

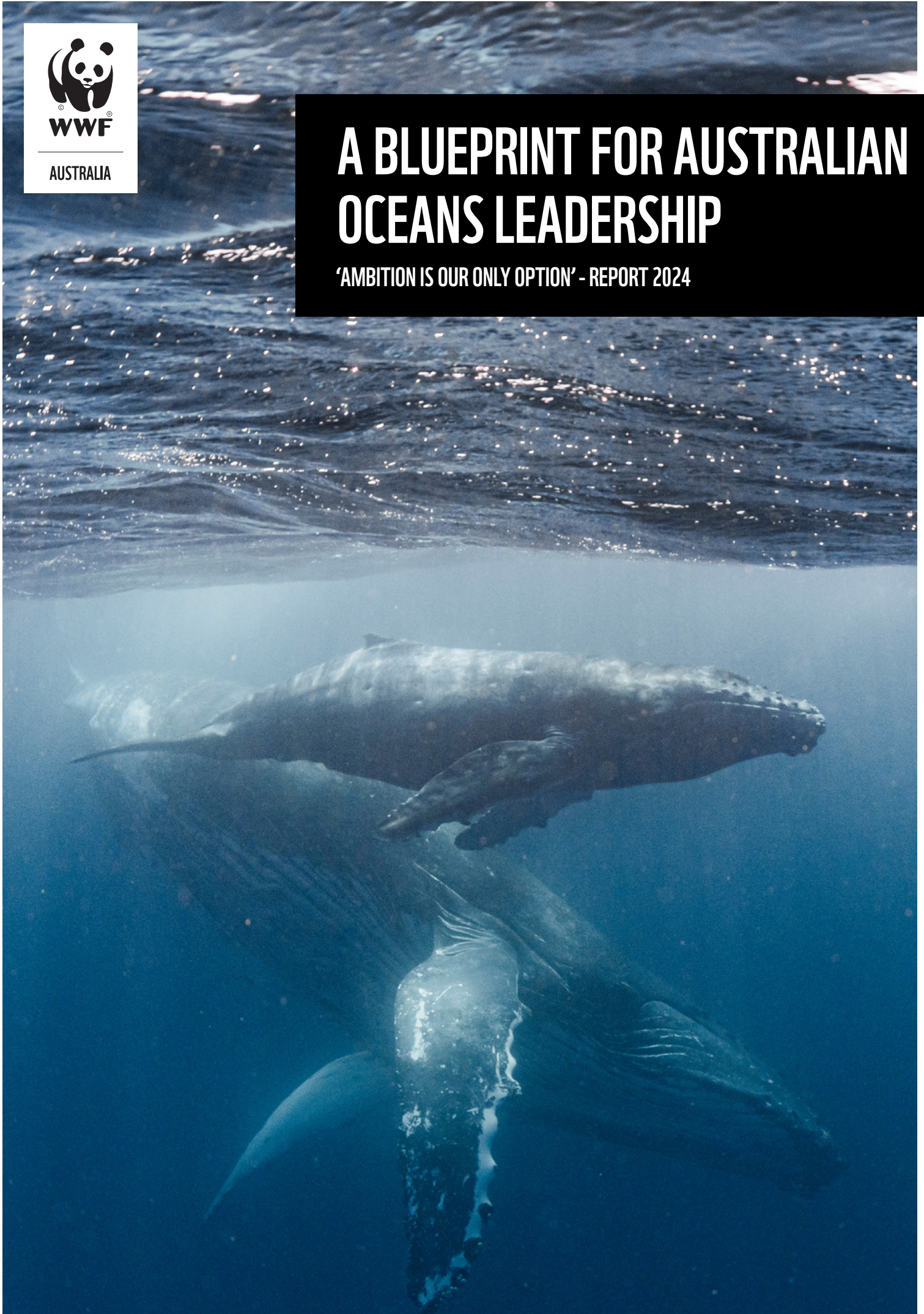


WWF

AUSTRALIA

A BLUEPRINT FOR AUSTRALIAN OCEANS LEADERSHIP

'AMBITION IS OUR ONLY OPTION' - REPORT 2024



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WWF-Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of lands, waters and sky throughout Australia. We honour their strong connection to Country, and the protective relationship that connection inspires. We pay our respects to Traditional Owners' deep expertise in managing and protecting Country over thousands of generations, and to Elders, past, present and emerging.

WWF-Australia has been working to create a world where people live in harmony with nature since 1978. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

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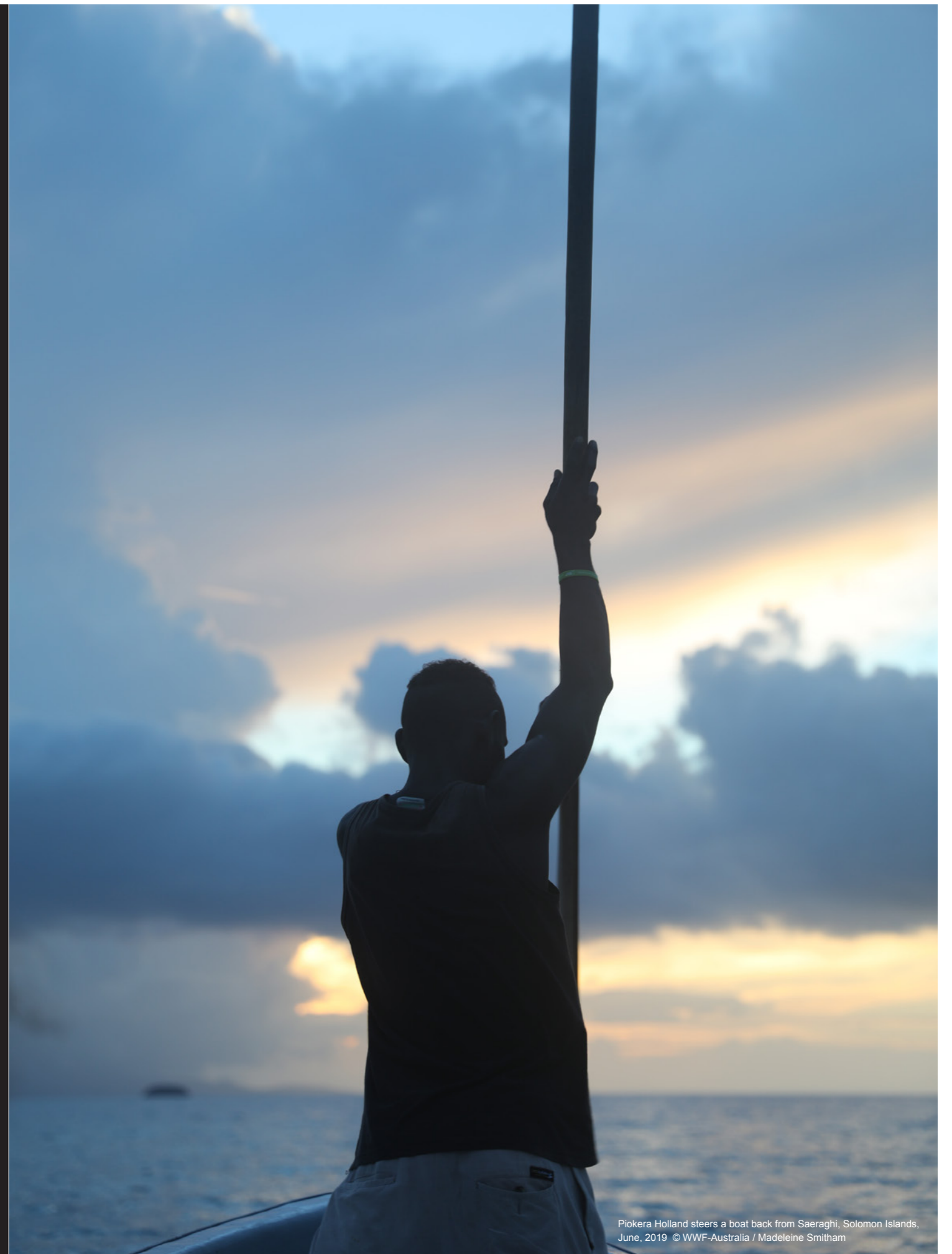


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'THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT UNDERSTANDS THE URGENCY OF THE CHALLENGE FACING OUR PLANET, AND WE ARE COMMITTED TO BEING A FULL PARTNER IN THE GLOBAL FIGHT TO SOLVE IT. ... THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A HEALTHY OCEAN WITHOUT A HEALTHY CLIMATE. AMBITION IS OUR ONLY OPTION. ... I WANT TO MAKE THIS PROMISE TO EVERYONE FROM THE PACIFIC HERE TODAY: AUSTRALIA IS LISTENING CLOSELY TO WHAT YOU'RE SAYING – AND WE ARE READY TO ACT. NOT JUST ON CLIMATE, BUT ON EVERY ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTION THAT TOUCHES YOU.'

THE HON TANYA PLIBERSEK, MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND WATER, AT THE UN OCEANS CONFERENCE IN PORTUGAL, 29 JUNE 2022



Piokera Holland steers a boat back from Saeraghi, Solomon Islands, June, 2019 © WWF-Australia / Madeleine Smitham

AMBITION IS OUR ONLY OPTION

When elected in 2022, the new Australian Government led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese set out a bold agenda for ocean protection and collaborative, sustainable oceans management.

This agenda was articulated at a range of Australian and international forums, from Sydney to Bali, from Canberra to Apia, and from New York to Lisbon. The Australian Government promised to ‘put the environment front and centre – back where it belongs’,¹ rightly framing nature protection as a human right as well as an economic, foreign policy and security issue. Commitments have been made at the highest levels of government, and while some progress has been made, many remain in the planning stage. To help realise this vision and what is needed to achieve it, WWF-Australia’s Blueprint for Oceans Leadership sets out 10 areas for action and around 50 specific recommendations. These are essential to achieve Australia’s international diplomatic and environmental leadership aspirations and to work in genuine partnership with other countries.

The perception that our oceans are immune to human pressures has been proven a myth. In recent years, it has become increasingly stark that multiple and cumulative threats are severely impacting our oceans – and people’s livelihoods as well as marine life. These include global warming, overfishing, industrial coastal developments, and pollution. Scientists confirmed that in 2023/24, coral bleaching occurred in at least 62 countries and territories worldwide; this year’s mass bleaching event will likely constitute the worst ever of its kind.²

Globally, nearly 1,500 marine species are listed as being at risk of extinction,³ and in Australia, more than half our shallow reef species have declined in numbers over the past decade alone.⁴ If we can’t halt and reverse unsustainable demands on our oceans, then Australia’s long-term well-being and prosperity are threatened, and populations across the Blue Pacific Continent (Oceania) face genuine existential threats.⁵

Historically, Australia has been a global leader in oceans conservation. Australia established one of the world’s first marine protected areas (MPAs) in 1879⁶; was one of the original

signatories to the Antarctic Treaty; and was a pioneer in establishing marine park and World Heritage protection for the Great Barrier and Ningaloo reefs. Oceans are central to the stories of so many Australian communities, to our national identity, and to our international reputation. But in the last decade, Australia’s global standing has diminished at a time when oceans conservation has become increasingly prominent and more urgently needed. Successive Australian governments have made some high-level commitments. These include efforts to tackle major transboundary threats through relevant international agreements⁷ and to sustainably manage 100 per cent of our oceans as one of 18 country members of the High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy.

These commitments are a solid foundation on which to build. But to regain Australia’s track record as a true world leader in oceans protection, concerted action across a range of areas is greatly needed. This includes a range of domestic, regional and global issues, many of which overlap and will deliver multiple and cumulative benefits. With this Blueprint, WWF-Australia urges decisive and swift action on 10 key areas as the basis for Australia’s oceans leadership:

1. Elevate First Nations leadership for healthy Sea Country, healthy people
2. Catalyse 30x30 in our region
3. Become a world leader in blue corridor conservation for key species
4. Build a world-class marine park network in Australia
5. Protect coral reefs in the face of global heating
6. Invest in the future of the Blue Pacific community
7. Eliminate plastic pollution and transition to a circular economy
8. Lead and collaborate on high seas protection
9. Support a moratorium on deep sea mining
10. End overfishing and harmful fishing practices.

A BLUEPRINT FOR AUSTRALIAN OCEANS LEADERSHIP



ELEVATE FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP



CATALYSE 30X30 IN OUR REGION



BLUE CORRIDOR CONSERVATION FOR KEY SPECIES



BUILD A WORLD-CLASS MPA NETWORK



PROTECT CORAL REEFS



INVEST IN THE BLUE PACIFIC



ELIMINATE PLASTIC POLLUTION



HIGH SEAS PROTECTION



MORATORIUM ON DEEP SEA MINING



END OVERFISHING & HARMFUL FISHING



Studying humpback whales with drones and digital tags along the Antarctic Peninsula.
© Duke University Marine Robotics and Remote Sensing Lab. Permit under NOAA.

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30%
FULLY
PROTECTED
MPAs BY 2030

Ambitious action on climate to stabilise global average temperature rise to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels must be the cornerstone of all ocean protection efforts. Communities worldwide, including many in Australia and the Pacific region, rely on the health of reefs and oceans for their livelihoods, food security and prosperity. The Australian Government's continued support for fossil fuels is contributing to harm to those communities as the health of reefs globally declines. Now is the time for Australia to take bold steps on climate action in response to calls from Pacific leaders and start healing the harm caused to oceans from many decades of delay and disruption of climate action.⁸

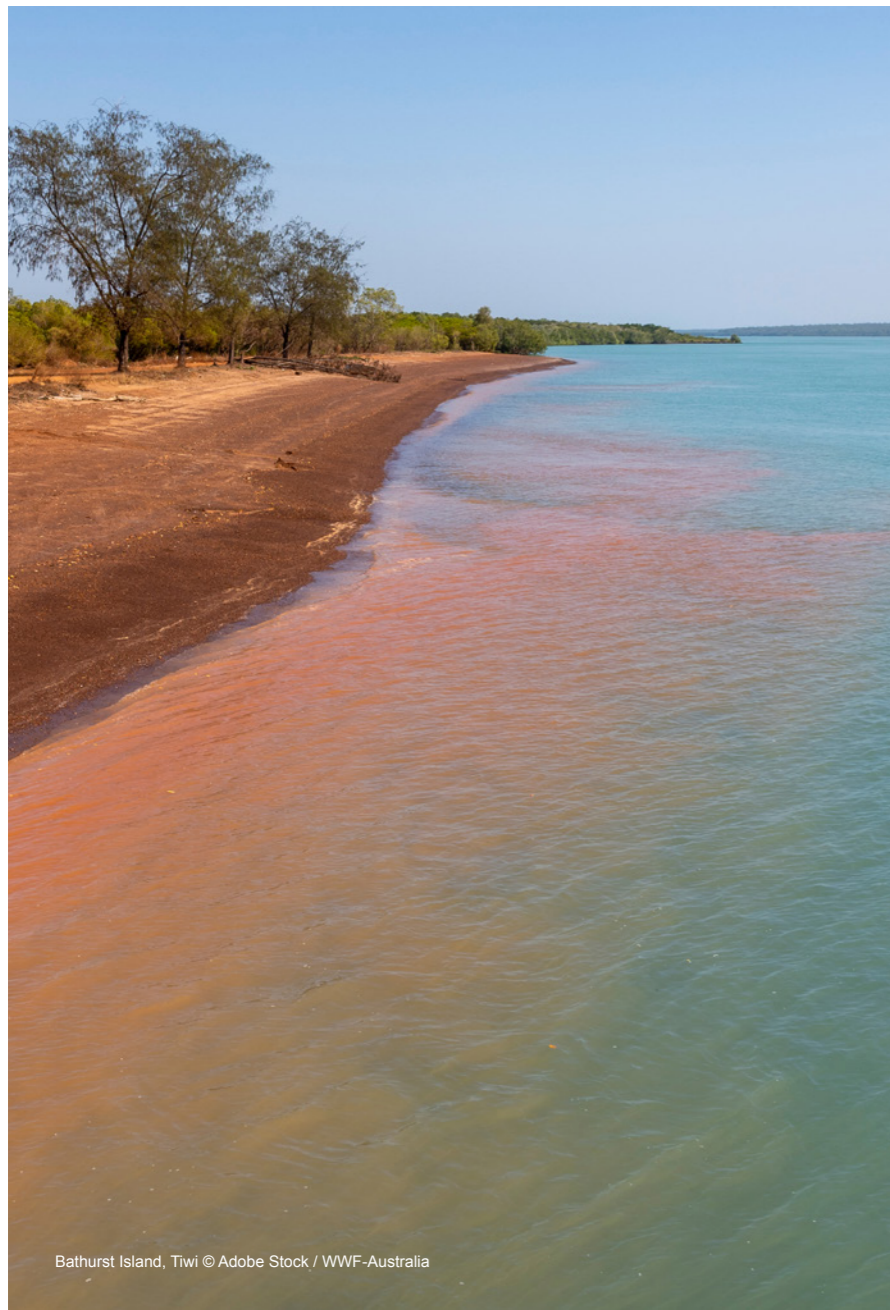


30%
DEGRADED
ECOSYSTEMS
UNDER
RESTORATION
BY 2030

Importantly, these actions cannot be piecemeal, and must be taken across all areas presented in this Blueprint. Individually, they represent important programs of work that can have significant beneficial impacts for species, communities, and ecosystems. They may be actioned at different levels of government and integrated across several action agendas, for example, Australia's Strategy for Nature and the Sustainable Oceans Plan. But these commitments must be more than the sum of their parts if we are to halt and reverse marine biodiversity loss. It is only comprehensive action across all areas in this Blueprint that will ensure the health of our oceans, as well as the security of livelihoods and economies across the Oceania region.

1 ELEVATE FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP FOR HEALTHY SEA COUNTRY, HEALTHY PEOPLE

First Nations and local communities have struggled relentlessly for generations to conserve their traditional lands and seas and preserve their rights.



During this time, these communities have witnessed – and fought to mitigate – epic levels of harm to Sea/Saltwater Country.⁹ The Indigenous-led *Heart of the Reef* statement sums this up in clear terms: ‘today Country is sick...we are all suffering and we can’t continue this way’.¹⁰ First Peoples coined the phrase ‘healthy Country, healthy people’ – long-held knowledge increasingly underpinned by scientific evidence¹¹ – and understand the truth and implications of this saying in a way that many Australians do not. Healthy Country, healthy people can be considered important to all Australians and to all Country – land and sea. The work of healing Country is a job for all Australians, working together with elected representatives and governments.

In recent decades Australia’s governments have started to integrate First Nations leadership into policymaking, management and caring for Country. While not a panacea for healing Country, these efforts are a critical stepping stone towards inclusive conservation; they are also a recognised driver of *Closing the Gap* (Target 8 (employment) and Target 15B (legal rights/interests in the sea)).¹² Some important progress has been made, for example, through establishment of the Indigenous Protected Area

(IPA) Program in 1997 and work to reconcile governance of marine protected areas (MPAs) with First Peoples’ customary ownership of coastal and marine environments.¹³

First Nations legal rights in marine areas have seen slower progress compared with land rights.¹⁴ There are also worrying signs of efforts to undermine those rights. First Nations leadership in environmental protection litigation recently resulted in Federal Court orders that initially prevented Santos’ planned drilling 7 km off the coast of the Tiwi Islands in 2022; then, in 2024, the court lifted the injunction, permitting drilling to proceed.¹⁵ Santos subsequently took legal action to recover costs from environmental groups that were not parties to the case but had supported First Nations groups efforts to protect sea country.¹⁶ While Santos has discontinued the action for now, there are major concerns regarding the chilling effect of similar action in the future on First Nations environmental leadership, collaboration with environmental charities, and democratic participation more broadly.

Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) and Indigenous rangers are the foundation of effective and equitable nature conservation in Australia. While funding has been insecure, this work has benefited from bipartisan political support. Australia’s IPA program has



**FIRST NATIONS
LEGAL RIGHTS IN MARINE
AREAS HAVE SEEN SLOWER
PROGRESS COMPARED WITH
LAND RIGHTS**

delivered demonstrable social, cultural, health and economic benefits, while forging more collaborative caring for Country.¹⁷ But barriers to inclusive conservation remain, including equitable and durable funding; job creation and gender equity in conservation roles; and legal reform to remedy a range of issues.

Scaling-up government investment in and cooperation on IPAs and conservation employment will not only deliver benefits to First Nations communities and all Australians. This work can play an important complementary role in meeting the 2030 and 2050 biodiversity goals agreed upon by the international community as part of the Global Biodiversity Framework. As countries take on the essential challenge of protecting 30 per cent of the world’s oceans by 2030 (and more in the long term), ‘other effective conservation measures’ (commonly referred to as OECM and including indigenous protected areas) will be a crucial tool to achieve this. Australian First Nations leadership can help to pave the way towards these goals through capacity and knowledge sharing across our region and internationally.

1 ELEVATE FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP FOR HEALTHY SEA COUNTRY, HEALTHY PEOPLE

Recommendations

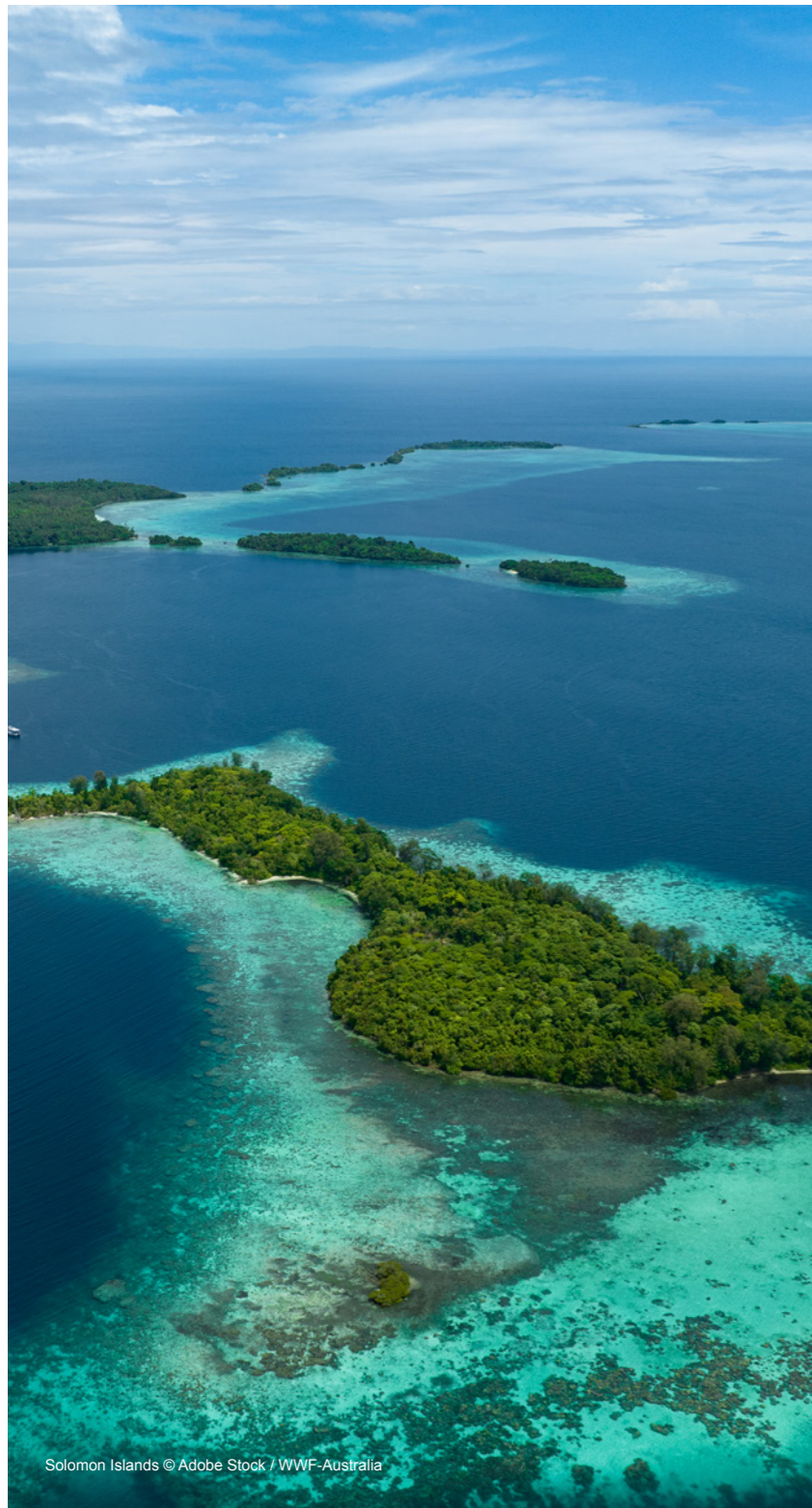
While all areas outlined in this Blueprint can contribute to the work of healing Country to benefit all Australians; the recommendations in this section focus on priorities specific to First Nations communities and leadership.

- 1.1 Establish a Commissioner for Country as a voice for Country, empowered to lead and support work to heal Country. The role should be Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander identified, established in statute, appointed by the Minister for Environment and accompanied by an appropriately resourced office.
- 1.2 Double the area of Sea Country Indigenous Protected Areas from 5.5 million hectares to 11 million hectares, with sustained and adequate funding allocated to management. A twinned employment strategy should seek to broaden the distribution of Indigenous ranger programs across Australia to care for expanded protected areas.
- 1.3 Commit to creating and employing 5,000 Indigenous ranger roles by 2030 and achieving gender equity by 2026. WWF-Australia welcomes Labor's commitment to create 3,800 roles by the end of the decade but advocates a more ambitious – but still realistic – goal.
- 1.4 Allocate \$10 million over three years to expand and operate an Indigenous women rangers' network, supporting women rangers' entry, retention and ability to excel in their field. The package must be comprehensive (i.e. fund more than salaries) and ensure culturally safe workplaces, female leadership, appropriate professional support and career pathway development.
- 1.5 Undertake policy and regulatory reform to provide Indigenous rangers with the opportunity to assume responsibilities for enforcement and compliance activities in their Sea Country and provide adequate resourcing and training to support this.
- 1.6 Introduce legislation to define and prohibit strategic litigation against public participation lawsuits, to protect First Nations communities' ability to advocate on behalf of their communities and Sea Country and to protect the democratic freedoms of all Australians.



Dolphins in Australia © Adobe Stock / WWF-Australia

2 CATALYSE 30x30 IN OUR REGION



The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) represents one of the most significant commitments to date by the international community to halt and reverse biodiversity loss.

The GBF 2050 goals and 2030 targets are ambitious, achievable and essential. They are, however, not legally binding. To achieve them, bold political leadership and strong partnerships will be essential. Achieving marine conservation targets will be a major challenge, noting that we will need to nearly quadruple the amount of marine protected and conserved areas globally, which currently sits at around 8 per cent.¹⁸

Globally, 30x30 marine protection is widely recognised as a **minimum requirement to mitigate unacceptable levels of biodiversity loss.**¹⁹ The scientific evidence base supports 30-70 per cent protection of land and sea internationally; 30-50 per cent of each habitat or ecosystem in each bioregion in areas like Australia²⁰; and higher for particular areas such as turtle nesting beaches.²¹ Some mega-biodiverse regions and countries will need to contribute more substantially to global 30x30 goals compared with others (see Table 1). This includes the Oceania region, characterised by ‘immense biodiversity’, including species found nowhere else on Earth (see Figure 1).²²

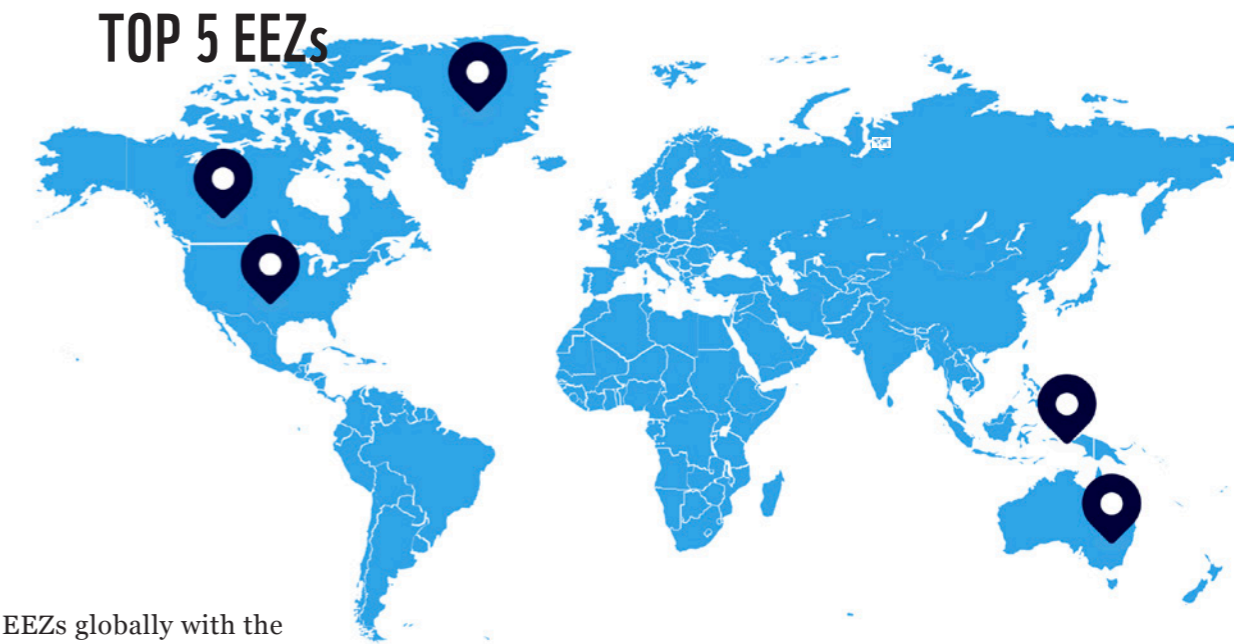


Table 1: Top 5 EEZs globally with the greatest amount of ‘Prioritised Area’ (global protection priorities within EEZs based on measures of biodiversity, from species to ecosystem level)²³

EEZ	Areas within the prioritized areas (10 ⁴ × km ²) >400,000 km ²	% EEZ
Canada	457	35
Australia ²⁴	393	55
United States	380	36
Greenland	348	47
Indonesia	335	69

Bounded by the Indian, Southern and South Pacific Oceans, as well as the Timor, Arafura, Coral and Tasman Seas, Australia is well positioned to influence and catalyse ocean conservation and sustainable management in the southern hemisphere. A great deal of the Earth’s marine biodiversity is found in these waters (and Table 1 and Figure 1). Partnerships with many countries that have made 30x30 commitments can help to drive these efforts. In this context, WWF-Australia advocates approaching the marine component of Target 3 – to conserve and manage at least 30 per cent of oceans, also known as 30x30 – from a regional perspective. This can form one important spatial approach to 30x30 that elevates and emphasises regional political collaboration and biological characteristics.

Under such an approach, high-capacity countries such as Australia should lead by example in high-level protection within their own exclusive economic zone (EEZ), as well as championing and supporting efforts within our region, political spheres of influence, and within relevant international forums. With significant expertise, capacity, financial resources and scientific capabilities, Australia is well placed and obliged to support collective efforts to protect our shared oceans and ecosystems. Australian leadership on 30x30 can build on our historical track record, including our engagement with Antarctic/Southern Ocean protection and management of marine ecosystems within Australia’s EEZ, such as Heard Island, McDonald Island and Macquarie Island.

2 CATALYSE 30x30 IN OUR REGION

Recommendations

- 2.1 Create a Special Envoy for Oceans role, with a mandate including (but not limited to) elevating and progressing oceans diplomacy and action domestically and internationally, working closely with relevant ministers and across portfolios, and building population-wide oceans literacy.
- 2.2 Work with Asia-Pacific states to collectively prioritise areas for conservation, leveraging Australia's significant marine science expertise and resources; focusing on connectivity; and ensuring comprehensive, adequate and representative protection. This will make a significant contribution to 30x30 goals at national, regional and international levels; deliver increased biodiversity protection; and help to secure livelihoods for coastal communities and economies.
- 2.3 Build support within the Pacific Island Forum and other regional fora for Ecologically or Biologically Significant Areas (EBSA) within the Oceania region, which should inform marine protection and effective conservation planning at the regional level.
- 2.4 Help to catalyse sustainable financing from public and private sources into ocean protection and sustainable management across the Oceania region. Continue and scale-up government investment in sustainable oceans management, including in support of marine protection and other effective conservation efforts by Pacific Island countries and territories.
- 2.5 Work with other leading ocean countries to help convene a global accord by the 2025 UN Oceans Conference to protect 100 per cent of seamounts globally.²⁵ UN member states called for immediate action to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems – including seamounts – two decades ago²⁶; now is the time to put words into action. As a first step, Australia should ensure seamount protection and end destructive bottom trawling in our EEZ and advocate protection measures through the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation.
- 2.6 Strengthen high-level political advocacy at the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) and with other key stakeholders to implement a network of Southern Ocean MPAs in East Antarctica, the Antarctic Peninsula and Weddell Sea, with the immediate priority being the East Antarctic MPA.

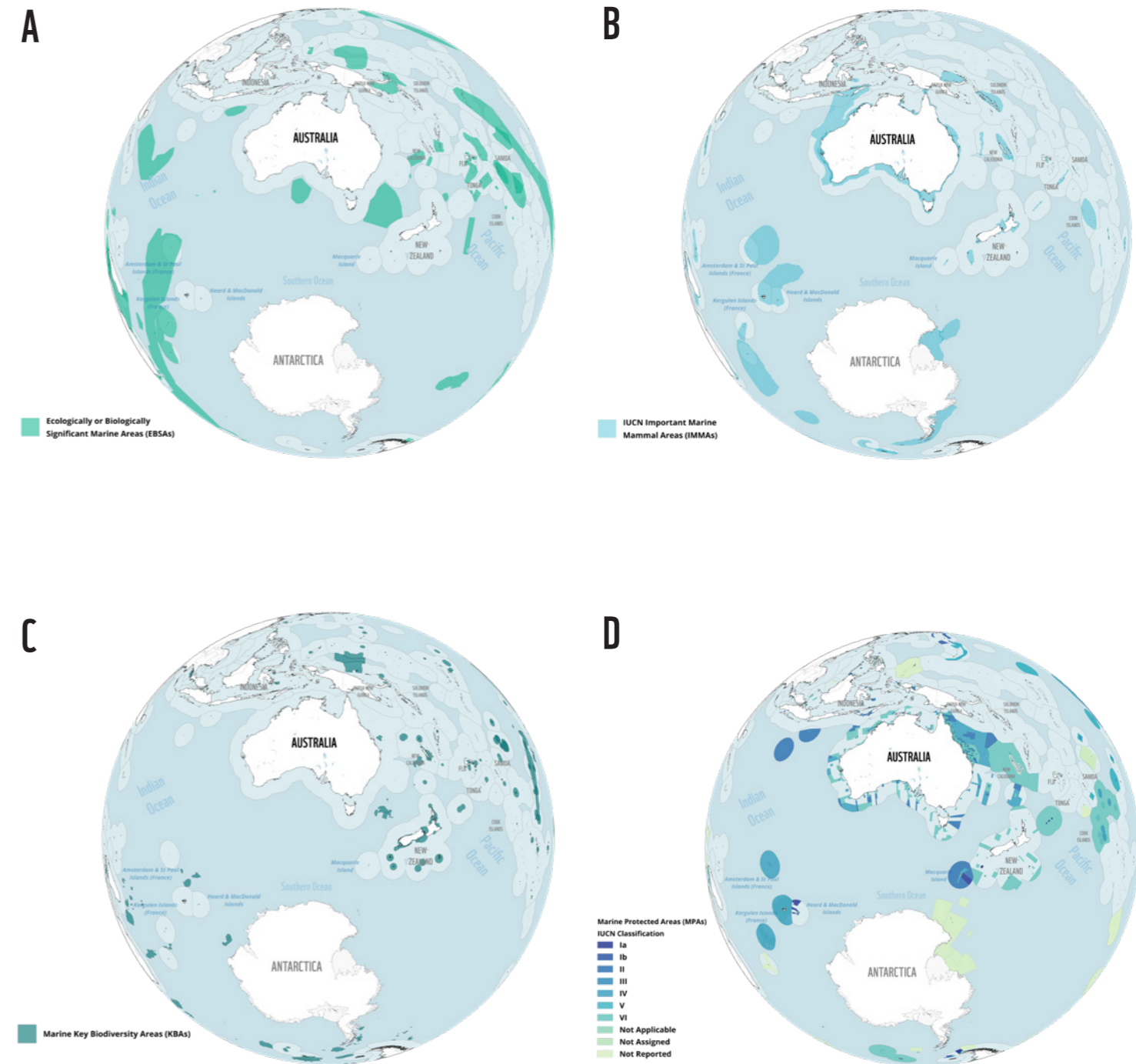


Figure 1: Marine areas requiring protection and effective management (assessed against established scientific criteria and designated as internationally significant) and existing marine protected areas across Oceania. A) Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) in open-ocean and deep-sea habitats; B) Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) with potential to be managed to protect discrete portions of marine mammal habitat; C) Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) which contribute significantly to global biodiversity; and D) existing levels of marine protection.

3 BECOME A WORLD LEADER IN BLUE CORRIDOR CONSERVATION FOR KEY SPECIES

The Coral Triangle and Oceania regions are the most biodiverse ocean ecosystems in the world.²⁷ Oceania constitutes the largest region on Earth but its landmass is the smallest; we are predominantly an ocean region.²⁸ Growing evidence shows that marine species such as large whales are important to enhancing ocean productivity that have benefits to the marine ecosystem and people.²⁹ Many of the species living in Oceania and the Coral Triangle are found nowhere else on Earth, yet they face growing and existential threats caused by over-exploitation and unsustainable practices.³⁰

Marine mammals, sharks and turtles are key indicators of marine ecosystem health, and the trend of their conservation status is cause for grave concern. For example, 20th century commercial whaling nearly wiped out many species of whales worldwide. Some species, such as humpback whales, have bounced back due to strong management measures, including by the Australian Government. But one in four of the world's cetaceans – whales, dolphins and porpoises – are still threatened with extinction, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).³¹ Six out of seven marine turtle

species are threatened with extinction, and the potential imminent population collapse of the leatherback³² and hawksbill turtle³³ – both of which occur in the Coral Triangle, Pacific and Australian waters – is of particular concern.

WWF and partners *Protecting Blue Corridors* report collates 30 years of migratory data of whales from 50 research partners and outlines a vision to safeguard their blue corridors worldwide (see Figure 2).³⁴ Importantly, the analysis helps visualise and identify solutions to emerging and cumulative impacts, and how we can better conserve, connect and protect their critical ocean habitats worldwide through cooperative efforts. Governments are taking notice. The 'Americas for the Protection of the Ocean' coalition is a commitment by nine countries in the eastern Pacific Ocean from Canada to Chile to deliver regional 30x30 goals and is being informed by the blue corridors approach. Strategies to implement stronger transboundary management will help improve ecological connectivity for marine megafauna and lead to stronger conservation outcomes for vulnerable species.

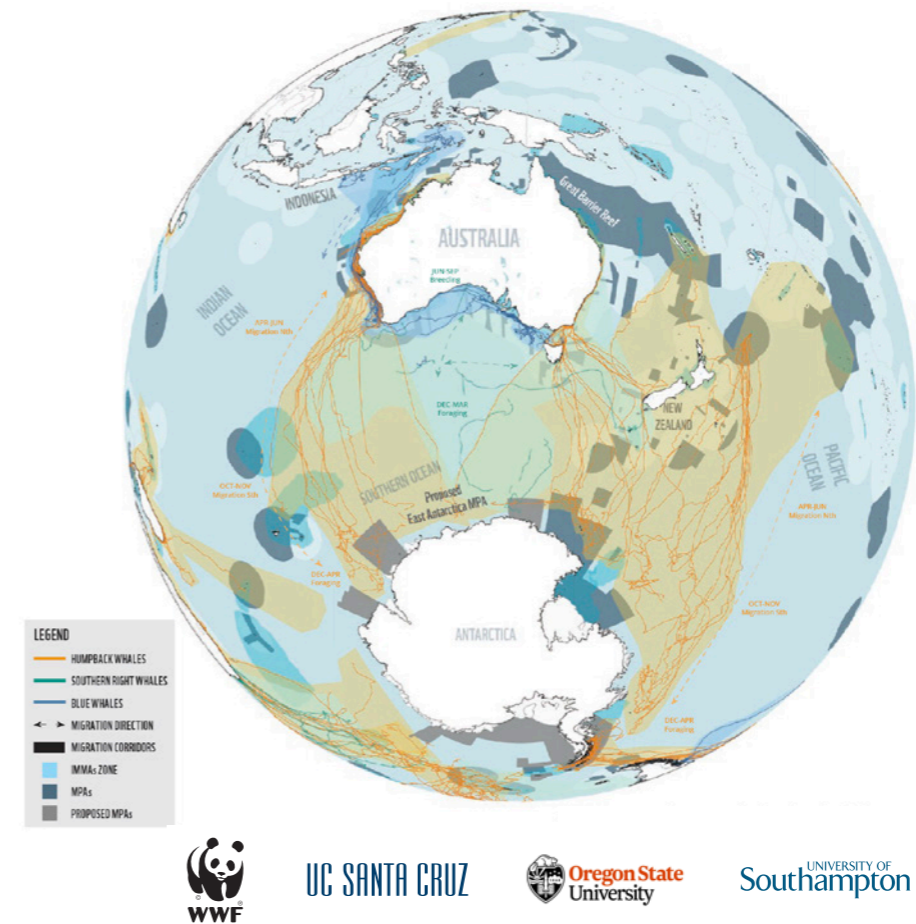
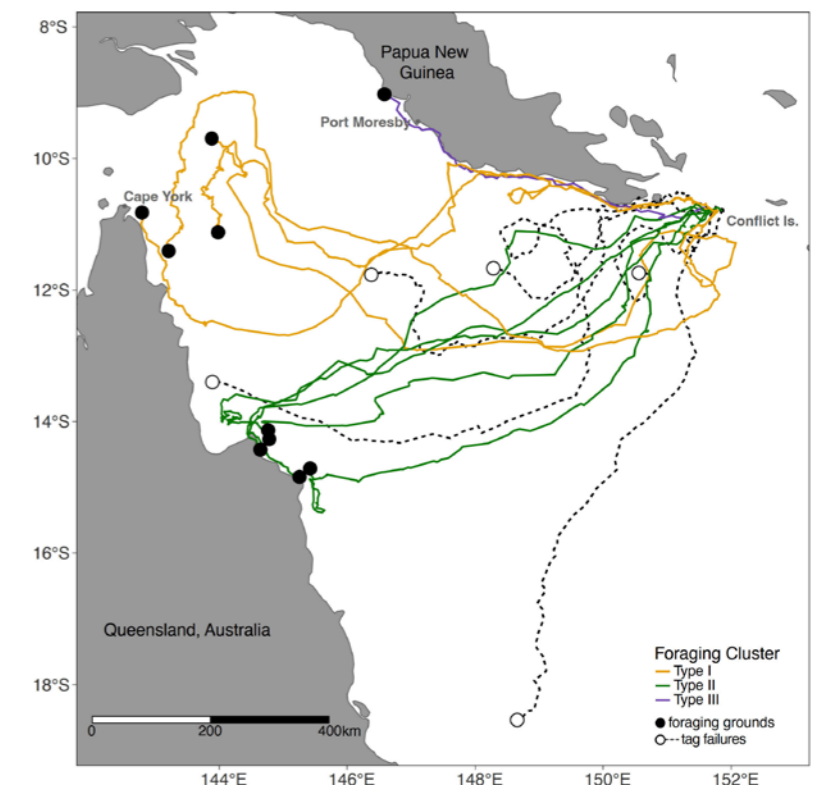


Figure 2: Compilation of satellite telemetry data showing migratory routes of southern right, humpback and blue whales, and existing marine protected areas.³⁵

Figure 3: Satellite tagging locations of hawksbill turtles, showing migratory routes and foraging grounds.³⁶



3 BECOME A WORLD LEADER IN BLUE CORRIDOR CONSERVATION FOR KEY SPECIES

Recommendations

- 3.1 Protect critical habitats and migration corridors for whales and dolphins through establishment of blue corridors, including through:
- Increasing coverage of IUCN Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs) (which currently cover more than 130 species) within Australia's Marine Park Network.
 - Using whale critical habitats, migratory routes and IMMAs to inform areas to implement shipping speed limits.
 - Reducing fisheries bycatch: The joint Australian and Queensland government program to permanently phase out commercial gill-net fishing from the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area has been a major conservation breakthrough; opportunities to achieve similar outcomes in other jurisdictions should be identified and pursued.
 - Establishing 'whale safe' ship routes: Use whale critical habitats, migratory routes and IMMAs to inform areas to implement mandatory shipping speed limits to reduce the risk of ship strikes and underwater noise pollution.
- 3.2 Invest in blue corridors conservation and research gaps, including turtles, rays, sharks and cetaceans, including by:
- Establishing a \$10 million 'blue corridors fund' to fill gaps in knowledge of migratory movement and critical habitats of data-poor species, including in Australia's offshore areas.
 - Assessing genetic and ecological turtle connectivity (nesting, foraging and migration) and pinpointing those most at-risk and those that require greatest protection using ShellBank³⁷ and other relevant initiatives.
 - Identifying blue corridors for turtles and using this data to propose critical habitat and migratory corridors as important marine turtle areas (IMTAs).³⁸ IMTAs should inform new and strengthened marine protected areas and other effective conservation and management (OECM) designations across Oceania, helping to inform regional 30x30 planning and implementation.



Whale with cargo ship in distance © iStock / WWF-Australia



An Antarctic Adelle penguin jumping between rocks © Adobe Stock / WWF-Australia

4 BUILD A WORLD-CLASS MARINE PARK NETWORK IN AUSTRALIA

Australia's network of marine protected areas (MPAs) covers approximately four million km², constituting 45 per cent of Australia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). However, less than a quarter of the total area covered by Commonwealth MPAs is highly protected and free from all extractive use.³⁹ This leaves swathes of vulnerable and precious ecosystems and habitats lacking in sufficient protection, risking further degradation and nature loss. This is critically important to achieving Australia's biodiversity commitments – it also has implications for the international community's commitments under the Global Biodiversity Framework, given that approximately 80 per cent of all marine species in Australian waters are found nowhere else on Earth.⁴⁰

A 2018 decision to significantly reduce marine protection levels in our marine reserve system saw Australia become the largest ever contributor to the downgrading of MPAs internationally.⁴¹ There is overwhelming scientific evidence of the effectiveness of highly protected MPAs and no-take zones in safeguarding habitats, providing refuge for endangered species, and allowing depleted fish populations to recover and thrive.⁴² In contrast, lower levels of protection fail to deliver conservation and fisheries benefits.⁴³

In recent years there have been some welcome marine protection commitments including expanded protection for Macquarie Island, Heard Island and McDonald Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands. However, our

marine park network is not adequately representative of the full array of Australia's precious marine ecosystems and needs both expansion and upgrading.

WWF-Australia welcomes Australia's proactive role in negotiating and adopting the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), and commitment to the 2030 and 2050 goals and targets that form the backbone of the GBF. WWF-Australia's view, grounded in decades of rigorous research by eminent scientists, is that the country's GBF Targets 2 and 3 commitments in marine environments must aim to exceed 30 per cent of coastal and marine ecosystems under restoration and at least 30 per cent of our EEZ must be highly protected, grounded in science and the comprehensive, adequate and representative principles to which the government is already committed.

Importantly, Australia's 30x30 commitment is almost universally supported by Australians, with 93% believing it is important to ensure 30x30 protection on land and at sea.⁴⁴ This is unsurprising, and this high-level of public support is likely to remain consistent for generations and centuries to come, given that it is grounded in a deep love of our beaches and oceans by Australians from all walks of life and an enduring cultural connection which First Peoples have cultivated since time immemorial.

4 BUILD A WORLD-CLASS MARINE PARK NETWORK IN AUSTRALIA

Recommendations

- 4.1 Immediate priorities should be to (1) finalise the review of the South-east Marine Parks Management Plan; (2) fully implement management plans for Cocos (Keeling) and Macquarie Island; and (3) expand and upgrade protection for the Heard Island and McDonald Islands Marine Reserve.
- 4.2 Commit to beginning the review of Australian marine parks in 2025 to expand and upgrade Lord Howe Island Marine Park, and Norfolk Island Coral Sea Marine Park.
- 4.3 Pledge to reach 30 per cent high-level protection⁴⁵ of Australia's EEZ – areas that are free from extractive use - by 2027. This pledge would demonstrate Australia global leadership and put us on a path to exceed our international obligations under the Global Biodiversity Framework.
- 4.4 Develop and implement a plan to restore at least 30% of degraded coastal areas, focusing on improved management and health of ponded pastures and tidal marsh ecosystems; re-establishment of degraded seagrass communities; and shellfish reef restoration. The annual investment required to support this program of work has been estimated at \$37 million.⁴⁶
- 4.5 Develop comprehensive financing to support expanded marine parks network, including integration of private sector investment and public/private financial partnerships.



A green sea turtle swims near Lady Elliot Island on the Southern Great Barrier Reef in Queensland, Australia. © Adobe Stock / WWF-Australia

5 PROTECT CORAL REEFS IN THE FACE OF GLOBAL HEATING

Coral reefs are the rainforests of the sea, occurring in less than one per cent of the ocean but home to around one-quarter of all marine species.⁴⁷ Between 16-20 per cent of the world's coral reefs are in Australia,⁴⁸ including the world's largest reef complex (the Great Barrier Reef) and its longest fringing reef (Ningaloo Reef/Coastal Area). Collectively, they support an estimated tens of thousands of species of coral, fish and other marine organisms; as well as globally significant populations of marine turtles, dugongs, dolphins, whales, sharks and rays.⁴⁹

Worldwide, approximately 850 million people live within 100 kilometres of reefs, with coral reef fisheries providing a key source of income and livelihood to coastal communities and an irreplaceable source of protein for many island populations.⁵⁰ In the Coral Triangle alone, 130 million people depend on marine resources. The communities that live near and depend on coral reef systems are defined by diverse socio-cultural characteristics and inherent inequities. There are significant gender-based differences in access to resources, opportunities, and rewards. Women are often segregated into low-skilled and unrecognised labour, such as fish processing. Climate change will exacerbate challenges of fairness and equity faced by developing countries, regions and communities reliant on marine livelihoods.

There is overwhelming scientific consensus that coral reefs are under severe pressure.⁵¹ While all natural systems are increasingly impacted

by global heating, coral reefs are the first ecosystem to be existentially threatened as the planet warms. A stark reminder of this is the 2024 global coral bleaching event - the fourth on record, the second in the last 10 years, and likely the most extensive and impactful.⁵² Coral reefs are also impacted by other intersecting threats, including water pollution from adjacent catchments, unsustainable fishing and destructive coastal management. These stressors are increasing locally and globally, and their cumulative impacts present unprecedented threats to coral reefs in Australia, our region and internationally.

Australia's expertise in coral reef science and management is world-leading. It is both in our national interest, and it is our moral obligation to take action to protect reefs. Some progress has been made in Australia to lift our ambition to reduce carbon emissions in recent years. However, Australia's current emission reduction targets are still not sufficient. They are aligned with a global temperature rise of 2°C – a climate scenario in which all coral reefs globally would be lost. Further, the climate science is clear that Australia's continued support for fossil fuel extraction is incompatible with stabilising warming at 1.5°C and therefore will cause more harm to all communities that depend on healthy coral reefs for their livelihoods and food security.⁵³



Recommendations

- 5.1 Align Australia's emissions reduction targets with Australia's duties under the Paris Agreement, including committing to reduce emissions by at least 90 per cent relative to 2005 levels by 2035 and net zero before 2040.⁵⁴
- 5.2 Support Pacific leaders' calls for a global Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty and a just transition to a fossil fuel-free Pacific. This requires replacing all fossil fuels for energy and export with clean energy and clean exports.
- 5.3 Build and support a community of practice for coral reef conservation and restoration through thought leadership, capacity-building and technology transfer for coral reef monitoring and management.
- 5.4 Strengthen and support regional seas agreements, especially in the Coral Triangle and Arafura Seas, to mainstream climate adaptation and resilience building of both ecosystems and coastal communities.
- 5.5 Implement the 2024 World Heritage Committee decision on the Great Barrier Reef with additional focus on unsustainable fishing and efforts to reduce pollution from poor catchment management.



HOME TO AROUND
ONE-QUARTER
OF ALL MARINE
SPECIES, CORAL
REEFS OCCUR IN
LESS THAN
1%
OF THE OCEAN

6 INVEST IN THE FUTURE OF THE BLUE PACIFIC COMMUNITY

Pacific leadership on oceans and nature protection is set out in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* and the *Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity* initiative, and includes specific calls to action for economic and diplomatic partners around the world. Ocean and environment is one of seven key themes within the *2050 Strategy*, and includes a commitment by all Pacific Island Forum members to ‘safeguarding the integrity of our natural systems and biodiversity through conservation action and by minimising activities that degrade, pollute, overexploit, or undermine our ocean and natural environment’.⁵⁵ The Pacific Prosperity call to action contains three goals, the first of which is ‘100 per cent% effective sustainable oceans management including 30% protection of the Blue Pacific Continent’.⁵⁶

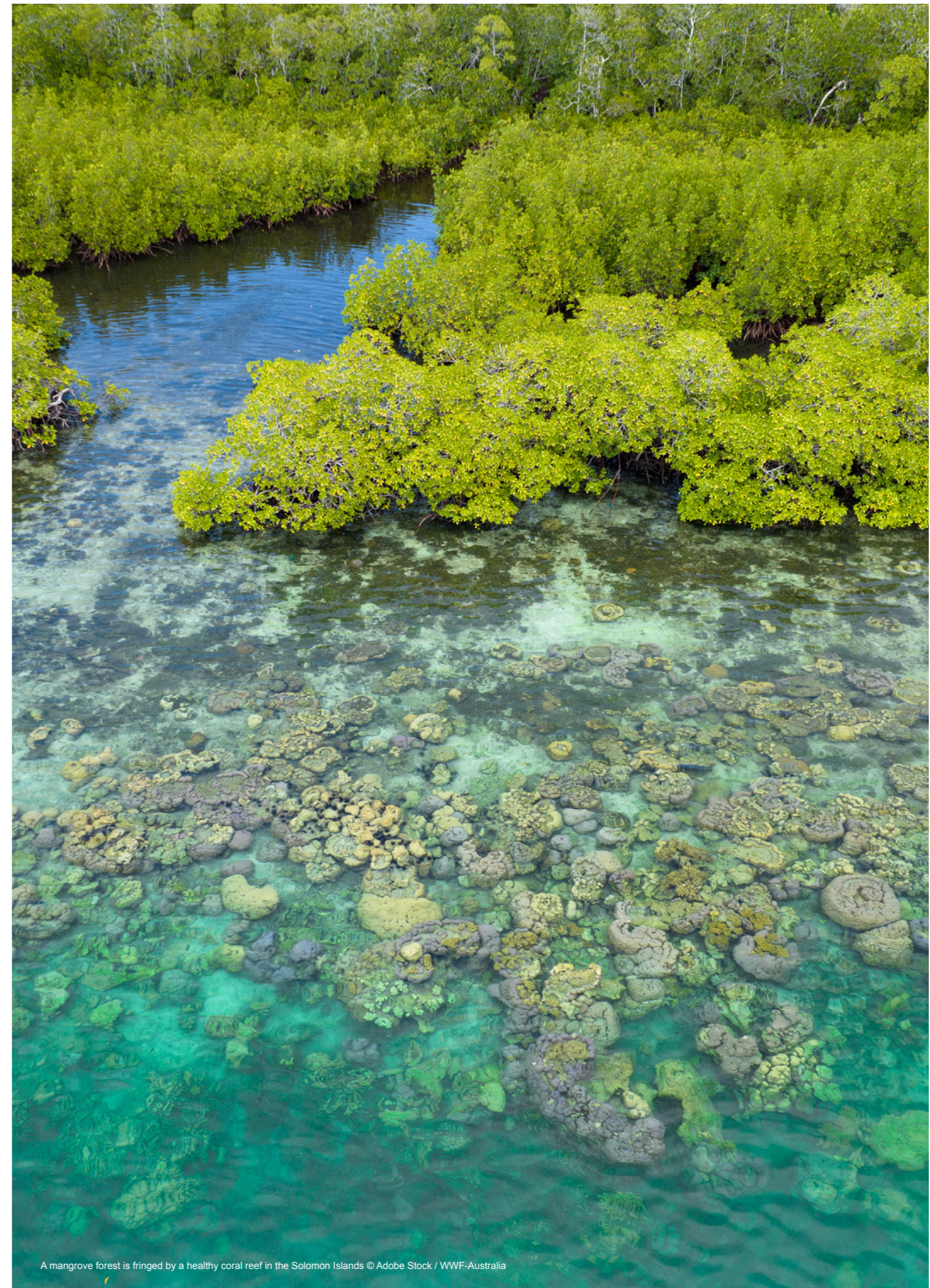
As detailed in the coral reef section above, action on climate change is the paramount concern for Pacific Leaders – alongside restoration of degraded ecosystems including coastal systems and coral reefs.⁵⁷ Alongside reducing carbon emissions, nature-based solutions can be a cost-effective way to translate key policy commitments into action and can support climate mitigation while helping communities adapt to the impacts of climate change. Healthy mangroves, for example, sequester carbon, protect from storm surges, and are spawning grounds for economically and nutritionally important fish. When designed with sustainable and inclusive development goals, Traditional Knowledge, and the cultural authority of communities, the benefits of nature-based solutions can be even more wide-reaching.

To effectively support a nature-positive future across the Pacific region, Australia needs to re-examine not just the quantum of overseas development assistance (ODA) but also investment timeframes. We applaud the resolution of the ALP National Conference to commit to ‘a plan and pathway’ to achieve the target of 0.5 per cent Gross National Income

for Official Development Assistance (ODA) and remind the government that climate finance should be new and additional to ODA.⁵⁸ This commitment needs to address the duration of funding as well as levels of funding. Australia’s international development projects are typically only funded for three to five years, often insufficient to achieve lasting policy and environmental change. A 2022 scoping study of nature-based solutions projects in the Pacific identified short timescales as one of the key obstacles to impact and that significant time and money are being spent on pilot studies that are not being supported to scale.⁵⁹

WWF supports the Oceania First Voices Regional Forums, the most recent of which was in March 2024. The forum brought together nearly 100 First Voices representatives and partners from across Fiji, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Australia and Aotearoa (New Zealand). Among the outcomes was an urgent call for all governments in the region to recognise the role and function of our governments in acknowledging the rights and engagement of our communities. This can help create an enabling environment to empower communities in national decision-making processes and in the co-design and delivery of grassroots actions to achieve local, national, regional and global priorities beneficial to all its collective citizens. The Australian Government can play a leadership role in heeding the calls of Oceania First Voices, as well as other key regional initiatives such as the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific* and the *Unlocking Blue Pacific Prosperity* initiative.

A practical example of this type of leadership could include facilitating knowledge exchange between Australian Traditional Owners and Pacific community leaders engaged in coastal and marine management, as well as providing technical support for Pacific governments to integrate community management and Traditional Knowledge into their 30x30 plans.



A mangrove forest is fringed by a healthy coral reef in the Solomon Islands © Adobe Stock / WWF-Australia



6 INVEST IN THE FUTURE OF THE BLUE PACIFIC COMMUNITY

Harvesting sea grapes in Solomon Islands © WWF-Pacific / Tom Parachute

Recommendations

- 6.1 Develop separate but complementary plans to achieve 0.5 per cent GNI for ODA and to grow climate finance (as new and additional funds to the aid program) to achieve Australia's international fair share of \$4 billion annually by 2025.
- 6.2 As part of rebuilding the international development program and growing Australian climate finance, invest in initiatives that have the primary objective of achieving development outcomes through the protection and restoration of nature and climate-critical ecosystems.
- 6.3 Recognising that supporting positive ecological change takes time, make long-term (at least 10-year) investments in proven nature-based solutions and avoid the temptation to continually fund pilots.
- 6.4 Ensure that investment (both ODA and partnership funding) in the Pacific prioritises women, youth, children and marginalised communities' involvement in decision-making and benefit-sharing.
- 6.5 As part of Australia's First Nations Diplomacy initiatives, explore opportunities to facilitate knowledge exchange between Traditional Owners and Pacific community leaders on integrating Traditional Knowledge and custodianship through co-management of marine ecosystems.



Plastic ocean debris © naturepl.com / Alex Mustard / WWF

7 ELIMINATE PLASTIC POLLUTION AND TRANSITION TO A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

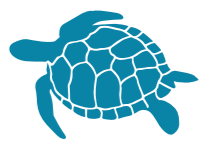
Plastic pollution poses significant threats to Australia’s wildlife. An estimated 15,000-20,000 turtles have been entangled in fishing gear in the northern Gulf region.⁶⁰ Around half of all marine turtles have ingested plastic, and ingesting just one piece increases a turtle’s chance of dying by 22 per cent.⁶¹ More than two thirds of short-tailed shearwaters – Australia’s most numerous seabird – have ingested plastic.⁶² Many marine species are susceptible to injury, disease and death resulting from plastic pollution, with certain types of plastics known to be particularly deadly, and certain species more vulnerable than others.⁶³

Plastic pollution damages the Australian economy by negatively impacting key economic industries including fisheries, shipping and tourism. The lifetime cost of plastic produced globally in 2019 is estimated at \$5.1 trillion⁶⁴; of this, Australia bears an estimated \$16.9 billion,⁶⁵ including damage caused to the economy and threats to Australia’s wildlife. The cost to Australia’s marine economies alone has been estimated at more than \$590 million for one year, in 2015.⁶⁶

Australia consumes large volumes of plastics, including around a third of which is single use. We generate more single-use plastic waste than any other country except Singapore⁶⁷ and recover less than 15 per cent of all the plastic waste we generate.⁶⁸ Up to 145,000 tonnes are estimated to enter the environment annually.⁶⁹ Urgent action is required to stem the unfettered and unsustainable flow of plastics into our economy and prevent them from entering the environment altogether.

Recommendations

- 7.1 Strengthen and mandate national waste reduction targets. These should include mandatory targets and obligations to reduce consumption of plastic – particularly virgin and single-use plastic, in addition to recovery and recycling requirements. National packaging reforms should comprise part of this reform agenda and should come into effect in 2025.
- 7.2 Economy-wide reform driven by Australia’s circular economy strategy should aim to remove non-reusable and non-recyclable polymers and products from the system entirely with only limited essential exemptions, in line with Australia’s circular economy transition commitments.
- 7.3 Take urgent action on cigarette filter pollution, which contributes disproportionately to plastic pollution in Australia, either through introduction of a mandatory extended producer responsibility scheme and/or banning plastic filters.
- 7.4 Speed up legislative and regulatory reform to ban ‘forever chemicals’ (PFAS⁷⁰) in all applications where this is feasible.
- 7.5 Maintain and lift Australia’s leadership within negotiations toward an international legally binding instrument to end plastic pollution. Australia should play a global leadership role in proposing specific measures to ban and phase out the most harmful and high-risk plastic additives and products, improve management of fishing gear, and support circular economy transition.



15-20

**THOUSAND
TURTLES
ENTANGLED IN
FISHING GEAR IN
NORTHERN GULF
REGION**



PFAS

**ARE EXTREMELY
PERSISTENT IN
HUMAN BODIES**

8 LEAD AND COLLABORATE ON HIGH SEAS PROTECTION

Historic agreements reached in 2022/23 on the Global Biodiversity Framework (Kunming-Montreal Protocol) and the Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement (also known as the High Seas Treaty) provide significant momentum and unprecedented opportunities for substantial and effective marine protection. The next 5-10 years will be a critical period in which the global community translates these commitments into action or fails to achieve what we have collectively agreed to. More than 90 countries have signed the High Seas Treaty, nearly 10 have ratified it, and many other countries are preparing to do so. Early ratification by Australia would demonstrate to the global community our intent to take a leading role in ocean protection both here and internationally.

This treaty (in tandem with the GBF) provides a unique opportunity to put in place 21st century models of protection, sharing political responsibility and investment, and achieving outcomes exceeding what countries can achieve individually. Work is urgently needed

to assess and build support for high seas MPA priorities and determine how they can help build protected area connectivity and assess and prevent transboundary harm. The Eastern Tropical Pacific Corridor collaboration of Ecuador, Colombia, Panama and Costa Rica is a practical existing example of a spatial design for marine protection that connects MPAs, EEZs and species pathways across multiple jurisdictions. The Americas for the Protection of the Ocean Coalition takes a similar approach. These models should be amplified within the Pacific region and elsewhere, with the added dimension of high seas designations.

WWF-Australia notes and welcomes the Australian Government's initial actions towards partnering with Australia's Pacific and Indian Ocean neighbours on high seas MPAs and other area-based measures as soon as possible. These efforts should prioritise development of networks of highly protected high seas MPAs, including diverse and dynamic ocean areas with high biodiversity values.

Recommendations

- 8.1 Ratify the BBNJ Agreement as soon as possible and prior to the UN Oceans Conference in 2025. Continue advocacy and support to leading advocates in the Pacific and internationally to enable the BBNJ to come into effect as soon as possible.
- 8.2 Allocate sufficient and sustained resources to relevant agencies to match Australia's role as co-chair of the BBNJ Preparatory Commission, given the work required to secure prompt entry into force and prepare for the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties.
- 8.3 Identify, build support and advance proposals for and implementation of transboundary and high seas marine protection opportunities across the southern hemisphere. Lord Howe Rise and South Tasman Sea should be an immediate priority for high seas protection based on their biological significance and feasibility.
- 8.4 Develop a long-term plan for a connected network of transboundary and high seas MPAs; the Australian Government's current work to develop a biogeographic regionalisation for the Indian Ocean is an important first step in this process.
- 8.5 Building on Australia's leadership on vulnerable marine ecosystems, including at the recent meeting of the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation, call for full protection of seamounts from bottom trawling on the high seas.



EARLY RATIFICATION OF THE HIGH SEAS TREATY BY AUSTRALIA WOULD DEMONSTRATE LEADERSHIP IN OCEAN PROTECTION



Straight ship trace in high seas © Adobe stock / WWF-Australia

9 SUPPORT A MORATORIUM ON DEEP SEA MINING

Deep seabed mining poses significant risks to the ocean, including causing irreversible harm to the marine environments and its ecosystem services or the extinction of entire species. The lack of scientific knowledge of the deep sea, including its ecosystems and species, calls for countries to apply the precautionary principle in this instance. Australia rightly champions and integrates this principle in many environmental policy, decision-making and planning approaches and should do so in relation to deep sea mining.

WWF-Australia was encouraged to see support for a moratorium on deep sea mining in international waters in the Australian Labor Party's 2023 National Platform. We urge the Australian Government to translate this support into a clear policy position that formally supports a moratorium or a precautionary pause. This position aligns with the growing calls for a moratorium on deep seabed mining, including from many of Australia's regional neighbours: New Zealand, Palau, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa and the French Polynesian Assembly.

DEEP SEABED MINING POSES SIGNIFICANT RISKS:



IRREVERSIBLE HARM TO MARINE ENVIRONMENTS AND ITS ECOSYSTEM SERVICES



EXTINCTION OF ENTIRE SPECIES



Deep sea cirrate octopus (Sauroteuthis syrtensis) from 800m depth, Atlantic. © naturepl.com / David Shale / WWF

Recommendations

- 9.1 Support a moratorium on deep seabed mining as a matter of precaution, noting a lack of scientific certainty and the high risk to the ocean from deep seabed mining. We urge the Australian Government to express their support for a moratorium at formal meetings of the International Seabed Authority.
- 9.2 Oppose the adoption of mining regulations and licenses/plan of work by the International Seabed Authority; there is insufficient evidence to inform science-based and data-driven decisions⁷¹, and it is premature for these matters to be progressed at this stage.
- 9.3 Work with other governments and industries to explore all alternatives to deep sea metals and minerals, with a focus on reducing demand for primary metals, transitioning to a resource-efficient, closed loop materials economy, and developing responsible terrestrial mining practices.
- 9.4 Engage in and support Talanoa (regional dialogue) with Pacific leaders on deep seabed mining, to encourage decision-making based on the precautionary approach.

10 END OVERFISHING AND HARMFUL FISHING PRACTICES



THE OCEANIC WHITETIP SHARK AND YELLOWFIN TUNA REQUIRE URGENT, COLLECTIVE ATTENTION

Australia is a fishing nation, a net importer of seafood, an international leader in scientific research, and one of the few developed countries in the Southern Hemisphere. While an important part of our culture and economy, fishing remains a key pressure on the Australian marine environment, including for marine turtles, marine mammals, seabirds and sharks. And despite Australia's strong scientific capabilities and regulatory frameworks, overfishing continues to occur on our doorstep. The *Status of Australian Fish Stocks* latest report shows that less than two-thirds of fish stocks assessed are classified as sustainable.⁷²

Overfishing is also occurring in internationally managed fisheries in nearby waters. While WWF is alive to the challenges in multilateral fisheries management, there is no justification for overfishing. We remain concerned that regional fisheries management

organisations have not effectively dealt with overfished species, despite scientific advice and more than adequate time to implement changes. Many species, such as the oceanic whitetip shark (which is facing extinction)⁷³ and yellowfin tuna (which is dangerously overfished in the Indian Ocean)⁷⁴ require urgent, collective attention.

We congratulate the government for exploring changes to Australia's import control rules for seafood and expanding its focus beyond sanitary and phytosanitary measures. WWF-Australia has also welcomed Australia's quick action in depositing its instrument of acceptance for the new World Trade Organization (WTO) *Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies*. While WWF-Australia is encouraged by positive steps, we remain firmly focused on the need to end all overfishing and strongly encourage the Australian Government to use multiple domestic, regional and international levers to achieve this goal.



Whitetip shark © Adobe stock / WWF-Australia

Recommendations

- 10.1 Eliminate overfishing from Australia's fisheries and be an active leader in ending overfishing in shared fisheries.
- 10.2 Ensure the permanent phase out of commercial gill net fishing in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area by June 2027 is fully implemented in line with the joint Australian/Queensland governments' commitment.
- 10.3 Ensure the Australian Government's seafood import policy is properly resourced, both in Australian and exporting countries' fisheries. Develop traceability support programs and grants for outreach, capacity-building and interoperability; expand the focus beyond just those species with the highest IUU risk; and align Australia's import policy with existing schemes in the US, EU and Japan to minimise compliance costs and maximise effectiveness.
- 10.4 Amplify the Pacific region's voice in reaching a strong conclusion to the WTO fisheries subsidy negotiations, and to do its part to assist neighbours to meet their obligations under any new WTO rules.
- 10.5 Partner with national research agencies and external institutions, such as the Pacific Community and the Integrated Marine Observing System programme to ensure science play a key role in a sustainable fishing future.

SUMMARY: AN OCEAN OF OPPORTUNITY

This Blueprint is intended support and inform a range of oceans-related commitments and processes already underway, as well as upcoming opportunities. These opportunities include:

Key regional and international forums for driving leadership and actions on oceans include the inaugural Commonwealth Oceans Ministers' Meeting, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, the PIF Leaders' Meeting, the Nature Positive Summit and the 2025 UN Oceans Conference. Through these and other forums, Australia can play a pivotal leadership role that helps elevate the importance of oceans within broader policy agendas and translate commitments into action. In addition to supporting Australia's biodiversity and climate ambitions and commitments, stepping up these efforts can deliver important co-benefits aligned with Australia's international development strategy.

Development of Australia's Sustainable Oceans Plan, a cornerstone of Australia's membership of the High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy; and Australia's updated *National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan*, one of Australia's obligations under the Global Biodiversity Framework. While separate commitments and outputs, there is an opportunity and need to knit these commitments together and accompany them with a clear program of work that steps up current actions where they exist, initiates further work and research where there are gaps to be filled, and provides a model of excellence to other panel members and parties to the GBF.

Our oceans face severe and multiple pressures, but it doesn't need to be this way. **There is strong bipartisan support for Australian global leadership on oceans.** By working together, we can turn the tide toward healthier and more productive oceans, using proven tools that allow marine species and ecosystems to recover over time, enhancing their resilience to climate change. These include protection and restoration of ocean habitats, science-based fisheries management, community-led conservation, and targeted species conservation measures. WWF-Australia is well placed to contribute to these efforts in Australia, across the Blue Pacific Continent, and internationally. We work closely with WWF-Pacific and WWF-New Zealand, drawing together substantial Indigenous, local and mainstream knowledge and experience. We are an integral part of WWF's 550-strong marine conservation and fisheries expert community, spread across 60 WWF offices around the world. Our reach, expertise and deep connection with communities across the Pacific region are unparalleled.

For further information, please contact Kate Noble, Senior Manager Oceans Policy at WWF-Australia: knoble@wwf.org.au

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THE CRITICAL DECISIONS WE MAKE TODAY WILL SHAPE AUSTRALIA'S TOMORROW.



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