



Australia's marine parks under threat after review, environment groups say

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Australia's marine environment – already beset by coral bleaching and kelp forest dieback – could face further pressures if the federal government acts on recommendations to wind back protection, green groups say.

The results of two lengthy panels set up by the Abbott government to review huge new marine reserves set up by then prime minister Julia Gillard in 2012 recommend changes to zoning use and boundaries for 26 of the 40 areas.



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Michelle Grady, oceans director for the Pew environmental group in Australia, said the reports threaten to expose vulnerable areas to commercial fishing if the recommendations were accepted.

"We're concerned the review proposes to cut back scientifically proven marine sanctuaries," Ms Grady said, with the Coral Sea one region of particular worry. (See chart below of the key marine zones.)



Debate is increasing over which marine areas should be protected.

She urged the government to avoid winding back protection at a time of severe coral bleaching in much of the region's coral reefs and widespread mangrove and kelp forest dieback in other marine areas.

Fiona Maxwell, a campaign manager for the Australian Marine Conservation Society, said the reports ignored the science and could trigger a devastating loss of threatened marine life.

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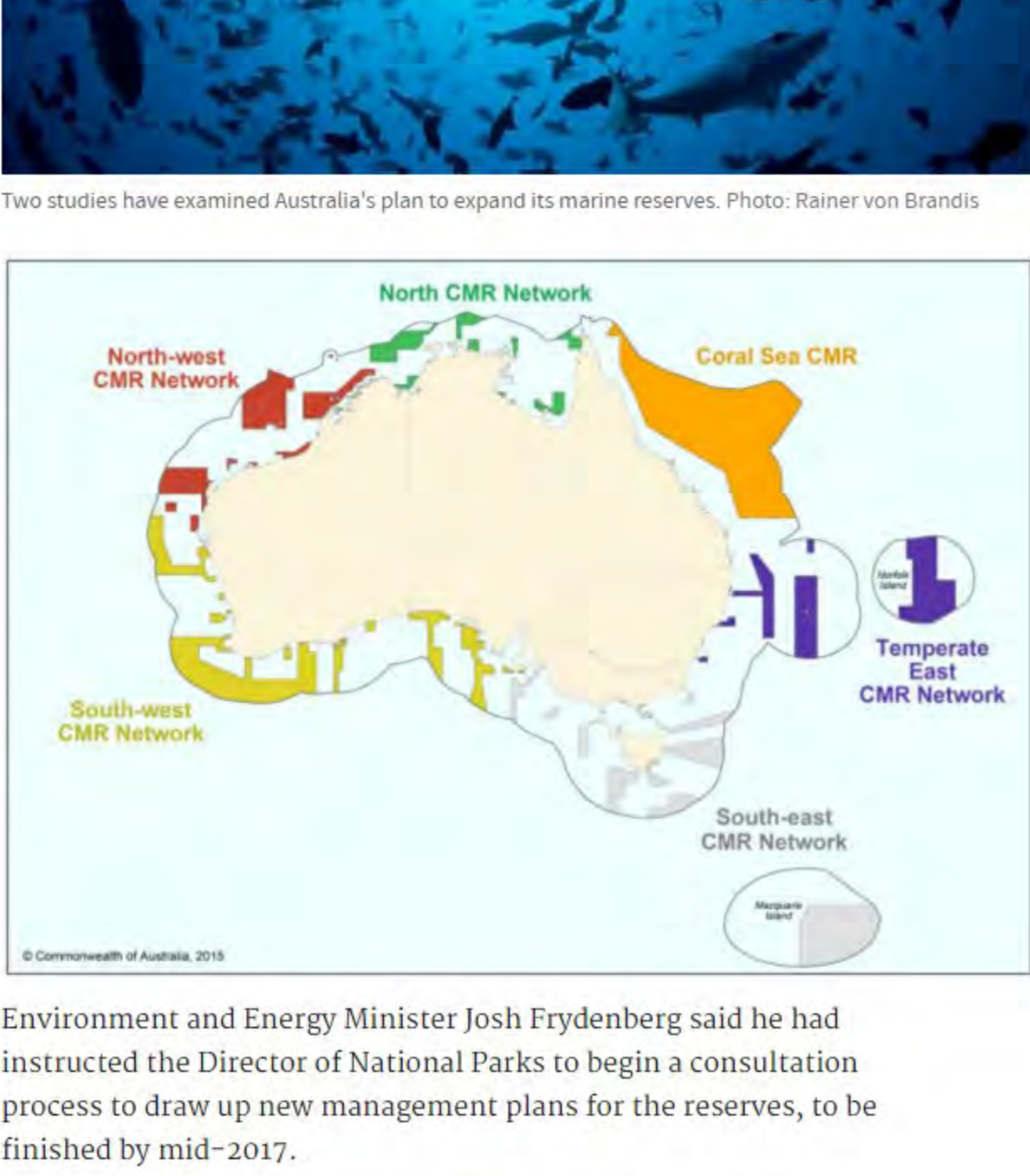
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"The Coral Sea is the cradle of the Great Barrier Reef, and one of the last places on Earth where healthy populations of ocean giants like sharks, tuna and marlin remain," Ms Maxwell said.

"It's not only our unique marine life but our coastal communities, recreational fishers, and the valuable dive tourism sector who are the big losers in the Abbott Review report."



Two studies have examined Australia's plan to expand its marine reserves. Photo: Rainer von Brandis



Environment and Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg said he had instructed the Director of National Parks to begin a consultation process to draw up new management plans for the reserves, to be finished by mid-2017.

The federal government would consider extending protection to the Bremer Canyon off south-western WA as part of its response to the two studies.

Environmental groups have previously raised concerns the new management would permit greater access to fishing. The Abbott government in 2013 acted to eliminate exclusion zones in breeding areas and waters home to threatened species, which would have come into effect in July 2014.

The marine parks reviews also come as the International Union for Conservation and Nature released a major study on ocean warming.

It noted oceans had taken up 93 per cent of the extra heat being trapped by greenhouse gases since the 1970s, creating "a cocktail of negative effects, which we are only just starting to understand". The greatest ocean warming is happening in the southern hemisphere.

"Because of its size and distance from human habitation the ocean in the past has seemed like an almost limitless natural resource, including as a source of food," the IUCN study said. "This is far from the truth as humanity has had a very major impact on all aspects of the ocean's functional systems and the organisms living in it, from the smallest microbe to penguins and whales."

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Improving 'overall protection'

The Australian reviews, though, said protection in the commonwealth reserves would be boosted by the suggested changes.

"As a package, [the recommended changes] will improve the representation and overall protection of conservation values, while providing access and continuity for a range of activities currently undertaken and proposed by commercial and recreational interests," one of the two review reports said.

While protection of the Coral Sea is to be improved with all reefs to be zoned as sanctuary, marine national park or habitat protection, the total area recommended for protection as a marine national park is reduced.

Richard Kenchington, a professorial fellow at the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources at the University of Wollongong, said the two reports appear to have "done a reasonable job" in balancing competing interests for the marine reserves.

The government should follow the authority's lead and introduce five-year reviews of the outlook for each of the marine reserves, said Dr Kenchington, a former executive director of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

"This is the outlook of what will happen if we keep doing what we are doing," he said.

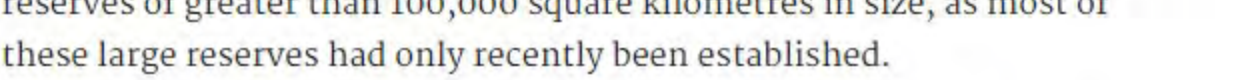
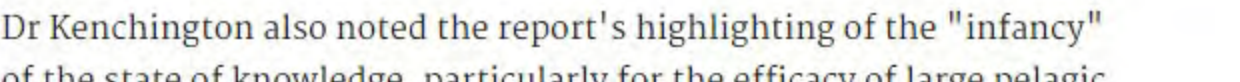
Dr Kenchington also noted the report's highlighting of the "infancy" of the state of knowledge, particularly for the efficacy of large pelagic reserves of greater than 100,000 square kilometres in size, as most of these large reserves had only recently been established.

Mr Frydenberg said the government had set aside \$56.1 million over four years to develop management plans for the reserves. It will decide at a later date what industry assistance will be needed for fishing crews exiting the industry.

The Bremer Canyon would be considered for special protection, given its renowned large aggregations of marine life including, orcas, sperm whales, seals, sharks and giant squid, he said.

While protection of the canyon would be welcomed, the region between it and the coast is now subject to scallop dredging, a low-return, highly destructive practice that has no support from the local community, Ms Grady said.

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