

Report of the Director of National Parks



**On the proposal to prepare draft management
plans for Christmas Island Marine Park and
Cocos (Keeling) Islands Marine Park**

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Australian Government
Parks Australia



Australian
Marine Parks

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1. Introduction

Christmas Island (CI) Marine Park and Cocos (Keeling) Islands (CKI) Marine Park were proclaimed under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) in March 2022, following extensive community engagement and stakeholder consultation.

Under the EPBC Act, the Director of National Parks (Director) is required to prepare management plans for each of these marine parks as soon as practicable. In accordance with section 368(2) of the EPBC Act, the Director invited comments on the proposal to prepare draft management plans for at least 30 days (the invitation was open from 6 July to 17 August 2023). The Director is required to take into account the comments received when preparing the draft management plans and then to release the draft plans for public comment under section 368(5) of the EPBC Act.

This report:

- Summarises the comments received in response to the proposal to prepare draft management plans for the two marine parks.
- Describes how the comments have been considered in the draft management plans (which are being released for public comment in conjunction with this report).

2. Summary of submissions and comments

2.1 Summary of submissions

In response to the notice of intent to prepare draft management plans¹ 11803 submissions were received. **Table 1** provides a breakdown of submissions.

Unique submissions were from a range of stakeholders, including Indian Ocean Territories (IOT) organisations and community members, mainland commercial fishers and representative bodies, recreational and local fishing groups, research groups, conservation organisations and mainland-based individuals. Campaign submissions² were facilitated by conservation organisations. There were 5466 campaign submissions facilitated by the Australian Marine Conservation Society and 6300 facilitated by PEW Charitable Trust (PEW).

Table 1: Summary of submissions received

Submission	Number	Comments
Unique submissions	37	<i>Of the 37 unique submissions: 12 specified the CI and CKI management plan proposals; 19 specified the CI proposal and 6 specified the CKI proposal.</i>
Campaign submissions	11766	<i>There were two different campaigns, respectively generating 6300 and 5466 submissions.</i>
Total submissions	11803	

¹ Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2023N00201>

² 'Campaign submissions' refer to those submissions that were generated by individuals through a third-party website and providing identical or very similar comments (there were two different campaigns).

Table 2: Summary of unique submissions by sector

Sector	Number of submissions
<i>IOT organisations and community groups/associations</i>	8
<i>Tourism industry*</i>	8
<i>Local government</i>	1
<i>Commercial WTBF concession holders/fisher (mainland based)</i>	2
<i>Commercial fishing representative bodies (mainland based)</i>	2
<i>Commercial fishers (IOT based)</i>	1
<i>Conservation organisations (mainland based)</i>	4
<i>Research organisations/researchers</i>	5
<i>Individuals (IOT and mainland based) – not clearly associated with a particular sector</i>	6
TOTAL	37

* Seven IOT-based and one mainland-based tourism industry submissions.

3. Submission themes, comments and management plan considerations

3.1 Marine park values

Submissions received during the consultation process emphasised the multifaceted values of the marine parks—natural, social, economic and cultural values were recognised.

Submissions highlighted natural values, such as:

- The areas of biological importance for threatened species (e.g. foraging habitat for whale sharks) and the key ecological features of the region (e.g. seamounts).
- Marine turtles, in particular hawksbill and green sea turtles and their nesting, foraging and resting habitat.
- Resident and migratory seabirds, including the globally threatened Abbott's Booby and Christmas Island Frigate and their foraging habitat in Christmas Island Marine Park.
- The ecological linkage of the Christmas Island National Park (CINP) and the Christmas Island Marine Park for seabirds and the red crab migration.
- Coral reefs and the diverse assemblage of species they support.
- Seagrass in Cocos (Keeling) Islands Marine Park and its importance as a nursery area for juvenile fish and a food source for turtles.
- The blue holes located within the Cocos (Keeling) Islands southern atoll lagoon.
- Land crabs on Christmas Island, including the globally significant population of red crabs that rely on the nearshore marine environment for spawning and larval development.
- Natural assets that occur outside of the marine parks including aggregation of giant trevally, mangroves and shoreline vegetation.

Consideration of submissions in the draft management plans

Chapter 2 of the draft management plans describes the natural values of the CI and CKI marine parks based on information received in submissions, as well as a range of other sources, including scientific and stakeholder input during the initial design of the marine parks. More detailed information on the natural values and features of the marine parks is available at

<https://parksaustralia.gov.au/marine/management/values/values-of-the-indian-ocean-territories/>.

Submissions highlighted cultural values of the marine parks, including:

- The marine environment's contribution to local community identity, culture, and lifestyle.
- The continuity of traditional fishing practices in the marine parks that have helped sustain local communities for generations.
- Sites of importance within the Christmas Island Marine Park and their contribution to the island's history.
- Pondoks (small shelters) have been utilised by Cocos Malay families on small islands in the southern atoll for generations to support access to the marine environment.
- Cocos Malay religious beliefs and practices related to the marine environment and their responsibility to protect it.

Consideration of submissions in the draft management plans

The draft management plans acknowledge and seek to describe the significant cultural and historical connections that local communities have to the marine environment in a general way, to provide context for the cultural values of the marine parks. Consultation with the local communities and advisory committees, as well as submissions, have informed content in the draft management plans that defines and describes specific cultural values. However, not every site or value of cultural significance raised through submissions has been included as a specific value of the park(s)—for example, while (Cocos (Keeling) Islands pondoks and some Christmas Island temples provide a basis of cultural connection with the marine environment, they were not included as specific park values as they are not located within the boundaries of the parks.

Submissions highlighted social and economic values of the marine park, including:

- The attraction of scuba divers, snorkelers and other tourists to the marine park's natural values and the flow on benefits this has to the wider community and local economy.
- Fishing and access to resources from the marine park providing islanders with a source of food and income.
- Local employment opportunities the marine park can provide in tourism, park management and research.
- Recreational activities that occur within the marine parks including fishing, snorkelling and diving and their contribution to the well-being and lifestyle of many community members.
- The importance of supporting social and economic values through streamlined processes for appropriate commercial access to the marine parks (e.g. for tourism operators).
- The marine park can support visitor education and learning – e.g. through collaboration with tourism operators.

Consideration of submissions in the draft management plans

With the majority of IOT waters incorporated into the two new marine parks, most of the social and economic values of these waters are now also within the marine parks. The draft management plans for the marine parks recognise social and economic values highlighted through submissions and broader consultation with local communities and other stakeholders. These include recreational and commercial activities that occur in the marine parks and the benefits derived from these, as well as benefits that marine park management can bring, such as local employment, and education. The submissions received on the social and economic values of the marine park are well-represented within these values. The draft plans also seek to provide for locally fit-for-purposes approaches for authorising commercial activities in the parks (class approval provisions for commercial tourism in Cocos (Keeling) Islands marine park for example) and commitments to continuing consultation with local communities.

3.2 Pressures on the marine park

A variety of pressures on the marine environment were identified throughout submissions. These included both indirect and direct pressures which occur at local and at global scales. Pressures raised included:

- The consequences of climate change for the marine environment, including rising sea temperatures, ocean acidification, and coral bleaching.
- Defence force activities in IOT waters.
- Potential impacts of the runway project at Cocos (Keeling) Islands, such as run-off and disturbances to sedimentation and proposed legacy waste removal.
- Activities and infrastructure within the port area of Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Island including mining, shipping, moorings, and anchors.
- International, ship-based and locally produced marine debris and its effects on marine life, tourism, and aesthetics of the island. Specific local issues raised included waste being disposed of into the marine environment and discarded fishing gear.
- Potential pollution into the marine environment, including wastewater discharge, non-reef safe sunscreen, artificial light pollution, and chemical contaminants from the taking off and landing of aeroplanes.
- The possible impacts of shark feeding, fly fishing and spearfishing on Cocos (Keeling) Islands and general pressure from increased visitation.
- Infilling of sediment in the southern lagoon on Cocos (Keeling) Islands and changes in hydrology and water quality that may be associated with this.
- Introduction of marine invasive species through ballast water and fouling on vessels.
- Local fishing pressure on local fish stocks.
- Illegal foreign fishing in the offshore waters of the parks.

Consideration of submissions in the draft management plans

Key pressures on the marine parks have been identified in the draft management plans and these reflect many of those raised through submissions, such as climate and environmental change, marine debris and other pollution, water quality, marine invasive and pest species, coastal development and infrastructure,

fishing pressure and recreational and tourism activities. Submissions received have assisted in providing island specific examples of known pressures in the marine parks. Specific local pressures or potential pressures are generally covered within the broader categories of pressures, providing scope for further consideration and possible action as part of park management.

3.3 Research, monitoring and management priorities

There was a strong linkage between the natural values and pressures identified among submissions and recommendations for related research, monitoring and management priorities, including:

- The water quality of the southern atoll lagoon at Cocos (Keeling) Islands and how it is influenced by sedimentation infilling, hydrological changes, infrastructure and development and waste management.
- Climate change impacts on the marine environment, focussing on assessing coral health, reef species and investigating resilience-building mechanisms.
- Monitoring changes to species assemblages in the southern lagoon habitats on Cocos (Keeling) Islands.
- Options to promote safe and sustainable interactions between humans and sharks on Cocos (Keeling) Islands.
- Monitoring for marine invasive species introduced by vessels or attached to debris.
- Key species and habitats in the marine park including sharks and sea cucumbers to improve understanding of their functional roles, population dynamics, threats, and mitigation measures.
- Long-term monitoring of turtles on Cocos (Keeling) Islands, in particular the health, growth rates and abundance of threatened and endangered green and hawksbill turtles and implementation of management actions to support turtle population recovery.
- The decline in seagrass in the southern lagoon on Cocos (Keeling) Islands and rehabilitation of this habitat.
- The impacts of aquaculture and fisheries on Cocos (Keeling) Islands on marine species including popular fisheries species bone fish and demersal fish.
- The impacts of potential future offshore commercial fisheries on southern blue fin tuna.
- Research to improve general understanding and support the protection of seamounts, as these vulnerable marine ecosystems are hot spots for biodiversity.
- Targeted research on threatened seabirds (e.g. tracking) to improve understanding of foraging areas.
- Adaptive management of the marine park by regularly gathering data, assessing the effectiveness of existing marine park management strategies, and identifying areas for improvement in response to new information.
- Monitoring of locally and globally sourced marine debris entering the marine park and investment into innovative waste management and recycling programs.
- Mitigation of port, shipping, mining and other coastal and development infrastructure activities impacts in and outside of the marine park.

Consideration of submissions in the draft management plans

Comments in submissions on research, monitoring and management priorities and actions have been taken into account and many are either directly reflected or broadly encompassed in the management actions and

monitoring priorities in Chapter 3 of the draft management plans. Others may become priorities during the life of the management plans and addressed through an adaptive management approach – management priorities and actions have been drafted broadly to facilitate this. Examples have been provided below to illustrate the connection between the detailed research and park management recommendations made in submissions and the broader level management priorities and actions, that will be a focus over the 10 year life of the management plans.

Improving understanding of park values and pressures on these values is a key action for the **science, monitoring and management effectiveness** management priority. This is likely to include research to better understand a range of natural values – not just those listed in the plan. The plan specifically includes actions to improve understanding of climate change and other ecosystem changes on the marine park and how to enhance resilience to these changes. Actions in this area are likely to improve understanding of changes in water quality, sedimentation infilling, lagoon species assemblages and a range of other specific matters raised through submissions.

The **protection, resilience and adaptation** management priority will involve management actions to protect species, habitats and ecosystems under pressure. This includes efforts to restore seagrass habitats on Cocos (Keeling) Islands (a clear management priority expressed through many submissions and other sources) and will capture actions to monitor and manage invasive species and marine debris (among other things). The impacts of infrastructure and development activities within the marine park will be managed through the assessment and regulation of proposals and activities within the marine park under this priority.

Australian Marine Parks are not designed for fisheries management. Monitoring stocks of target fish species will therefore generally not be a management priority for Parks Australia though Parks will seek to draw on monitoring by fisheries managers to support marine park management. Parks Australia's management and monitoring will generally focus on habitats and broader species groups and other natural values. The draft management plans do recognise that pelagic fish species are an important natural, cultural, social and economic value for the IOT marine parks and has listed them as a monitoring priority.

3.4 Community and visitor engagement and education

Several submissions made suggestions about how to best engage and communicate with the community and visitors about the marine park, including:

- Education and engagement through schools to foster intergenerational knowledge transfer, for example through:
 - Direct involvement of school students in beach-clean ups and research projects
 - Establishment of a Cocos (Keeling) Islands junior ranger program.
- Targeted communication through signage at key visitor sites providing information on conservation efforts in the marine parks and educational material on how to protect them.
- Involve and educate communities on management of the marine park through community meetings/information sessions, community events, workshops, and citizen science projects.
- Hold a multi-sector forum on Cocos (Keeling) Islands for the community, scientists, and industry to educate, engage and foster broader collaboration between stakeholders.

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- Funding and capacity building to support co-management of the marine park by the local communities to ensure better outcomes for the environment and the community. Including the creation of long term local marine park ranger jobs and supporting small locally run projects on Cocos (Keeling) Islands.
- Increase visitor awareness of the natural and cultural values of the marine parks and the impact activities can have on the marine park.
- Collaboration with tourism operators and accommodation providers to educate visitors on the marine park and promote sustainable use of the park including through high quality and safe tourism practices (e.g. voluntourism).
- Work with local stakeholders including fishers and tourism operators on Christmas Island to develop sustainable practices that benefit the environment and the local community.
- Communication methods to effectively engage with the Cocos (Keeling) Islands community on the marine park include using social media, placing signage at the airport or ferry terminal, and contributing articles to the local newsletter.
- Educational activities and signage to promote communities and visitors' awareness of marine debris.

Consideration of submissions in the draft management plans

Comments in submissions about community and visitor engagement and education priorities have been taken into account and some are directly reflected in Chapter 3 of the draft management plans. There are two management priorities and goals provided in Chapter 3 in relation to 'visitor use and communication' and 'community and stakeholder engagement' and community advisory committees will be established for each park. This will ensure that community and visitor engagement is a focus over the life of the management plans and specific actions in the plan include:

- *Building on environmental educational programs in local schools.*
- *Educating visitors and park users about sustainable practices.*

Some suggestions put forward in submissions are already being undertaken – such as the development of educational signage and the employment of local marine park rangers. Other specific suggestions will be more appropriately considered during the implementation of the management plans (such as the idea to hold a multi-sector forum on Cocos (Keeling) Islands), especially through the advisory committees that will be established under the plans.

Parks Australia will continue to encourage marine researchers to hold community meetings, community events and workshops and otherwise involve community members and visitors in their work. Establishing and maintaining partnerships and collaborative arrangements with local groups and stakeholders (such as tourism operators) will be a key focus of Parks Australia's management across all areas of management.

3.5 Marine park designs

A common theme across most submissions was strong support for the zoning of the marine parks that was established through their proclamation in March 2022. Comments included:

- Support for the current zoning of both marine parks that have been co-designed with the local communities following extensive consultation.

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- Support for the retainment of the inshore yellow zones (Habitat Protection Zones) that enables the sustainable use by the local communities and offshore green zones that protects fish stocks.
- Emphasis on the global conservation benefits of protecting the pelagic environment in the offshore green zones.
- The marine parks' contribution to the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas (NRSMPA) and Australia's support for the global target to protect 30 per cent of the world's oceans by 2030.

Five submissions suggested changes to the current zoning to increase inshore protection of the marine parks. Comments included:

- Increasing the protection of the marine park by establishing green zones in 30% of inshore waters for both marine parks.
- Inclusion of the port area in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands Marine Park as a Multiple Use Zone to increase the functionality of the marine park.
- Inclusion of an inshore green zone in Christmas Island Marine Park to protect areas with high levels of biodiversity (e.g. outer reef slope), meet the NRSMPA goals and protect demersal fish species. One suggestion was made for areas of the south coast which are fished infrequently due to unfavourable swell conditions.

Four submissions from the commercial fishing industry sector proposed changes to the marine park design and commented on the potential impacts to the mainland-based commercial fishing industry—Western Tuna and Billfish Fishery (WTBF) concession holders in particular. These submissions suggested that the offshore green zoning should be changed to yellow zones (Habitat Protection Zones) to enable pelagic commercial fishing to occur in the future or that lower impact fishing (e.g. longline fishing) should be allowed within the offshore green zones of the marine parks. Reasons given included:

- The marine park zoning significantly impacts the WTBF and the industry was not properly consulted on the marine park design.
- The marine park design does not align with the principles of comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness that underpin the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas (NRSMPA).
- There is insufficient scientific justification for the establishment of the offshore green zones.
- The commercial fishing methods that would be used (e.g. pelagic longline) would not harm seafloor features, as it occurs in the upper water column and would have low catch rates of non-target species.
- Low impact fishing (e.g. pelagic longline fishing) should be allowed in the green zones of the marine parks and managed via seasonal closures or other fisheries management tools.
- Pelagic species outside of the Australian Fishing Zone are being exploited by foreign fishing vessels and the exclusion of commercial fishing in the green zones of the marine park is leading to an increase in imported seafood.
- An offshore green zone is not necessary as Australia's Fisheries Management Authority already manage pelagic fish species in this area.
- The design of the marine parks limits the industry's ability to respond to climate-induced stock movements.

Consideration of submissions in the draft management plans

Comments in submissions about marine park design have been taken into account.

Parks Australia conducted extensive community and stakeholder consultation on the design of the Indian Ocean Territories marine parks during 2021. The extent and zoning of the marine parks as proclaimed in March 2022 reflects this. Comments received on the proposal to prepare management plans for the marine parks did not provide new information that the Director considers would warrant changes to the proclamation zoning.

The Director's December 2021 report on Establishing Australian Marine Parks in the Indian Ocean Territories addresses most of the concerns raised in comments about the design of the marine parks. This report is available at: <https://parksaustralia.gov.au/marine/pub/iot/AMP-IOT-DNP-Report.pdf>.

In relation to zoning the Cocos (Keeling) Islands port as a Multiple Use Zone, it cannot be included as a zone within the management plan, as most of the port area is not included within the marine park.

3.6 Compliance and authorisation of activities in the marine parks

Several comments were made in relation to managing compliance and authorisation of activities in the marine parks, including:

- Adequate monitoring and enforcement in the offshore and nearshore environments are required to protect the marine park from illegal fishing.
- A well-funded community led fisheries management will lead to the best environmental outcomes for the marine park.
- Support for a fisheries license regime, education program and enforced bag and size limits to manage recreational fishing in the marine park.
- Limits on the number of charter fishing tours on Cocos (Keeling) Islands.
- Commercial and recreational fishing needs to be sustainable to ensure the long-term viability of the fisheries and the preservation of fish stocks.
- Prohibition should be applied to trophy hunting and spearfishing within Christmas Island Marine Park and spearfishing with scuba on Cocos (Keeling) Islands.
- Restriction should be imposed on the export of fish out of Cocos (Keeling) Islands.
- Support for simplicity and consistency between authorisation of commercial tourism activities in the Christmas Island National Park (CINP) and the Christmas Island Marine Park.
- Improving the sustainability of tourism activities on the island through recognition of global sustainability standards and supporting the tourism industry to increase certification uptake.
- Enablement of traditional hunting of red-footed boobies for food by the Cocos Malay outside of Pulu Keeling National Park (PKNP).

Consideration of submissions in the draft management plans

Comments received on compliance and authorisation of activities have been taken into account in the draft management plans. The management plans support the recently established community led recreational

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fishing management arrangements established by the Commonwealth Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts (DIRTDCA) by applying these arrangements within the yellow (Habitat Protection Zones) of the marine parks. The rules implemented by DIRTDCA apply many of the suggested management measures such as bag, size and export limits.

The management plans acknowledge the threat of illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing and that Parks Australia will partner with other government agencies to counter this threat to the extent possible.

The management plans provide that commercial tourism operators will be authorised to operate in the marine parks under a class approval, permit or licence. To support streamlining of authorisations for local tourism operators:

- *The draft Christmas Island Marine Park management plan states that the Director will implement arrangements to enable marine tourism operators to gain a single authorisation covering both Christmas Island National Park and Christmas Island Marine Park.*
- *The draft Cocos (Keeling) Islands Marine Park management plan states that the Director will seek to establish a class approval under this management plan with fit-for-purpose conditions for local marine tourism operators, rather than an individual authorisation process.*

The Red-footed Booby is a listed migratory and marine species under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act). An approval under the EPBC Act would be required before this species could be harvested. However, the Director recognises the cultural importance of such a harvest for some members of the Cocos Malay community, and the Cocos (Keeling) Islands Marine Park management plan allows such a harvest to occur in the marine park if an EPBC Act approval is obtained.

3.7 Other comments

Some submissions provided comments on items that were not relevant to the proposal to draft management plans for the Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands Marine Parks. These comments were not taken into account and are not discussed in this report or reflected in the draft management plans.

Appendix A: Acronyms

AEEZ – Australia’s Exclusive Economic Zone

CI – Christmas Island

CINP – Christmas Island National Park

CITA – Christmas Island Tourism Association

CKI – Cocos (Keeling) Islands

DITRDCA – Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts

EPBC Act – Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act

IOT – Indian Ocean Territory/Territories (Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands)

NRSMPA – National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas

PKNP – Pulu Keeling National Park

WTBF – Western Tuna and Billfish Fishery