

Australia to Protect Seamount System with Multi-Use Park

Continuing its campaign to develop a nationally representative system of MPAs, the Australian government has announced plans to establish a multi-use marine park around a seamount system that includes one of the southernmost coral reefs in the world.

The proposed protected area, to be called Lord Howe Island Marine Park, would encircle the Lord Howe Island seamount and its associated marine ecological systems, off the coast of the state of New South Wales (NSW). Measuring 3000 sq. km, it would lie within 3 and 12 nautical miles (nm) from the coast of Lord Howe Island, Ball's Pyramid, and their adjacent islands. The zone within 3 nm of the coast is already designated as a state marine park, operated by the NSW government.

Unusual mix of tropical, temperate life

The island group represents the exposed peaks of a large volcanic seamount. Located at the boundary between tropical and temperate water masses, the seamount's waters support an unusual mixture of temperate and tropical organisms, with a high degree of endemism. Its 83 coral species contain a unique association of tropical species at their southern limits of distribution and sub-tropical species rare or absent from the Great Barrier Reef. The islands and their waters were placed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1982.

The only inhabited island in the group -- Lord Howe Island -- has 320 residents, some of whom fish the waters commercially for island consumption. As the primary stakeholders within the 12 nm boundary, the island community will play a significant role in the planning and management of the marine park, say government officials. Among the planning issues will be the potential division of the park into management and use zones.

Commercial fishing activity by Lord Howe Islanders has increased in recent years and is currently unlicensed. However, local fishers have informally regulated their fishing effort with agreements not to export catch and to supply fish only to the small island resident and tourist populations. "The informal regulations work due to the limited number of operators on the island and the fact that it is more economical to sell catch on the island than to export to the mainland," said Leanne Wilks, Assistant Director of Marine protected Areas for Environment Australia.

Fisheries management to be negotiated

Wilks said the commonwealth government is supportive of continuing island-based commercial fishing and other activities as long as they remain compatible with the biodiversity protection objectives of the proposed park. To help ensure compatibility, the fisheries management agencies of the Australian and NSW governments are each working with the local community to formalize fishing regulations in the area. Wilks said fisheries formalization would be designed to support sustainable fisheries resources, monitor any adverse fishing impacts, and periodically review biological reference points for major stocks, such as kingfish. The park's proposal document notes that kingfish have been "extensively fished" by islanders in state waters.

Craig Bohm, New South Wales Coordinator for the Marine and Coastal Community Network (an Australian NGO), said that islanders will be challenged in recognizing that "outsiders" will want to have a say in how the marine park, and its fisheries, are managed. Nonetheless, he is confident the planning and management issues can be resolved amiably. Noting that the island is already working with mainland scientists to study the stocks of targeted species, he said, "I believe the community understands that they need to be integrated into the Australian mainland management frameworks if they are to attract fishery research dollars and management assistance in the future."

Local support for the proposed marine park has been high. In fact, the park's proposal document notes "a strong desire" by the island community to extend the park boundary even further than proposed, to 30 nm. (The Australian government holds that there is little evidence to justify a larger area to protect biodiversity value.)

Bohm said the locals appreciate the area's beauty. "Lord Howe Island has long been recognized as the 'jewel in the crown for NSW and Australia' -- a location where some are lucky to live, others are lucky to visit, and still others are happy to know it is there and in good condition," he said.

Protecting a pristine environment

The park's proposal document states that the majority of the seamount system exists in an undisturbed, natural condition. Current regulations under the Australian Fisheries Management Authority almost completely prevent fishing by non-island residents within the 12 nm perimeter: There is a single mainland-based commercial fisher with an exemption based on historical reasons. Fishing operators voluntarily agreed to the restrictions in acknowledgement of World Heritage values more than for fisheries management reasons, said Wilks.

The park proposal's public comment period lasts until May 15, 2000. Wilks said that eventually an advisory committee, consisting of local and mainland residents, would be established to advise the commonwealth government on the park's management. The committee will include members representing the interests of marine conservation, the local community, the tourism industry, commercial and recreational fishers, scuba divers, and the Lord Howe Island Board (a municipal authority).

Under Australia's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, which takes effect July 2000, all commonwealth MPAs must be assigned to a particular World Conservation Union (IUCN) category at the time of declaration. These categories range from protected areas managed only for science ("strict nature reserves") to areas managed for the sustainable use of natural ecosystems ("managed resource protected areas") ([MPA News 1:4](#)). The commonwealth government has not yet assigned a category to the proposed marine park nor indicated whether it will be divided into use zones, waiting instead for input on these issues from stakeholders.

The Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS), an NGO, has called for a minimum of 15% of the marine park to be set aside as no-take areas. The AMCS would also like for a secondary buffer or longline exclusion zone to be established outside the 12 nm boundary to ensure against the possible drift of tuna gear into the park area.

The proposed park's shared boundary with a state marine park (NSW Marine Park) is expected to facilitate an integrated management and planning process across both MPAs. Bohm, who has met with state and commonwealth officials on this issue, said that once both parks are operational, the daily management will largely be the responsibility of the NSW Marine Parks Authority, with some funding assistance from the commonwealth government. The advisory committee of stakeholder representatives will be used as the primary advisory body for both the NSW and commonwealth marine parks, he said.

The Lord Howe Island Group is the second seamount system in the past year to be proposed for protected status by Australia. Last May, the Australian government declared the 370 sq. km Tasmanian Seamounts Marine Reserve, in which all fishing will be banned below 500 m ([MPA News 1:1](#)). Tuna longline fishing will be allowed in shallower waters of that reserve (within the upper 500 m), as scientists have indicated such activity would not have a significant impact on the submerged seamount system. Like Lord Howe Island, the Tasmanian Seamounts are a World Heritage site.

For more information:

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Web Site on Lord Howe Island Marine Park proposal

http://www.environment.gov.au/marine/marine_protected/commwealth/lordhowe.html

The above web site summarizes Australia's plan to designate the Lord Howe Island seamount system as a marine park, with photos of the island group and a link to the proposal document.

Source URL: <https://www.openchannels.org/news/mpa-news/australia-protect-seamount-system-multi-use-park#comment-0>