

MPAs – A Problem Not a Solution

Walter Starck, PhD.

Australia has the largest *per capita* marine area in the world and vast areas of coastal waters un-impacted by human activity. We have far more and larger Marine Protected Areas than any other nation with about 1/3 of the global total. We also have the world's lowest fishery harvest rate and 70% of the seafood we consume is imported. All comes from areas far more heavily fished than our own. These imports currently add some \$1.8 billion annually to a foreign debt that is growing twice as fast as the economy and the cost is rapidly increasing. Continuing to add to an ever growing morass of restrictions on our own fishing is unneeded, unethical and unaffordable.

Ongoing expansion of MPAs have become a problem, not a solution. Their environmental benefit is dubious and unevaluated under our lightly impacted conditions. We also know from wide scale experience with the Great Barrier Reef Green Zones that they have seriously degraded the marine experience available to the public and the socio-economic impact has been a hundred times higher than originally estimated by GBRMPA. Their advice with respect to Moreton Bay should be regarded with great caution.

Under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity to which we are signatory, Australia is required to protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements. It is important to be aware that “customary” and “traditional” in this context is not limited to indigenous people. The obligation to protect and encourage the customary practice of non-indigenous Australians is in no way different from that of indigenous Australians. It is further important to recognize that recreational fishing and boating is a very low impact activity. It is not incompatible with the purposes of conservation and sustainable use.

In addition government's own guidelines also require that procedural steps for good regulation should include:

- Definition of the problem and objectives in addressing it.
- Determination of practical alternative solutions.
- Evaluation of probable risks, costs and benefits of different solutions (including non-action).
- Monitoring of actual outcomes.
- Adjustment of measures in accord with results.

All points of these guidelines have been slighted or ignored in establishment of MPAs.

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. We are paying for this incompetence with our health, happiness and pocketbooks. Australia deserves better and voters must begin to demand it.