

# Hypothetical Solutions to Imaginary Problems

## The Greens Marine Policies

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The Marine and Coastal Areas policy of the Greens might aptly be characterised as a random collection of hypothetical solutions to imaginary problems. They presume problems which do not exist, propose solutions without regard to cost, need or effectiveness and make no assessment of likely consequences. An undefined “precautionary principle” appears to be a major underlying doctrine. To address the myriad unrealities encompassed in the 37 items enumerated in their online marine policy statement would require far more space than is available for this summary assessment. What follows is an overview focused on the real and easily verifiable situation regarding Australia’s marine resources.

Contrary to the litany of purported “threats” presented by the Greens, the actual environmental situation in Australia is arguably the best in the world. Our waters and air are cleaner and most of the continent remains natural environment in excellent condition. Although a few species of marsupials have been lost since the arrival of Europeans, such loss has been relatively minor compared to the much larger wave of extinctions following the first arrival of humans here or the current situation elsewhere.

No marine species in Australia has ever been lost due to human causes nor are any now threatened with such extinction. The Great Barrier Reef is in pristine condition. Of the over 2500 named reefs in the complex, only a few dozen near population centres are regularly visited. Over 90% of the reefs are only rarely fished or even visited by anyone. Most are too far offshore to be affected by human activities on the coast and most of that remains undeveloped.

The GBR commercial fishing harvest rate is limited by law to a level equating to an average of 9 Kg per square Km per year. The most recent global survey of the Status of Coral Reefs states that that well managed reefs can sustain an annual fisheries harvest rate of 15 metric tonnes per square Km. Even with a harvest rate of less than one-tenth of 1% of what a well-managed resource could yield, the Greens apparently still believe the GBR is threatened by overfishing and more restrictions are needed.

All this is easily verified, non-controversial fact. The reality of this situation is readily observable to anyone by taking an extended reef cruise or a flight over the reef. Away from the proximity of the few small population centres, boats are rare to be seen and one passes reef after reef with no vessel anywhere in sight. A PhD and a computer are not required to figure out that no boats means no fishing.

On a national scale the situation is not too dissimilar. Australia has the third-largest fishing zone in the world and the second largest shelf area. On a *per capita* basis we have by far the largest fishery area of any nation. We also have the lowest overall fishery harvest rate at just over 3 per cent of the global average.

Currently we import about 70 per cent of the seafood we consume, and both the volume and unit cost of seafood imports are increasing. All of these imports *come* from much more heavily fished resources elsewhere. This is unconscionable.

Seafood imports currently add some \$1.8 billion to our annual trade deficit. We are selling off non-renewable mineral resources to buy a renewable one we have in abundance and calling this sustainable management. This is beyond moronic.

Our fisheries are, indeed, in decline; but, it's not from overfishing. It's from the most costly restrictive management in the world and the Greens want to make it even more costly and restrictive.

Meanwhile, over recent years numerous large scale clinical and epidemiological studies published in the world's leading medical journals have found large health benefits from increased seafood consumption for a broad range of neurological, cardio-vascular and immune related conditions. Translated into reduced health care costs, it could save Australia billions of dollars per year not to mention the improved quality of life for millions of Australians. Obviously we need to be looking at how to expand our underutilised fisheries and aquaculture potentials. The Greens policy, however, is aimed only at finding more imaginary reasons to close them down.

A major focus of the Greens policy is aimed at hugely expanding a costly network of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to "protect" marine life that is under no threat at all. With the lowest fishing harvest rate in the world, and a rapidly shrinking industry, we currently have about one-third of the total global MPA area.

MPAs have no effect on pollution or climate change and the possibility of overfishing is already more than adequately addressed by the most costly and restrictive fisheries management anywhere.

The Law of the Sea Treaty under which we claim EEZ rights provides that other nations may petition to access our marine resources if we are not utilising them. It would be difficult for Australia to sustain an argument that vast no-take MPAs are a "use" of fisheries resources.

The Biodiversity Treaty which has been cited as requiring the declaration of MPAs, also requires that traditional uses be protected. Recreational and commercial fishing are traditional uses going back to first settlement by both indigenous and colonial peoples. Large no-take MPAs violates such rights.

A key Greens MPA objective is the creation of the world's largest no-take MPA in the Coral Sea. Consider then that:

- Most Coral Sea islands and reefs are already protected as national parks.
- All Coral Sea fisheries are already subject to highly restrictive management by the Australian Fish Management Authority.
- All of the species and biotopes found in the Coral Sea are already protected in world's largest coral reef MPA, the GBR National Park.
- The Coral Sea is one of the world's prime tuna fishing grounds. We now harvest a few hundred tonnes per year from the Coral Sea where Japanese longliners sustainably harvested 30,000 tonnes for many years. We currently import some \$165 million in canned tuna from Thailand. Meanwhile Papua New Guinea licenses Asian fishing companies to catch the same migratory stocks in their waters. They currently produce about 400,000 tonnes, while all our tuna fisheries only catch around 15,000 t. We "save" our stocks for Asian fishermen to catch and then sell back to us.

With the additional MPAs desired by the Greens we would be approaching two-thirds of the global total of MPA area with all of our contribution being where it is least needed.

Under our lightly harvested highly regulated conditions, there is no need for or benefit from, extensive MPAs and it would be prudent to await the accumulation of further knowledge to implement them over time in accord with increasing knowledge and need. Current scientific understanding is simply not adequate for a soundly based large scale implementation of MPAs at this time. The crash program of MPA implementation amounts to large scale environmental meddling with no proper assessment of either needs or consequences.

Fisheries have by far the lowest impact of any form of food production. To replace global fisheries production with beef would require conversion to grazing of an area about 15 times larger than the whole of Australia. Failing to properly utilise our extensive resources is not genuine conservation but simply poor management.

We can't go on imposing more and more costly and restrictive measures to prevent problems that don't even exist, nor can we ourselves exist without detectable effect on the natural world. Ecology is above all holistic. Every organism must have impacts in order to exist. Australian's are no exception.

Aiming to maximise our benefits and minimise our detriments requires trade-offs and balances whereby we seek to spread our impacts across our whole resource base within the bounds of sustainability. Every resource we lock up puts more pressure on others and makes balance more difficult. An unnecessary restriction in one place becomes an increased impact somewhere else.

The fundamental purpose of management is the determination and assessment of options with the aim of maximizing total value. Simply claiming to be saving the environment while imposing more and more restrictions with no regard to the broader consequences is a travesty of the very concept of management.

Our economy and quality of life are being increasingly burdened by a proliferation of poorly conceived regulations which provide little or no actual benefit. Environmental regulation in particular has come to be dominated by a narrow ill-informed environmentalist ideology and political pandering for green votes. All Australians are paying the price of gross resource mismanagement in our cost of living, our health, our freedom and in the broader wellbeing of the nation.

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