

A message from the South-east Saltwater Council

Not without us, if it's about us

Traditional Owners have never surrendered rights and authority to Country, including Sea Country. All Country was protected and cared for by our Ancestors for thousands and thousands of years and is cared for by our descendants today.

Before continuing with our message, we wish to pay respects to our Ancestors, men and women, for the strength, resilience, knowledge and wisdom they shared and applied to caring for Country and their communities. They knew, as we know today, that the health of Country is connected to the identity, health and wellbeing of our people. They knew that all Country – land, rivers, oceans and all living within it – is interconnected and interdependent, and must be cared for in that way. Caring for Country also required, and continues today to include specific roles and responsibilities for men and women, alongside collective responsibility.

Our cultural and biocultural landscapes are unique. We are one of the oldest continuing cultures in the world, and our Country, all Country, is home to a vast array of plants, animals and places that have a cultural and practical value to us all. Today's cultural landscapes reflect how we engage with our world and experience the surroundings. While colonisation resulted in our Land and Sea Country being broken up into artificial land and sea tenures and associated colonising management regimes, we remain connected to our Country, the cultural landscapes and our biocultural values that continue across these artificial boundaries today.

Country is a place of belonging, and way of believing and living, including culture, identity, spirituality, language, law, family, sustainable economy and trade.

Since dispossession and colonisation, Sea Country has been significantly and negatively impacted by a different world view and values. We are deeply saddened about the degradation that has happened as a result of dispossession and colonising approaches to the use and management of Sea Country.

Our voices, our values, and the knowledge passed down to us over many generations have been ignored to the detriment of Sea Country, and all people today.

We note that Marine Parks were created in Australia, including in the south-east marine region, in an attempt to conserve small pieces of our precious Sea Country. As a global warming hotspot – in the top 10% globally – we have no time to waste in working together as partners today to address degradation and to protect Sea Country for generations going forward.

Moving forward for the wellbeing of our Sea Country and people, we must take back control of our inherited rights and responsibilities to care for Country. We must be active leaders and respected partners in the fight to protect and preserve fragile marine and coastal Country for all. The time is now for our Saltwater Council, for Traditional Owners of the South-east Marine Parks, to unite and work together in the interests of our marine parks, connected oceans, coastlines, waterways and landscapes for generations that follow us.

We have expressed our sadness and frustration at the lack of inclusion of our voices, knowledge, values and interests in decision-making about Sea Country, including most recently the

development of the South-east Marine Parks Network Management Plan (the Plan). We have expressed that we are unable to endorse the plan as we have had no part in its development.

We note that Parks Australia has acknowledged this fact, and has more recently worked with us to forge a far better way forward for all those who care about our Marine Parks and Sea Country. This will require the development of a genuine and long-term partnership with us over time, as opposed to being regarded as one of many groups or stakeholders; and tokenistic engagement.

Traditional Owners bring unbroken, deep and longstanding connections, knowledge and values to the management of Sea Country that will benefit all people, and most importantly Sea Country itself. We all need healthy Sea Country to survive and thrive, physically, culturally, spiritually and economically. All those who care for Sea Country understand this and it's our belief and experience that management as partners will benefit all.

Our South-east, Saltwater Council alliance as Traditional Owners is unique. We are autonomous and self-determined in our rights, responsibilities and approaches to caring for Country, but we are connected for the shared purpose of vastly improving and protecting South-east Marine Parks and connected Sea Country.

To achieve this vision going forward, we must put Sea Country first, and our partners need to respect our view and assertion that:

If it's about us, and all Country is about us, then planning, decision-making, and management must happen with us.

To be clear, ***with us*** means from the start of thinking about planning, to the end result of managing Country together, and how we keep track of the environmental, cultural, economic and other impacts of our decision-making and actions on Sea Country.

This requires a major shift in thinking about Traditional Owners as partners, and increased respect for our values, knowledge and assertions about how to best manage Sea Country; *all aspects of Sea Country* – from cultural heritage through to environmental stewardship and management of recreational and commercial interests. Many of us are either working on, or have in place our own Sea Country Plans that guide our work with partners, and our own communities. These are highly valuable resources as we approach partnership work for South-east Marine Parks management.

We are committed to working as respected and respectful partners with government towards growing and sustaining our South-east Marine Parks, first established in 2007 – noting that our connection precedes that time by thousands and thousands of years. In working together, we need to acknowledge this fact – that jurisdictional boundaries today can conflict with our ongoing connections to Sea Country – through millennia.

In this new era, we will work together, to improve the relationship with us, and the cultural competence of our partners and all those who care about Sea Country. We will work together to share our values, knowledge and assertions for Sea Country, and more specifically Marine Parks.

We will also work together to blend where appropriate our traditional ecological knowledge with new science and technologies. We will work collaboratively to co-design future management plans, and to build the next generation of First Nations Sea Country Guardians, planners, researchers and decision-makers.

We can do our best to remediate and address the significant damage and loss that is currently happening and that is rapidly increasing in our fragile marine and coastal environments, but we need to do this now and together.

Climate change and other anthropogenic pressures on our Sea Country do not wait. *The time to act together is now.*

This statement is endorsed by the following members of the South-east Saltwater Council:



Wadawurrung
Traditional Owners



**Wurundjeri
Woi-wurrung**
Cultural Heritage
Aboriginal Corporation

The South-east Marine Park Saltwater Council is a newly established Council whose membership includes Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAP) from Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania. It is expected that membership to this Council will continue to grow over time.