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**Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Climate Change, Water, Environment and the Arts inquiry into
Climate change and environmental impacts on coastal communities**

30 September 2008

Summary

The Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA) is responsible for the development and implementation of Australian Government initiatives to protect and conserve Australia's coasts and oceans and ensure their management is ecologically sustainable¹.

Australia has 36 000 kilometres of mainland coastline. 'Coasts' encompass beaches, estuaries, nearshore islands, reefs and the waters around them. They are at risk of serious degradation because of the pressures on them, including population growth and urbanisation, pollution, mining, tourism, fishing, species invasion from ballast waters, and climate change.²

In general, the range of environmental pressures is very difficult to separate out from challenges posed by climate change and therefore managing climate change pressures is also part of the legislative program and policy responsibility of this Department.

According to the 2006 State of the Environment Report, if current population trends continue, 42.3 per cent of the Nowra to Noosa coastline will be urbanised by the year 2050, with the resulting loss of much of Australia's temperate and tropical coastal systems and stress on existing built and natural infrastructure.³ The rate and scale of this change will bring irreversible impacts to coastal zone environments and, ironically, threaten many of the natural values which draw people to live on the coast.

In addition, coastal communities adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef are facing the situation where agricultural diffuse source pollution is posing a significant threat to the health and resilience of the Reef.

In response to this situation, the Australian Government has commenced two significant new programs through Caring for our Country: *Community Coastcare* and *Reef Rescue*. These programs are implemented jointly by DEWHA and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF).

As well as administering the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act 1999* (the EPBC Act) (see below), DEWHA also has responsibility for a number of programs which recognise the integral link between catchments, coasts and oceans (including Marine Bioregional Planning), programs aimed at protecting, or promoting sustainable use of, coastal resources as well as many that promote sustainable communities, including coastal communities.

While work done to date has been useful, coastal zone management has not been particularly well serviced in the past. For this reason, DEWHA considers that this critical area needs greater coordination between agencies and across jurisdictions to ensure that these communities are able to address the challenges posed by population growth and increasing environmental pressures, including climate change. In advising

¹ *Portfolio Budget Statements 2008-2009, Budget Related Paper No.1.6, The Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts portfolio*

² Beeton RJS (Bob), Buckley Kristal I, Jones Gary J, Morgan Denise, Reichelt Russell E, Trewin Dennis (2006 Australian State of the Environment Committee); *Australia State of the Environment Report 2006*

³ Beeton RJS (Bob), Buckley Kristal I, Jones Gary J, Morgan Denise, Reichelt Russell E, Trewin Dennis (2006 Australian State of the Environment Committee); *Australia State of the Environment Report 2006*

the Government on a national coastal policy, the Department will consider these issues together with the findings of the current inquiry.

The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

DEWHA administers the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act), the Australian Government's central piece of environmental legislation.

The EPBC Act provides a legal framework to protect and manage "matters of national environmental significance", including Commonwealth marine areas, nationally threatened species and ecological communities and wetlands of international importance (or Ramsar wetlands). The Act also provides for the establishment and management of Commonwealth reserves, both terrestrial and marine.

The Act aims to balance the protection of these crucial environmental and cultural values with our society's economic and social needs by creating a legal framework and decision-making process based on the guiding principles of ecologically sustainable development.⁴

Specifically the EPBC Act aims to, among other things, conserve Australia's biodiversity and promote ecologically sustainable development through the conservation and ecologically sustainable use of natural resources, while providing for a streamlined national environmental assessment and approval processes.

The EPBC Act protects native species and ecological communities by providing for:

- the identification and listing of species and ecological communities as threatened;
- development of conservation advice and recovery plans for listed species and ecological communities;
- assessments of the ecological sustainability of fisheries;
- development of a register of critical habitat;
- recognition of key threatening processes; and
- where appropriate, reducing the impacts of these processes through threat abatement plans.

The EPBC Act enables the Australian Government to protect and manage threatened species by:

- determining the threats faced by species;
- preventing, mitigating and/or managing those threats; and
- supporting the recovery of the species until they can be removed from the EPBC Act list of threatened species.

These provisions are important to allow for the protection of coastal resources, particularly at this time when they are under increased pressure.

⁴ The objectives of the EPBC Act may be found at <http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/index.html>

A limitation of the EPBC Act is the constraints on its ability to consider the cumulative effects of actions by multiple parties. DEWHA is attempting to address this shortcoming by taking new approaches to the protection of biodiversity at an ecosystem level. For example, the implementation of the Marine Bioregional Planning framework (see below) and the current Strategic Assessment of Browse Basin liquefied natural gas reserves in the Kimberley⁵ are examples of using the provisions of the EPBC Act to assess threats at an ecosystem level, taking into account all of the uses that may impact on the resources and biodiversity of a particular area and all parties with a stake in a region.

Nevertheless, the EPBC Act has been used to protect threatened species and habitat in coastal zones. In July 2008, the Minister for the Environment and Heritage, the Hon Peter Garrett MP, rejected an application for a residential development near Mission Beach in far north Queensland using powers under the EPBC Act. The Minister deemed that the planned development would have the potential to significantly impact on habitat of the southern cassowary and that these impacts could not be offset or minimised.

The catchment-coast-ocean continuum

Many coastal economies depend on fishing, shipping, petroleum and mineral extraction, tourism and/ or recreational industries, which in turn depend on the health of the marine environment. In addition, DEWHA recognises that activities on land in catchment areas can have a significant impact on coastal areas, as well as the marine environment, and vice versa.

A National Approach to Addressing Marine Biodiversity Decline

Research work undertaken to date indicates that Australia's marine biodiversity is under increasing pressure from many uses of the marine environment. *A National Approach to Addressing Marine Biodiversity Decline*, a report endorsed by the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council (NRMMC) in April 2008, identifies the five most significant broad scale threats to marine biodiversity as climate change, resource use, land based impacts, marine biosecurity and marine pollution. The report proposes a number of key policy directions aimed at addressing these issues. Of the eight key policy directions proposed, three are of particular relevance to climate change and coastal communities. These are:

- Key Direction 5 – improve understanding of the vulnerability of marine biodiversity to climate change focusing on ecosystems and species that are at particular risk;
- Key Direction 7 – develop regional climate change adaption policies and plans based on predictive modelling and integrate them into marine bioregional planning processes; and

⁵ More details on the Kimberley Strategic Assessment are available at <http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/notices/assessments/kimberley.html>

- Key Direction 8 – progress the integrated management of the coastal zone including monitoring coastal marine biodiversity.⁶

Marine Bioregional Planning

DEWHA recognises that link between catchments, coasts and oceans and incorporates this into its Marine Bioregional Planning framework. Marine Bioregional Planning is a world-leading approach to regional marine planning and provides a focus on biodiversity conservation and ecologically sustainable management of Australia's oceans.⁷

Marine Bioregional Plans will draw on Australia's growing marine science and socio-economic information base to provide a detailed picture of each marine region. Each plan will describe a region's key habitats, plants and animals; natural processes; human uses and benefits; and threats to the long-term ecological sustainability of the region. The plans will give details about the various statutory obligations under the EPBC Act that apply in any region, and will describe Government's range of conservation measures in place, such as those relating to recovery planning for threatened species.

Existing policies and programs related to coastal zone planning

Caring for our Country initiatives

Caring for our Country commenced on 1 July 2008 and brings together delivery of Commonwealth NRM programs into an integrated package. Caring for our Country provides \$2.25 billion in funding over five years.

The goal of Caring for our Country is to have an environment that is healthy, better-protected, well-managed, and resilient, and that provides essential ecosystem services in a changed climate. The program focuses on achieving strategic results and invests in six national priority areas, one of which is coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats.⁸

Caring for our Country - Community Coastcare

Community Coastcare will provide \$100 million over five years under the Caring for our Country "coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats" priority area. All Community Coastcare projects will contribute to Caring for our Country national priorities by:

- protecting and rehabilitating coastal environments and critical aquatic habitats; and

⁶ The report is available at:

<http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/publications/marine-diversity-decline/index.html>

⁷ Further information about Marine Bioregional Planning is available at:

<http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/mbp/index.html>

⁸ Information on Caring for our Country is available from the website:

<http://www.nrm.gov.au/>

- enhancing community skills, knowledge and engagement with Indigenous Australians, volunteers and coastal communities.

In 2008-09 Community Coastcare will provide up to \$20 million for coastal restoration and preventative conservation works through a range of mechanisms including two levels of competitive grants: small grants of up to \$50,000; and grants for larger-scale activities in high priority areas up to \$250,000.

Small grants will support a variety of activities to protect and rehabilitate coastal waterways and wetlands, prevent coastal erosion, enhance community skills and knowledge, record and pass on traditional knowledge and protect nesting sites, Indigenous cultural landscapes and culturally sensitive sites.

Applications for grants for larger-scale activities must demonstrate a substantial contribution to national priorities in areas of high conservation value, such as nationally significant coastal wetlands. These projects must also deliver substantial outcomes in terms of improved water quality and rehabilitation and/or protection of nationally significant coastal zones and coastal 'hotspots'.

Larger-scale activities must also demonstrate a substantial contribution to the protection of matters of national environmental significance in identified coastal hotspot areas, threatened species and ecological communities.

A Community Coastcare coastal hotspot is an area that:

- encompasses one or more matters of national environmental significance as defined under the EPBC Act;
- is under pressure as a result of population growth and development, disturbance of acid sulfate soils, and water quality decline; and
- is suffering ecosystem disturbance leading to habitat loss and biodiversity decline.

Twelve coastal hotspots were identified as priority locations for 2008-09 Community Coastcare larger-scale grants in New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia.

Applications for funding in 2008-09 closed on 25 July 2008. Following assessment by community-based and technical panels, successful projects will be announced in late 2008.

Caring for our Country - Reef Rescue

There is a growing body of scientific evidence linking the declining health of the Great Barrier Reef to poor water quality. Run-off from agricultural land results in the delivery of agrichemicals and excessive levels of nutrients and sediments to the Great Barrier Reef Lagoon. Water pollution may lead to the overgrowth of coral by algae and impedes the natural ability of coral to feed, reproduce, combat disease and recover from disturbances such as bleaching events.

Reef Rescue is also a component of Caring for our Country. It is a new five year/ \$200 million program that aims to increase the resilience of the Great Barrier Reef to climate change by improving the quality of water entering the reef lagoon.

Reef Rescue is being implemented jointly by DEWHA and DAFF, working closely with a range of stakeholders, including the Queensland Government, regional NRM bodies, Indigenous communities, industry and conservation groups.

Through Reef Rescue, the Australian Government will assist land managers in Great Barrier Reef catchments to improve their land management practices and reduce the impact that nutrients, pesticides and sediments are having on the Reef.

Reef Rescue will also invest in extension services and community awareness activities, increasing the understanding of Traditional Owner management issues, improving the understanding of the link between land management practices and environmental impacts, and monitoring and reporting of water quality, land condition and the uptake of best management practices.⁹

Reef Rescue will build on the achievements of the Reef Water Quality Protection Plan (Reef Plan). Reef Rescue and an updated, more strategic Reef Plan will be developed in close collaboration between the Australian and Queensland Governments with the aim of progressing these initiatives in an integrated way.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), part of the DEWHA portfolio, is responsible for managing the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and has provided a separate submission to this Inquiry.

Integrated Coastal Zone Management

In 2006, the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council (NRMMC) endorsed the *National Cooperative Approach to Integrated Coastal Zone Management: Framework and Implementation Plan* (the Framework), which provides the policy framework for strategic coastal planning. The Framework has a strong focus on policy coordination and actions related to natural resource management and land based sources of marine pollution across the catchment-coast-ocean continuum.

Actions identified in the implementation plan were designed to build on existing coastal management initiatives at all levels of government and, where feasible, were intended to be achieved through the efficient allocation of existing resources. The six priority areas are: integration across the catchment coast ocean continuum; land and marine based sources of pollution; climate change; pest plants and animals; planning for population change; and capacity building.

The Framework is being implemented by Australian, state, and territory governments. The Implementation Plan for the Framework sets out, under strategic priority areas,

⁹ A Government announcement providing more information on the above programs can be accessed at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/minister/garrett/2008/pubs/budmr20080513-joint.pdf>

implementation objectives and actions required to address coastal management issues that are of national scale or scope, or where issues will benefit from complementary arrangements between jurisdictions.

DEWHA considers that the key themes and priority areas are still relevant. However, an important shortcoming of the Framework is that it does not adequately address coastal development holistically. This will be discussed later in this submission.

Mechanisms to promote sustainable use of coastal resources

In order for coastal communities to be sustained in the face of the many pressures they are currently facing, their resources need to be carefully managed.

Water supplies are an important issue in many coastal areas which are subject to strong population growth and other environmental pressures. The Australian Government's Water for the Future initiative is administered by DEWHA and will secure the long-term water supply for many communities, including those in coastal areas. This will include investing in new water supplies that do not rely entirely on rainfall, updating infrastructure to reduce water waste and helping households save water in their everyday lives.¹⁰

The catchment-coast-ocean continuum is integral to managing coastal resources. DEWHA is responsible for a number of programs that address issues such as marine debris, marine pollution, and invasive species, all of which are threats to many coastal communities' natural resources, particularly wildlife.

In addition, DEWHA is responsible for conducting assessments of fisheries under the EPBC Act, to ensure their ecological sustainability. Ecological sustainability of Australia's fisheries is essential, not only for long term species and ecosystem viability but also to underpin economic sustainability for those who depend on our oceans, such as coastal communities. Under the EPBC Act, DEWHA must ensure that:

- all Commonwealth managed fisheries undergo strategic environmental impact assessment before new management arrangements are brought into effect; and
- all fisheries, from which product is exported, undergo assessment to determine the extent to which management arrangements will ensure the fishery is managed in an ecologically sustainable way.

Currently, fisheries around Australia are managed under complex state/Commonwealth arrangements. This may be an area which could be addressed in order to better manage protected species, as well as commercial fish species and other species which are taken as bycatch and byproduct by commercial fishers.

DEWHA is also responsible for five protected areas that include coastal waters. Activities within these areas are managed in accordance with the EPBC Act. While recreational take is permitted subject to a range of conditions, commercial harvesting

¹⁰ Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *Environment Budget Overview 2008-09*.

is generally not permitted. This assists in protecting local fish stocks and ecosystems in those areas. Enforcement of activities within our protected area coastal waters is a cooperative arrangement with relevant state and other Australian Government authorities.

Mechanisms to promote sustainable coastal communities

DEWHA administers a number of programs aimed at making Australian homes and communities more sustainable. While these initiatives are not directly targeted at coastal communities, they will go a significant way towards helping these communities cope with the increased demand on resources and infrastructure in coastal regions. These include:

- green loans of up to \$10,000 to assist families to install solar, water and energy efficient products;
- rebates of up to \$500 to help install rainwater tanks and greywater facilities in up to 500,000 homes across Australia. In addition, \$10 000 will be provided to 300 surf life saving clubs in Australia to install a rainwater tank, or to contribute to a larger water saving project;
- rebates of up to \$1000 to eligible households for the installation of solar or heat-pump hot water systems and the gradual phase out of inefficient hot water systems;
- grants of up to \$50,000 for schools to install a wide variety of energy and water saving measures¹¹; and
- support for local government through the Cities for Climate Protection (CCP) program. The CCP is a collaborative program between ICLEI Oceania¹² and DEWHA that enables councils and their communities to achieve quantifiable reductions in their emissions through a strategic milestone framework. Councils focus on reducing their own corporate emissions, and from households and businesses within their community.

Governance and institutional arrangements for the coastal zone

A challenge for the development of a national approach to strategic coastal planning is the effective coordination of government and other initiatives related to coasts to maximise policy outcomes and future investment and generate benefits for coastal communities. Currently, the major coordinating processes for coasts at a national level are:

- COAG, through the COAG Working Group on Climate Change and Water;
- the Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council's Marine and Coastal Committee (NRMMC MACC), which administers the ICZM referred to earlier in this submission;

¹¹ Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, *Environment Budget Overview 2008-09*.

¹² ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI) is an international, not-for-profit association of local governments and local government organisations that have made a commitment to sustainable development. ICLEI Oceania is the regional secretariat for ICLEI.

- the NRMCC's Natural Resources Policies and Programs Committee's Climate Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (CLAN) Working Group, which covers coasts and some marine matters; and
- COAG's Local Government and Planning Ministers' Council Planning Officials Group (POG).

To date, coordination between these processes has been ad hoc and there is a need to improve on communication and coordination of activities within and between governments, as well as with key stakeholders. Identifying the respective roles of each group will enable a clearer articulation of the roles of the NRMCC committees vis-à-vis the COAG process on climate change, and ensure that key NRM issues are adequately covered in coastal planning and adaptation.

As a first step, the NRMCC MACC agreed in July 2008 to a review of ICZM implementation, as well as reviewing the need and functioning of the Intergovernmental Coastal Advisory Group (ICAG), which manages the implementation of the ICZM for the MACC. This review should take into account where the ICZM fits in with the other processes currently underway and may provide an opportunity to better address some of the coordination issues above.

National Plan to Care for our Coasts

The Government has committed to develop a national coastal policy with greater Federal Government involvement in policy and planning. As highlighted in this submission, DEWHA considers that coastal zone management requires greater policy attention and coordination between agencies and across jurisdictions to ensure that coastal communities are able to address the challenges posed by population growth and increasing environmental pressures, including climate change. In advising the Government on a national coastal policy, the Department will consider these issues together with the findings of the current inquiry.