

Friends of the Earth Melbourne submission to the Protecting Spirit of Sea Country Bill 2023

About us

Friends of the Earth Melbourne is an environmental and social not for profit organisation with fifty years of experience advocating for environmental and social justice and with a long history of supporting First Nations voices in self determination to assert their cultural ties to country.

This document is written by Freja Leonard, the No More Gas campaign coordinator for Friends of the Earth. Freja has decades of history of environmental advocacy, First Nations People's solidarity and in the past five years has maintained a particular focus on the activities of the gas industry and working to realise a post gas environment for Victoria's, and more broadly Australia's energy matrix. Freja has attended numerous consultation meetings with offshore oil and gas project proponents and works alongside First Nations People to provide support where needed and requested during consultation meetings.

Submission on the Bill

We write in full support of the spirit, intent and determinations of the Protecting Spirit of Sea Country Bill 2023 as tabled by Senator Dorinda Cox.

Specifically, we welcome the addition of "intangible cultural heritage" as defined within the UNESCO *International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

We would support acknowledgement within the Bill that descriptions of cultural heritage sites, tangible or otherwise may vary from one First Nation community to another and that these differences should not be sufficient to undermine or call into question the relevance or veracity of one description over another. This submission asserts that to accord primacy of one description of cultural heritage over another, or to conclude that neither descriptions are relevant if they differ is an act of religious persecution or at the very least the result of colonising legal frameworks which do not serve the best and most accurate interpretation of Traditional Owner songlines and cultural story telling. We believe that it is not the place of courtrooms to rule over the validity of stories of Sea Country or songlines from one Traditional Owner nation group to another.

Similarly, we would welcome the inclusion of Indigenous Protected Areas as triggers for denial of project approval, or where an area under approval subsequently is rescheduled as an Indigenous Protected Area that permit extensions may not be considered.

In our view, Federal legislation that directly addresses the importance of protecting not just traditional Sea Country as it is understood and recognised by Traditional Owners but also the spiritual significance of Sea Country in this cultural context is long overdue and we commend Senator Dorinda Cox for introducing this important Bill.

I am happy to be contacted in relation to this submission, and consent to having this submission be publicly available and to have our identifying information associated with this submission.

Freja Leonard, No More Gas campaign coordinator, Friends of the Earth Melbourne