

The Hon Peter Garrett AM MP

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts

C09/10618

Ms Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

14 SEP 2009

Dear Ms Irwin 

Thank you for your letter of 17 June 2009 seeking my response to a petition submitted to the Standing Committee on Petitions regarding a proposal to establish a Coral Sea Heritage Park.

The petition expresses concern over any possible actions by the Australian Government that will result in usage restrictions, access or additional controls over the Coral Sea beyond those that exist under current legislation, and refers to a proposal by the Pew Foundation to establish a Coral Sea Heritage Park.

The Coral Sea is internationally recognised for its rich biodiversity and important heritage values. On 19 May 2009 I announced the establishment of a Coral Sea Conservation Zone under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act). The Coral Sea Conservation Zone covers approximately 972,000km² of Australian waters and seabed east of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, out to the edge of Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone.

In order to establish a conservation zone, the EPBC Act requires that I be satisfied that the area should be assessed to determine whether the biodiversity, other natural features and heritage in the area should be protected by including the area in a Commonwealth reserve. There is no statutory requirement to consult with stakeholders prior to the proclamation of a conservation zone as consultation will be a key part of the assessment process which follows.

The environmental significance of the Coral Sea lies in its diverse array of coral reefs, atolls, deep sea plains and canyons, and the extent to which the region's natural and heritage values have remained relatively undisturbed by direct human impact. Recent international studies have highlighted that the Coral Sea is one of the last remaining areas of the world's oceans where large-scale and biologically rich ecosystems remain relatively intact. The Coral Sea also has important heritage significance, being the location of a number of historic shipwrecks and of major naval conflicts of World War II.

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The Coral Sea Conservation Zone is an interim measure to protect the area against increasing pressures while it is being assessed for permanent protection. The conservation zone imposes no additional regulatory impact on most activities in the Coral Sea, such as commercial and recreational fishing, or cruise and merchant shipping. However, some commercial and scientific research activities require a permit. More information about the conservation zone is available at:
<http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/coral-sea.html>.

By declaring a conservation zone in the Coral Sea, the Australian Government is demonstrating its commitment to protecting one of Australia's most biologically diverse and undisturbed marine environments.

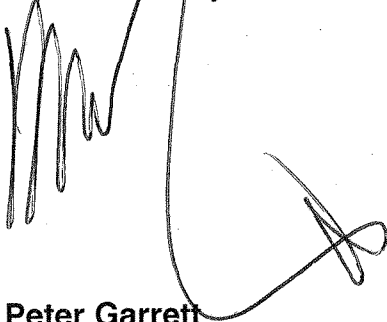
The Coral Sea lies within the East Marine Region. The Australian Government process of marine bioregional planning is currently underway in this region and assessment of the Coral Sea area will be undertaken consistent with this process.

As the first major step in the marine bioregional planning process for the East Marine Region, a Bioregional Profile has been developed which describes in detail the conservation and heritage values of the region, including the Coral Sea. The profile, available from <http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/mbp/east/index.html>, provides the foundation for the development of a Marine Bioregional Plan and the development of measures for the conservation and sustainable management of the marine environment, including the development of a new network of marine protected areas

The marine bioregional planning process will involve extensive stakeholder consultation and a detailed analysis of the environmental, economic and social values of the area, as well as existing and potential future uses.

Thank you for referring this petition to me for response.

Yours sincerely



Peter Garrett