

## **Sea Country Planning**

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Sea Country Planning is a process in which Traditional Owners and/or other local Indigenous people develop their goals, strategies and actions for protecting, managing and using their coastal and marine environments and resources. From 2003-2006, sea country planning was funded by the Australian Government's National Oceans Office as part of regional marine planning activities under Australia's Oceans Policy. During this period, five sea country plans were developed:

- *Kooyang Sea Country Plan*, developed by members of the Framlingham Aboriginal Trust and Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation in South-west Victoria.
- *Dhimurru Yolngu Wunambal Gapu Wana Sea Country Plan*, prepared by the Dhimurru Land Management Aboriginal Corporation in north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.
- *Thuwathu / Bujimulla Sea Country Plan* prepared by the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation on behalf of Traditional Owners of the Wellesley Islands region of the Gulf of Carpentaria in Queensland.
- *Ngarrindjeri Nation Yarluwar-Ruwe Plan - Caring for Ngarrindjeri Sea Country and Culture*, prepared by Ngarrindjeri Tendi, Ngarrindjeri Heritage Committee and Ngarrindjeri Native Title Management Committee, supported by the Ngarrindjeri Land and Progress Association; the Plan covers the Murray River estuary and Coorong region of South Australia.
- *Yanyuwa Sea Country Plan*, developed by the Mabunji Aboriginal Corporation on behalf of the Traditional Owners of the Sir Edward Pellew Islands region of the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory.

These sea country plans are available at <http://www.environment.gov.au/indigenous/seacountry/>

### ***Origins of Sea Country Planning***

SCP emerged as a planning tool during the development of the South-east Regional Marine Plan, when it became clear from consultations with coastal Indigenous groups that their rights and obligations to their local traditional areas made it difficult for their issues and interests to be addressed in a marine plan covering a very large region. The National Oceans Office responded by funding the five pilot sea country plans, covering areas and issues determined by the local Indigenous groups themselves. Selection of the Indigenous groups to undertake sea country planning was made on the advice of an Indigenous advisory group in south-eastern Australia and native title representative bodies in other regions.

### ***Features of Sea Country Plans***

Sea country plans explain the connection of Indigenous people to their traditional coastal and marine environments at a local scale. Though the pilot sea country plans were funded by the Australian Government, they are not government documents. This allows Indigenous groups to freely express their aspirations and propose strategies and actions for sea country management that meet their needs. Typically, sea country plans also explain how government agencies, industry and

other stakeholders can work with Indigenous people to implement the proposed strategies and actions. In this way, sea country plans assist government agencies and others to meet their commitments to engage with Indigenous people in environmental and resource management, cultural heritage protection and economic development.

Sea country plans are not statutory plans - i.e. they have no legal status or authority. However, because they clearly explain Indigenous peoples' interests and proposals, sea country plans can lead to collaboration with agencies that in the past have not understood Indigenous interests in sea country and have not known what steps could be taken to work with Indigenous people in coastal and marine management.

Some of the actions proposed in sea country plans can be implemented quite quickly, while others may require more lengthy negotiation and reform. Employment of sea country facilitators to coordinate implementation of the plans, protection of cultural sites and the establishment of Indigenous Protected Areas, for example, can be achieved through existing funding programmes. On the other hand, establishing joint management of marine protected areas (MPAs) or reforms to the governance of fisheries management to give a greater voice to Indigenous people will require substantial negotiations with government agencies and others.

### ***The Future of Sea Country Planning***

Despite the success of the pilot sea country plans, it appears unlikely that the National Oceans Office will fund further sea country planning as part of the regional marine planning process. This is because the Australian Government has narrowed the focus of regional marine plans to provide a greater emphasis on the protection of biodiversity and the establishment of MPAs in Commonwealth waters. Nevertheless, it is possible that other Australian Government programmes may continue to provide support for sea country planning, for example through NHT initiatives, Regional Partnership Agreements or Shared Responsibility Agreements. Sea country planning could also be funded by state government agencies (e.g. conservation, fisheries, Indigenous Affairs departments), industry (e.g. fishing, tourism) or conservation NGOs.

Sea country plans are part of a shift in environmental planning towards the recognition of Indigenous cultural domains ('country') as an appropriate basis for Indigenous engagement. For example, one of the overarching strategies for the implementation of the Aboriginal Cultural and Natural Resource Management Plan for the Wet Tropics NRM Region in far north Queensland is the development of "Country-based Plans", for the many tribal and clan areas within the Wet Tropics. 'Country', whether on the sea, on the coast or inland is the fundamental scale at which Australian environments have been managed for tens of thousands of years. It makes sense therefore, that a country-based scale of planning, such as sea country planning, is an effective tool for enabling Indigenous voices to be heard in setting directions for the future management our environment and resources.