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Protected Oceans Worth Travelling For

A dive-tourism perspective on the review of Australia's Marine Park Network
Management Plans

Deborah Dickson-Smith | Diveplanit Travel | September 2026

Coral Sea, Temperate East, South-west, North-west and North networks

I welcome the opportunity to comment on the preparation of new management plans for Australia's Commonwealth marine parks. I am a dive travel specialist and the Manager of Marketing and Business Development with Diveplanit Travel. Through our work connecting divers with destinations across Australia and overseas, I see every day how strongly travel decisions depend on healthy reefs, abundant marine life, clean water and confidence that special places will remain protected.

The opportunity

This once-in-a-decade review covers 44 Australian Marine Parks and can help deliver Australia's commitment to protect at least 30% of our ocean in highly protected areas by 2030.

My central recommendation

Substantially expand well-designed National Park Zones, guided by science and meaningful engagement with Traditional Owners, marine users and regional communities.

The traveller's test: what makes a destination worth the journey?

For divers and snorkellers, the quality of the experience is inseparable from the health of the environment. Travellers seek destinations with high biodiversity, abundant fish, healthy coral and kelp communities, and reliable encounters with sharks, rays, turtles, whales and other wildlife. These experiences drive bookings, repeat visitation, positive reviews and long-term demand.

Dive travellers commonly stay for several days and spend across accommodation, transport, hospitality, retail and guiding services. Australia's recreational scuba diving industry has been estimated to contribute up to \$4.2 billion annually to the national economy. Protecting the natural assets that draw these visitors is therefore not only an environmental responsibility; it is an investment in regional jobs, business confidence and Australia's international reputation as a nature-based tourism destination.

NSW provides a useful indication of the scale of this economic relationship. Industries dependent on the state’s marine estate generate \$20.6 billion in annual income and support more than 100,000 jobs, with tourism the largest contributing industry. Protecting marine ecosystems therefore safeguards economic assets comparable in scale to other major sectors. (Source: Deloitte Access Economics, NSW Marine Estate Economic Contribution and Market Insights Report, prepared for NSW DPI Fisheries)

My experience of global dive travel is clear: destinations that protect marine life can compete on quality rather than price. Well-managed protected areas in international draw-card locations such as Palau, Misool and Wakatobi have helped make healthy ecosystems central to their tourism offering. Australia has equally exceptional natural assets, but maintaining that advantage requires stronger, adequately funded protection to ensure they stay healthy.

A warning from South Australia

South Australia’s harmful algal bloom shows the scale of environmental, economic and reputational damage that can follow when marine ecosystems come under severe stress. In June 2026, exceptionally low numbers of giant Australian cuttlefish led Whyalla operators to cancel tours during the region’s most important marine tourism season. Operators reported turning away thousands of visitors, with one business projecting a \$400,000 loss and the wider impact on Whyalla estimated at more than \$1 million. The disruption demonstrates how quickly the loss of an iconic wildlife experience can undermine operator income, regional visitation and confidence in a destination. The broader effect on interstate and international tourism has not yet been fully quantified, strengthening the case for early monitoring, well-funded management and preventative protection rather than responding after ecological and reputational damage has occurred.

Australian success story: Lady Elliot Island

Lady Elliot Island is an example of science, restoration, strong environmental rules and low-impact tourism reviving a degraded ecosystem. Once damaged by guano mining, the southernmost coral cay of the Great Barrier Reef is now a thriving wildlife refuge protected by surrounding sanctuary zone protection, and its eco-resort is consistently booked to capacity. This popularity highlights how travellers choose destinations based on healthy marine environments and responsible tourism operators.

Australia’s competitive advantage

Australia’s distinctive marine life, including sea dragons, wobbegongs, grey nurse sharks, giant cuttlefish and eastern blue groper, is a major drawcard for international visitors, particularly from North America. Australia competes with Southeast Asia and Pacific destinations on the quality of its marine environments. Expanding well-designed National Park Zones is essential to protect the habitats and wildlife behind these experiences. If marine quality declines, operators are forced to compete on price; if our reefs and coastal waters remain healthy and abundant, Australia can compete on the strength of a world-class experience.

Recommendations

1. More sanctuary protection	A substantial increase in National Park Zones across all five regions, contributing meaningfully to 30% protection by 2030.
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2. Protection in the right places	Priority for reefs, seagrass meadows, canyons, seamounts, shelf and upper-slope habitats, migratory corridors, breeding and feeding grounds, wildlife aggregations and climate refuges, rather than distant areas that are difficult to access.
3. Whole ecosystems protected	Zones that encompass complete reefs, canyons and habitat systems, with cross-shelf and depth-spanning connections where needed.
4. Sustainable tourism recognised	Diving, snorkelling, wildlife tourism, education and research recognised as high-value, low-impact uses that depend on abundant marine life.
5. Industrial impacts excluded	No bottom trawling, destructive netting or longlining, seabed mining, oil and gas development, seismic blasting or other habitat-modifying activities that undermine marine park values.
6. Traditional Owner leadership respected	Self-determined participation, protection of cultural knowledge and values, and meaningful opportunities for shared decision-making and cultural stewardship.
7. Management properly funded	Long-term investment in science, monitoring, surveillance, compliance, education, adaptive management, transparent reporting and stakeholder engagement.

Regional snapshots: where stronger protection matters most

Coral Sea — restore a world-class ocean wilderness

The Coral Sea is a globally important ocean wilderness and one of Australia's strongest dive tourism assets. The new plan should restore and improve protections reduced in 2018, prioritising whole reef systems, climate-resilient reefs, seamounts, deep-water habitats and wildlife aggregation sites. Particular priorities for dive tourism include the Osprey Group, Bougainville, Holmes, South Flinders, Boot, Ashmore and Marion reefs. Damaging industrial fishing methods and sea cucumber harvesting should not be permitted in the marine park, and surveillance against illegal fishing should be strengthened.

Temperate East — protect the shelf and connect the seamounts

The Temperate East has exceptionally low National Park Zone coverage despite its unique mix of tropical, subtropical and temperate species. Protection should be expanded on the continental shelf and upper slope, including at Cod Grounds, Pimpernel Rock and the broader Solitary Islands, Hunter, Jervis and Central Eastern marine parks. I also support stronger protection and improved connectivity for Lord Howe and Gifford marine parks, developed in a way that reflects the knowledge and aspirations of the Lord Howe Island community.

South-west — bring sanctuary protection closer to the biodiversity

The South-west supports extraordinary endemic biodiversity, whale migration and feeding areas, reefs, seagrass systems and canyons, yet highly protected coverage remains inadequate, particularly on the continental shelf. Priorities include stronger protection at Two Rocks (a

cherished dive asset for Perth dive community), Perth Canyon, Jurien, Geographe, Bremer, the South-west Corner and the Great Australian Bight, with connected zones that include accessible shelf habitats as well as deeper waters.

North-west — secure globally significant wildlife destinations

The North-west contains globally significant reefs, whale shark and humpback whale habitat, turtle nesting areas, seabird colonies, seagrass meadows and canyon systems. Protection should be strengthened at Ningaloo, Rowley Shoals, Kimberley, Ashmore Reef, Eighty Mile Beach and other high-value locations, while ensuring Traditional Owners shape decisions affecting Sea Country.

North — close Australia’s largest protection gap

The North protects part of one of the world’s largest remaining shallow tropical marine systems but has the poorest National Park Zone coverage of the networks under review. New highly protected areas are needed across shelf, canyon, upper-slope, seagrass and reef habitats, including in Arafura, Arnhem, Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, Limmen, Wessel, Oceanic Shoals, Gulf of Carpentaria and West Cape York marine parks.

Conclusion

Strong protection means Healthy habitats, abundant wildlife, resilient tourism businesses, stronger regional economies and enduring visitor experiences.	Delay and weak protection risk Declining biodiversity, damaged destination reputations, lower visitor demand and restoration costs that can persist for decades.
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Strong marine protection is not about excluding people from the ocean. It is about safeguarding the natural values on which sustainable industries depend. National Park Zones maintain access for diving, snorkelling, boating, tourism, education and research while protecting the wildlife and habitats that make these activities worthwhile.

The cost of declining biodiversity is borne by regional communities, tourism operators and future generations. Once a destination loses its wildlife abundance, reef quality or environmental reputation, recovery can take decades and visitors can readily choose healthier alternatives elsewhere. Preventative protection is more effective and less costly than trying to restore degraded ecosystems and rebuild lost tourism demand.

I urge the Australian Government to adopt new management plans that deliver a substantial, science-based expansion of National Park Zones; protect complete and representative ecosystems; recognise Traditional Owner rights and leadership; support sustainable tourism and compatible marine uses; and provide the funding required for effective long-term management. By doing so, Australia can protect extraordinary marine life, strengthen the resilience of coastal economies and ensure divers from Australia and around the world continue to experience healthy, abundant and genuinely world-class oceans.

Thank you for considering this submission.

Deborah Dickson-Smith

Manager, Marketing and Business Development.

Website: [Diveplanit Travel](#)

Email: deborah@diveplanit.com

Phone: +61 419 618 466