



Australia creates the world's largest network of marine reserves

By Online Editor

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By Makereta Komai, PACNEWS Editor in Rio de Janeiro

Australia's most precious ocean environments will be protected by the world's largest network of marine reserves created by the Gillard Government.

Environment Minister Tony Burke released on Thursday (14 June) Government's final network of marine reserves which - once proclaimed under national environmental law - will increase the number of marine reserves from 27 to 60, expanding the national network to cover more than a third of Commonwealth waters.

“For generations Australians have understood the need to preserve precious areas on land as national parks. Our oceans contain unique marine life which needs protection too,” he said.

“We have an incredible opportunity to turn the tide on protection of the oceans and Australia can lead the world in marine protection.

“The maps I have released today are most comprehensive network of marine protected areas in the world and represent the largest addition to the conservation estate in Australia's history.

“This new network of marine reserves will help ensure that Australia's diverse marine environment, and the life it supports, remain healthy, productive and resilient for future generations.”

The new marine reserves take the overall size of the Commonwealth marine reserves network to 3.1 million square kilometres, by far the largest representative network of marine protected areas in the world.

Following the huge number of submissions received, protection has been increased for a number of iconic reefs in the Coral Sea Marine Reserve that are important for marine turtles and large ocean predators.

The national marine network features:

1) The Coral Sea Region is the jewel in the Crown and covers an area of more than half the size of Queensland. It supports critical nesting sites for the green turtle and is renowned for its diversity of big predatory fish and sharks. The network includes protection for all reefs in the Coral Sea with the final proposal adding iconic reefs such as Osprey Reef, Marion Reef, Bougainville Reef, Vema Reef, and Shark Reef included as marine national parks.

2) The South-West Marine Region extends from the eastern end of Kangaroo Island in South Australia to Shark Bay in Western Australia. It is of global significance as a breeding and feeding ground for a number of protected marine species such as southern right whales, blue whales and the Australian Sea Lion. Features in the South-West region include the Perth Canyon – an underwater area bigger than the Grand Canyon and the Diamantina Fracture Zone – a large underwater mountain chain which includes Australia's deepest water.

3) The Temperate East Marine Region runs from the southern boundary of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park to Bermagui in southern New South Wales, and includes the waters surrounding Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands. It is home to the critically endangered east coast population of grey nurse shark, the vulnerable white shark and has important offshore reef habitat at Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs and Lord Howe Island that support the threatened black cod.

4) The North Marine Region includes only the Commonwealth waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Arafura Sea and the Timor Sea extending as far west as the Northern Territory-Western Australian border. Globally important nesting and resting areas for threatened marine turtle species including flatback, hawksbill, green and olive ridley turtles will be protected. As will important foraging areas for breeding colonies of migratory seabirds and large aggregations of dugongs.

5) The North-west Marine Region which stretches from the Western Australian - Northern Territory border through to Kalbarri, south of Shark Bay in Western Australia is home to the whale shark which is the world's largest fish and provides protection to the world's largest population of humpback whales that migrate annually from Antarctica to give birth in the water off the Kimberley.

Burke said over the past 12 months, the Government has consulted with marine and tourism business representatives, environmental groups and members of the public through 250 meetings across the country.

“I have met with stakeholders across the country and more than 1950 people have been involved in the full consultation process,” he said.

“Our aim is to protect our unique marine environment, while supporting coastal communities and marine industries around the country.

“Over the coming months, the Government will consult the fishing industry and fisheries management agencies on the design and implementation of a fisheries adjustment assistance

package.

“We now go through one final 60 day consultation period. It's too late for people to say I want this line shifted or I want this zone painted a different colour. The question now is very straight forward. Do we go ahead with the most comprehensive marine park network in the world or do we not?”

It is expected that the final marine reserves will be declared before the end of the 2012.

SOURCE: PACNEWS