I welcome the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft NSW Mainland Marine Park Network Management Plan 2021-2031 (the Plan).

I am extremely concerned about the proposed Plan, particularly the potential for further cutbacks to marine sanctuaries.

I’m equally concerned about the lack of good process, transparency and accountability when it comes to making decisions relating to our marine parks.

Furthermore, as evidenced by the shocking authorisation of illegal fishing in Batemans Marine Park sanctuary zones in 2019, and the Minister for Agriculture’s statement last year that he is eager to remove further sanctuary areas in marine parks (1), it’s clear that our NSW marine life will remain at risk from this Government.

I strongly support Marine Parks, in particular the highly-protected areas (sanctuaries) within them that are the most effective tool for conserving marine biodiversity for future generations.

While I appreciate the vision for a consistent, holistic approach to managing marine parks in NSW, I’m deeply alarmed that the Plan substantially downplays their primary purpose as conservation tools. I do NOT support the proposed framework that appears to primarily pave the way for increased extractive and damaging activities to be allowed within them.

1. The Marine Estate Management Act 2014 (the Act) describes that the primary purpose of marine parks is “to conserve the biological diversity, and maintain ecosystem integrity and ecosystem function, of bioregions in the marine estate”. Other purposes for marine parks (to provide for management of uses, development and activity within the marine park) should only, according to the Act, be provided for “where consistent with the primary purpose” (2). The proposed Plan fails to account for this prioritisation; including in the so-called “trade off” outcomes, Threats, and Action items.

2. The proposed Plan omits the names of two bioregions (the Hawkesbury Shelf and Twofold Shelf) that remain completely unprotected in NSW under the nationally agreed CAR (Comprehensive Adequate and Representative) principles; and makes no reference to any Objective or Action to increase sanctuary protection in line with CAR principles, for the next 10 years of management.

3. The proposed Plan includes Action items which pave the way for future downgrading protections in sanctuaries and other zones. While the rest of Australia and the world are scaling up protection in the face of increasing threats, NSW isn’t committing to protecting marine life for the next generation.

4. Across 152 Actions for Implementation, the proposed Plan shows fewer than 15 partnerships with any non-governmental local, state or national conservation groups, marine educators or researchers, academic institutions, or marine science professional bodies – even for Actions which are clearly within the immediate interest, expertise and scope of conservation or science stakeholders. By contrast, more than 120 partnerships are named with non-governmental stakeholders who exploit marine resources, even when the Action items are outside their field of expertise/reference. This represents an unacceptable level of planned bias in management.

A revised Plan MUST display:

1. Action items and “trade off” strategies that integrate the first three principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development (i.e. use of the precautionary principle; assuring intergenerational equity; conservation of biological diversity and ecosystem integrity) consistently throughout the Plan.

2. Action items and partnerships reflecting the non-fisheries expertise of the full NSW community. Before the Plan is finalised, DPI Fisheries and DPIE-EES must urgently scale-up engagement with local, state and national ENGOs; marine scientists and educators; citizen science; and local community groups who have collective decades of learning and experience in marine science, education, conservation practice, data collection, and associated expertise in marine park management.

3. Objectives and Actions to increase sanctuary protections (within marine parks and across the Marine Estate) to fulfil NSW’s commitment to CAR principles over the next 10 years.

My concerns about the Plan are greatly heightened by the NSW government’s poor track record on marine protection, its willingness to ignore expert advice, and lack of open engagement and transparency. This was highlighted by the Government’s decision, without consultation or scientific evidence, to allow illegal fishing in Batemans Marine Park sanctuaries two years ago, and the Minister for Fisheries publicly stated intention in 2020 to remove further sanctuary areas in marine parks.

I request that DPI-Fisheries and DPIE-EES compile and present to the public a formal report of the public feedback on the draft Plan, as is standard good governance practice in other jurisdictions.

Please consider this my formal submission on the draft NSW Mainland Marine Park Network Management Plan 2021-2031.

Sources:

1. Fishing World (2020). VIDEO: NSW Minister for Agriculture says no more marine parks. 20 March 2020. https://www.fishingworld.com.au/news/video-nsw-minister-for-agriculture-says-no-more-marine-parks

2. NSW Government (2020). Marine Estate Management Act 2014 No 72.

https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/act-2014-072#sec.22