



Australian Government

Department of the Environment and Heritage

Mermaid Reef Marine National Nature Reserve Management Plan 2007-2014

HAVE YOUR SAY Invitation to Comment

Mermaid Reef Marine National Nature Reserve is located approximately 300 km to the west-northwest of Broome, Western Australia.

Mermaid Reef is one of three reefs forming the Rowley Shoals (see map overleaf). Each of these reefs consists of an oval reef platform rising from the deep ocean waters and enclosing a large lagoon accessible by narrow channels. The three reefs represent different stages of reef development, with Mermaid Reef representing an earlier stage. They are accepted to be the most perfectly formed shelf atolls in Australian waters, and vital 'ecological stepping stones' that enable reef biota originating in tropical waters further north (near Indonesia) to reach downstream waters to the south.

Mermaid Reef Marine National Nature Reserve was proclaimed in 1991 and is managed by the Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage on behalf of the Director of National Parks. The other two reefs – Clerke Reef and Imperieuse Reef – are managed by the Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management (WA CALM) as the Rowley Shoals Marine Park. Both agencies work closely together to ensure cooperative management.

Mermaid Reef is managed primarily for scientific research and educational purposes, in accordance with its classification as a 'Strict Nature Reserve' World Conservation Union (IUCN) category 1(a).

Mermaid Reef is closed to all forms of fishing, and commercial tourism is allowed only under permit issued by DEH. Mermaid Reef is managed under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and the [current management plan 2000 - 2007](#).

Visitation levels are low at 150-200 visitors per year, due to a combination of remoteness and the summer cyclone season. During the peak season (October-November), Mermaid Reef attracts divers from Australia and overseas, seeking to experience its impressive coral formations, exceptionally clear water, and abundant marine life in a pristine wilderness setting.

The current management plan for the Reserve will cease to have effect on 16 May 2007. The Department of the Environment and Heritage is now proposing to prepare a new management plan to take effect from 2007 to 2014.

Members of the public are invited to make initial comments on this proposal.

Preparing the Management Plan

The EPBC Act requires the Director of National Parks to prepare a management plan for Mermaid Reef Marine National Nature Reserve. Among other things, the Act requires that the plan:

- Assigns the reserve to an IUCN protected area category;
- States how the park is to be managed;
- States how the natural and cultural features of the park are to be protected and conserved;
- Specifies limitations or prohibitions on what the Director may do in relation to the park;
- Specifies any operations, e.g. mining, that can be carried out in the park;
- Indicates generally the activities to be regulated or prohibited and how this will be done; and
- Indicates how the plan takes account of relevant international agreements.



Steps in preparing the management plan

1. The Director of National Parks publishes an invitation to the public to comment on the proposal to draft a new plan (the document you are now reading).
2. The Director prepares a draft plan, taking all comments into account.
3. The Director publishes the draft plan and an invitation to comment on the draft plan. It is anticipated that a draft plan will be available for comment in mid 2006.
4. The Director considers all comments and may alter the plan.
5. The Director gives the Australian Government Minister for the Environment and Heritage the plan for approval.
6. If the Minister approves the plan, it is submitted to both Houses of Parliament.
7. The plan comes into effect unless disallowed by Parliament, and is published and implemented.

What are the issues?

You are asked to provide comment on any matters of interest to you, including the following:

Visitor experience

Tours to Mermaid Reef provide diving, snorkelling and sightseeing adventures. Mermaid Reef is commonly marketed as one of the world's premier dive spots and a remote, untouched wilderness area.

Some issues during the life of the current management plan which relate to visitor access to the reserve have included:

- whether the current commercial tour vessel size limit (34m) and passenger limit (25 per vessel) should be increased;
- whether to significantly alter accessibility to the Reserve by allowing seaplanes to land in the Mermaid Reef lagoon for transfers of passengers to boats; and
- whether some form of overall visitor limit should be set.

Decisions on these matters may affect the nature of tourism to the reserve, the 'visitor experience', and the 'wilderness values' of the Reserve and so public comment is sought.

Illegal fishing

There is an increasing threat of illegal fishers, such as Indonesian fishers targeting shark fin. Although there have been few incursions at Mermaid Reef to date, this matter is a priority concern for reserve users and managers.

Some stakeholders have suggested that the low visitation levels and short season contribute to the vulnerability of the Reserve to illegal fishers. It has been proposed that opening the reserve to new activities, such as catch and release pelagic charter fishing or tourist transfers by seaplanes, may extend the current season and thus act as a deterrent to illegal fishers. Views on these suggestions and their impacts, along with other suggestions or concerns, are sought.

Community participation in management

The tour industry is planning to develop an industry stewardship strategy that will set out ways in which industry can contribute to management of the reserve. Public comment is sought on how community participation can contribute to more effective management and ways in which visitors could assist in monitoring activities.

Remote area management

How to ensure an effective management presence in a remote reserve is an ongoing issue. A particular challenge for this remote reserve is how to ensure all commercial operators and private visitors know and respect the rules, and that enforcement is consistent. We are also seeking suggestions on how to improve access to information for reserves users as well as improving feedback of information from users to reserve managers.

How can I comment?

Please send your comments **in writing** by the closing date of **Thursday 9 March 2006**, to:

Post: Naomi Wolfe
Marine Protected Areas Management
Dept of the Environment and Heritage

Email: mpa@deh.gov.au

Fax: 02 6274 1771

The current management plan is available at: <http://www.deh.gov.au/coasts/mpa/mermaid/>. Hard copies can also be requested from the Community Information Unit on 1800 803 772. For more information call Reserve Manager, Naomi Wolfe on (02) 6274 2262 or visit the above website.

