

## Australia Designates World's Largest No-Take Area

In a move to protect the waters of one of the most remote places on Earth, Australia has designated a giant marine reserve around an island group just outside the Antarctic Circle. At 65,000 km<sup>2</sup>, the Heard Island and McDonald Islands Marine Reserve is the world's largest no-take area - roughly the size of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg combined.

The Australian territory of Heard Island and McDonald Islands (HIMI) lies equidistant from Australia and South Africa in the southern Indian Ocean. Licensed fishing there by Australians started in 1997, trawling for Patagonian toothfish and mackerel icefish. Although management has been restricting the fishery to three boats to limit environmental impacts, unlicensed fishing activity by non-Australian vessels - including longliners - has been widespread. (It has been estimated that in 2001-2002 within the HIMI exclusive economic zone, the illegal catch of toothfish was equal to 89% of the total allowable catch for the legal fishery.) With the new marine reserve, government discussions are underway on how to strengthen surveillance and enforcement of the fishing restrictions.

The HIMI marine reserve incorporates a pre-existing wilderness reserve that stretched from the islands' shorelines out to 12 nautical miles. Fishing within that protected area, as well as an adjacent 1-nm buffer zone, has been off-limits for several years. Managers do not expect the new HIMI marine reserve to have a significant negative impact on the licensed trawl fishery, as the terrain within the reserve is not ideally suited for bottom trawl gear and areas outside the reserve have yielded good catches.

Heard Island is home to Australia's only active volcano, as well as large numbers of penguins and seals. McDonald Island, the major island in the group, has such steep shores that just two successful landings by boat have occurred since the island's discovery a century ago. The uninhabited islands, which have no species introduced by humans, were transferred from the United Kingdom to Australia in 1947, and were inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1997.

### Protecting spawning habitat

Margaret Moore, senior marine policy officer for WWF Australia, an NGO, said the new reserve would play a crucial role in protecting spawning habitat for fish and foraging areas for rare seabirds and marine mammals. "This is one of the most significant conservation decisions taken by Australia," said Moore. "It acknowledges Australia's responsibility to manage remote areas of our oceans."

Negotiations on details of the reserve designation took two years and involved government officials, scientists, NGOs, and the fishing industry. Peter Taylor, director of the marine protected areas program for Environment Australia, said industry agreed to the new reserve because fishermen saw the value in protecting likely spawning and nursery areas for their target fish. "There was mutual interest in protecting these areas," said Taylor. "The licensed fishers of this region are high-profile and known for their conservation interests."

The industry has complained about illegal fishing activity for years, and licensed operators have supplied intelligence and surveillance to officials. Government enforcement operations, including vessel arrests, have reportedly reduced the level of illegal activity occurring in the region since 2000, although patrols have been sporadic. Officials are discussing additional measures to strengthen enforcement, including the use of satellite-based monitoring similar to systems used by military operations, said Taylor.

Patagonian toothfish, often marketed as Chilean sea bass, has experienced intense fishing pressure around the world in the past decade. Quentin Hanich, oceans campaigner for Greenpeace Australia, applauded the move by Australia to designate the new HIMI reserve, but said that stopping pirate fishing for toothfish in the reserve and elsewhere would require international efforts. He called for the intergovernmental Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) to establish an independent, centralized vessel-monitoring system to verify all catch documents and ensure that only legally caught fish are traded worldwide. He also called for CCAMLR to support the nomination of toothfish under the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species.

The size of the new no-take zone surpasses another Australian marine reserve, the 58,000-km<sup>2</sup> Macquarie Island reserve off Australia's southeast coast.

**For more information:**

**Margaret Moore**, WWF Australia, PO Box 528, Sydney, NSW 2001, Australia. Tel: +61 2 9281 5515; E-mail: mmoore@wwf.org.au.

**Peter Taylor**, Marine Protected Areas, Environment Australia, GPO Box 787, Canberra 2601, Australia. Tel: +61 2 6274 1759; E-mail: peter.taylor@ea.gov.au.

**Quentin Hanich**, Greenpeace Australia Pacific, GPO Box 1917, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia. Tel: +61 2 6257 6516; E-mail: Quentin.Hanich@au.greenpeace.org.

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