

Comment on proposed Coral Sea Marine Park – from respected independent marine researcher and coral reef specialist Dr Walter Starck

AUSTRALIA has the third-largest Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) area 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 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 is 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. Our fisheries are, indeed, in decline. But it's not from overfishing; it's from the most costly restrictive management in the world.

Meanwhile, medical research is reporting immense health benefits from seafood. The Government

is budgeting millions of dollars to promote increased consumption yet, at the same time, is preventing its production.

As if all this incompetence is not enough, we are now creating vast new Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to 'protect' marine life that is under no threat at all. With the lowest fishing harvest in the world, and a rapidly shrinking industry, we currently have over one-third of the global MPA area.

When planned additions are completed over the next few years, we will have about half of the global total. If, as is now being proposed, the Coral Sea area is added, our MPAs will be approaching two-thirds of the global total.

The overwhelming majority of support for this malignant growth of MPAs comes from purported 'stakeholders', who have never paid a visit to these areas (nor ever will). Their only 'stake' is a self-proclaimed concern over something they have no investment in and about which they have made no effort to inform themselves.

The Coral Sea area is under no perceivable threat of any kind. Distance, weather and our small population provide more than adequate protection. Already most of the islands and reefs are protected as National Parks. Significantly increased exploitation is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

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. We 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 Coral Sea area is under no threat and could easily accommodate fishing well above current levels, or those likely in the immediate future. All that will be achieved by declaring it an MPA is to turn an asset into a liability, requiring further millions in annual expenses in administration and enforcement.

– Dr Walter Starck
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Based in Queensland since 1979, US-born Dr Walter Starck has a PhD in marine science from the University of Miami and over 40 years' worldwide experience in reef studies. As a pioneer in the field, his research has helped to unveil key aspects of the basic nature of reef biology, including over 100 species of fish previously unknown to science. The author of over 50 articles and books, he has worked as a research associate at universities and museums in Australia and the USA. His views on reef biology, derived from decades of direct observation, are not always in accord with popular theories. ■