evaluated to ensure they reflect the distinct values, pressures, and needs of each park. For example, integrating tourism-related actions into the Communications program area could better address intersecting outcomes, such as raising awareness of marine park values, and ensure resources are allocated more effectively.
- **Enhance flexibility and adaptability** – future plans should consider ways to reduce the prescriptiveness of program actions, such as adopting an outcomes-focused approach that provides high-level guidance within the management plans, while outlining specific actions in separate implementation plans. It was noted that this approach could allow Parks Australia to respond more effectively to emerging risks, priorities, and changing circumstances over the 10-year cycle.
- **Strengthen monitoring and evaluation** – Incorporate specific, measurable, and time-bound outcome indicators, supported by a robust monitoring and reporting framework to enable effective progress tracking. Clear program logic should also be developed to ensure that actions are directly aligned with intended outcomes, enabling a more systematic evaluation of the plans' effectiveness over the duration of the plan.
- **Improve engagement with First Nations partners** – embed co-management principals and approaches that prioritise early, inclusive, and culturally responsive engagement with First Nations communities. Tailor strategies to reflect the diverse ways First Nations groups care for Sea Country and ensure all relevant partners are included in decision-making processes. Up-to-date, impartial mapping of relevant groups and partners should be considered, alongside the establishment of informal engagement avenues with First Nations peoples, to enable inclusive participation.
- **Optimise zoning frameworks** – base zoning decisions on robust and transparent scientific evidence, supported by ongoing monitoring and consideration of adaptive mechanisms that allow for boundary adjustments as new information becomes available to better meet park values. Explore more flexible and nuanced zoning approaches, such as seasonal or species-specific protections, to better reflect local needs and reduce unintended consequences.

- **Align regulatory settings** – where possible, improve alignment of regulations across marine protected areas and streamline licensing processes to reduce stakeholder burden and improve compliance. Clearer communication about differing regulatory and licensing requirements across jurisdictions will also help park users navigate these systems more effectively.
- **Optimise implementation mechanisms** – continue to utilise both grants and direct investment, with consideration given to enhancing the use of direct investment to ensure stronger alignment with management plan priorities as the plans progress. In addition, address barriers to participation in grant programs, particularly for smaller operators and First Nations communities, by reducing administrative burdens and simplifying application processes.
- **Strengthen AMPACs** – improve the effectiveness of AMPACs by setting clear goals and expectations for the committees and their members and enhancing communication through regular updates, clearer requests for advice, and consistent feedback on how their input is used to inform decision-making.

APPENDIX A: Performance assessment tools

Completion status categories (at the individual action level)

 Completed	 Ongoing	 Implemented with modifications	 Partially completed or implemented	 Not commenced
Action was specific and has been fully implemented as described.	Action is an ongoing requirement that has been consistently implemented as described.	Action has been fully implemented, but in a way other than was described in the plan.	Action has been partially implemented but is not yet complete as per the description in the plan.	No progress has been made against the action.

Implementation effectiveness rating categories at the management program level

Grade	Threshold
 Good	Management actions and outcomes have been largely delivered as planned, with no significant gaps; or Management is efficient and effective due to adequate enabling services being in place; and Targets for at least three-quarters of stakeholder feedback performance measures have been fully or substantially met.
 Good with some concerns	Most management actions and outcomes have been delivered as planned but some important actions were not delivered; or Some management activities are not adequate, leading to decreased efficiency or effectiveness; and Targets for at least half of stakeholder feedback performance measures have been fully or substantially met.
 Significant concerns	Some aspects of management plan actions and outcomes have been adequately delivered, but many important actions have not been fully delivered; or Some enabling management activities are adequate, yet many are not, leading to substantially reduced efficiency or effectiveness; and/or Targets for between a quarter and a half of stakeholder feedback performance measures have been fully or substantially met.
 Critical	Failure to deliver most planned management actions and outcomes; or Many management actions are not adequate, leading to greatly reduced efficiency or effectiveness; and/or Targets for less than a quarter of stakeholder feedback performance measures have been fully or substantially met.
Unknown	There is insufficient information or data available to make a judgement.

Outcome effectiveness rating categories

Grade	Result
 Fully met	All of the success measures/targets were fully met.
 Substantially met	All of the success measures/targets were fully or substantially met.
 Partially met	Half of the success measures/targets were fully or substantially met or most/all of the measures/targets were at least partially met.
 Not met	At best, half or less than half of the success measures/targets were partially met.
 Unknown	There is insufficient information or data available to make a judgement.

Trend rating categories (outcomes)

Trend	Threshold
 Trend stable	There has been no change in the status of this matter over the life of this plan.
 Trend getting worse	There has been a negative trend in the status of this matter over the life of this plan.
 Trend getting better	There has been a positive trend in the status of the matter over the life of this plan.

Stakeholder engagement metrics

Stakeholder engagement metrics are proposed as a key measurement to determine performance against management plan actions and outcomes.

The ORIMA team will produce a stakeholder engagement plan and collect qualitative feedback from a range of relevant stakeholders about the extent to which actions and outcomes have been implemented or achieved. Stakeholder responses will be aggregated, with the approximate proportion of stakeholders who consider key outputs or outcomes to have been effectively implemented or achieved summarised as shown below.



Most – More than three quarters of stakeholders consulted

Many – More than half of the stakeholders consulted

Some – Around a third of the stakeholders consulted

A few – Less than a quarter of stakeholders consulted