

The Hon Tony Burke MP

Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities

Gillard Government acts to protect the Coral Sea

Media release

25 November 2011

The Gillard Government announced today the proposed establishment of the world's largest marine protected area in the waters of the Coral Sea that fall within Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone.

Environment Minister Tony Burke said the Coral Sea was recognised across the world as a marine region of significance for its unique biodiversity. And in Australian waters the environment is in near pristine condition.

The proposed Coral Sea Commonwealth Marine Reserve covers approximately 989 842 square kilometres - an area of ocean more than half the size of Queensland.

The western side of the reserve has taken into account recreational and charter fishing as a use.

"Australia's vast oceans provide a source of food and resources, and are a place of recreation. But we cannot afford to be complacent," Mr Burke said.

"In the space of one lifetime, the world's oceans have gone from being relatively pristine to being under increasing pressure.

"The environmental significance of the Coral Sea lies in its diverse array of coral reefs, sandy cays, deep sea plains and canyons. It contains more than 20 outstanding examples of isolated tropical reefs, sandy cays and islands.

"There is no other part of Australia's territory where so much comes together – pristine oceans, magnificent coral, a military history which has helped define us and now a clear proposal for permanent protection."

The shallow reef systems of the Coral Sea support tropical ecosystems abundant in hard and soft corals, sponges, algae, fish communities and other creatures such as nautilus and sea stars. Many of the reefs are known for their high densities of shark species.

The Coral Sea islands support critical nesting sites for the green turtle and a range of seabird species. It is also renowned for its diversity of predatory fish, such as albacore, yellowfin and bigeye tuna, broadbill swordfish, black marlin and mako sharks.

Beyond the shallower waters lie deep sea troughs and canyons, open ocean reefs and undersea mountains - and while much of the area is relatively unexplored, it is likely to support unique deepwater ecosystems. Recent discoveries have included deep, cold water coral communities.

Several important species found in the Coral Sea are under pressure elsewhere from over-harvesting and habitat degradation. It is a refuge for many iconic species under serious threat.

"Australia has a unique opportunity to protect this precious marine environment for future generations," Mr Burke said.

"That's why our Marine Bioregional Planning Program is so important. It is more than conservation - it's about making sure the future of our oceans is one of strength and resilience."

Mr Burke said the proposed Coral Sea Marine Reserve is the last component of the Gillard Government's proposed network of marine reserves around Australia.

"Although we are still to complete our consultation process and declare a final network, Australia is on track to deliver a world-leading system of marine reserves which will include examples of all the different marine ecosystems and habitats found in Australian waters," Mr Burke said.

The proposed Coral Sea Commonwealth Marine Reserve is remote. The nearest point is more than 60 kilometres from the coast and it extends out to 1100 kilometres from the mainland.

Along with its environmental values, the Coral Sea is an important heritage site. During World War II it was the scene of a battle between the Japanese and Allied naval and air forces from the United States and Australia. Three ships are known to have sunk in the north-eastern area of the Coral Sea—the USS Lexington, the USS Sims and the USS Neosho.

Many vessels that traversed the Coral Sea to transport materials between Sydney and northern Australia and Asia were wrecked on the treacherous reefs that now bear the ships' names.

Mr Burke said the Government had consulted a wide range of marine users and interest groups in the development of the proposed Coral Sea Marine Reserve.

"Now there will be a further opportunity for these stakeholders and regional communities to have their say in this important process. I encourage people to get involved," Mr Burke said.

"We extended the 60-day consultation period to 90 days to ensure people have every opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed Coral Sea Marine Reserve. The feedback and input the Government receives will assist in finalising the proposal."

During the three-month public consultation period, officers from the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities will be visiting coastal centres along the Queensland coast. They will hold information sessions and meet with representatives of various industries and stakeholder groups.

Public information sessions will be held in Hervey Bay, Cairns, Gladstone, Mackay and Townsville. The public information sessions are also supported by a range of marine use sector and interest group meetings. The consultation period will close on 24 February 2012.

For more information on the proposed Coral Sea Commonwealth Marine Reserve, including details of public information sessions scheduled across the region, go to www.environment.gov.au/coasts/mbp/index.html.