



Management of the Solitary Islands Marine Park

In 1998 the New South Wales Government declared the Solitary Islands and adjacent waters one of the first marine parks in the state. The declaration recognised the area's natural values, including its extraordinary array of marine biodiversity, relatively natural undeveloped coast and stunning scenic qualities.

The Commonwealth's Solitary Islands Marine Reserve adjoins the state marine park.

After extensive public consultation, the Solitary Islands Marine Park zoning plan came into effect in October 2002. The 'multiple use' zoning plan protects representative examples of marine biodiversity and areas of ecological importance, as well as providing for ecologically sustainable use and public enjoyment. In addition to the zoning plan, the Marine Parks Authority runs a number of management programs to maintain important natural and cultural values within the marine park. The outcomes of these programs are detailed below.

Consultation and planning

The Solitary Islands Marine Park Advisory Committee was formed soon after the establishment of the marine park. The committee comprises representatives from stakeholder groups, including local Aboriginal communities, marine conservation, the tourism and commercial fishing industries, recreational fishing and boating, local government, scuba diving, spear-fishing and marine research.

The committee advises the Marine Parks Authority on the management of the marine park, including the ongoing planning and review of its day-to-day management programs. The committee will also be heavily involved in the review of the Solitary Islands Marine Park zoning plan.

Education, information and visitor assistance

Educational strategies are raising awareness and understanding of the values of the Solitary Islands Marine Park. These include:

- distribution of marine park user guides and zoning plan summaries
- installation and maintenance of information signs at key locations, such as boat ramps and pedestrian paths
- a school and community education program
- displays, print media articles, radio presentations and face-to-face contact with the public
- information seminars on the values of the marine park for tourism operators.

A recent survey of local community attitudes by McGregor Tan Research indicated the success of the park's educational and advisory activities: 77% of respondents said they were aware that the area around Solitary Islands was a marine park, while an overwhelming majority (87%) indicated they were in favour of conserving the Solitary Islands Marine Park.

The Marine Parks Authority works closely with the main local tourism organisation, Coffs Coast Marketing, to promote the park to visitors. Some key marketing outcomes from this partnership include promotional articles in magazines such as *Australian Geographic*, *Australian Traveller* and *Getaway Magazine*, and features on television programs such as *Getaway* and *Totally Wild*.

Compliance and enforcement

Surveillance and enforcement are essential components in effective marine park management. The Solitary Islands Marine Park compliance program includes:

- development of an overarching compliance strategy to provide a framework that covers all routine and tactical compliance in the marine park
- regular vessel patrols of the marine park to monitor activities and ensure compliance with the zoning plan
- shore-based patrols which supplement monitoring from vessels
- joint operations and cooperative arrangements with other agencies, including the Department of Primary Industries, Water Police, Customs, National Parks and Wildlife Rangers, and NSW Maritime to further enhance the effectiveness of compliance.

Compliance activities, combined with the cooperation and goodwill of visitors to the park, have resulted in a high level of compliance with marine park rules and regulations, which in turn helps to protect the marine environment.

Raising awareness of the extent of the marine park has underpinned the compliance program. Land-based zone markers and ocean zone marker buoys throughout the marine park assist visitors to locate sanctuary zone boundaries.

Research and monitoring

In accordance with the Solitary Islands Marine Park research and monitoring plan, a wide range of scientific research in the marine park is improving our knowledge of the marine environment and assisting in park management.

The research and monitoring program aims to increase knowledge and understanding of the marine environment and ecological processes, identify and map habitats, and assess the effectiveness of marine park zoning.

Research program outcomes include:

- establishment of a long-term reef fish monitoring program at 71 sites within the park
- seafloor mapping of areas in the park to identify, in detail, the different types of habitats and their location in the park
- establishment of long-term monitoring of the park's shallow reef communities
- surveys of seafloor communities in the deeper waters of the park using a combination of drop video cameras, towed video cameras and remotely operated vehicle deployments
- monitoring the abundance of reef fish inside and outside sanctuary zones at several sites each year to examine the effectiveness of sanctuary zones in conserving biodiversity
- monitoring the use of the marine park through a combination of visitor surveys, observational surveys and flights over the park to examine use patterns in the summer high season and winter low season.

The Marine Parks Authority has also been involved in a range of research and management activities to better understand the significance of the Solitary Islands Marine Park to local indigenous communities. The authority is a key partner in a project to monitor traditional use of the Arrawarra Stone Fish Traps over a three-year period. The project is employing Aboriginal people, training Elders in scientific monitoring techniques, and facilitating the sharing of information about traditional management of marine resources. The Marine Parks Authority has also worked closely with the Gumbaynggirr Nation, in particular Garby Elders, to develop a conservation plan for the use of the Arrawarra Headland Stone Fish Traps.

Visitor infrastructure

As outlined above, the installation and maintenance of signage has been a key program for the marine park.

Public moorings have also been installed in the park to limit damage from anchors in sensitive areas. Currently, 42 public moorings are provided.

Permit system

Under the *Marine Parks Act 1997*, most commercial activities and some recreational activities, research and organised events require the consent of the Marine Parks Authority. The issuing of permits enables the authority to manage potential impacts to the marine park and help to ensure that activities are ecologically sustainable. Permits also allow for data collection and monitoring, so that impacts can be assessed over time and management adjusted accordingly.

Commercial and charter fishers, scientists and scuba divers require a permit from the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts to conduct these activities in some zones in the adjacent Commonwealth Marine Reserve.

Environmental assessment

In accordance with statutory responsibilities, marine park staff provide advice on development proposals adjacent to the park to ensure that impacts to the marine environment are minimised. Appropriate environmental impact assessment is undertaken for all developments within the marine park.

Pollution control and incident management

The Marine Parks Authority has contributed to the development of local incident response strategies to deal with pollution and the stranding of marine wildlife. In addition, the authority has provided input into strategies for ameliorating pollution and education programs on marine pollution, such as the three pollution fact sheets developed with Coffs Harbour City Council that were provided to residents.

Management resources

Five staff are employed to undertake day-to-day management of the marine park. They include a manager, research officer, marine assessment officer and two marine park compliance officers. In 2007 a part-time administration officer and a part-time community education officer were employed and in 2008 a marine park planner was also employed. Two casual field staff have assisted with research and monitoring programs, especially underwater dive surveys, since 2002. A planning officer was employed in 2008.

Department of Primary Industries (Fisheries) staff have provided important additional support for fisheries enforcement and compliance activities in conjunction with marine park staff.

Enthusiastic intern students from local tertiary institutions and a range of volunteers have also provided assistance in marine park projects. For example, the Solitary Islands Underwater Research Group, a community group comprising divers, teachers and biologists, has assisted in mapping reef habitats, installing an underwater trail and developing a DVD of the park's marine species which is included in educational kits for schools.

Contact details

For more information, contact Environment Line on 1300 361 967.

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