



# Australian Coral Reef Society Inc.

A society promoting scientific study of Australian Coral Reefs

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## Submission on Australia's Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2010-2020

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The Australian Coral Reef Society (ACRS) wishes to congratulate the government on putting forward a revised national strategy for biodiversity conservation which underpins a considerable commitment to the quality of the environment, and thus the quality of life for the Australian people. By putting forth our comments on the present National Strategy draft, we hope to make the final document more faithfully reflect the implementation of the laudable, but so far vague, goals presently espoused in the current draft. We believe the Strategy could be considerably strengthened by more specific targets for restoration, more specific and innovative mechanisms of funding for management initiatives, and more detailed time frames upon which to measure success.

*Targets for ecosystem recovery.* Coral reefs and associated coastal ecosystems have suffered a long and dramatic decline on a global scale, ever since humans first started interacting with them. Whilst Australian reefs have suffered less, mainly due to remoteness, lower population numbers, and highly developed management strategies, our reefs continue to suffer from poor water quality, over-fishing, and the omnipresent spectre of uncontrollable climate change. These changes are often masked by each new generation's perception that the reef they experience is the pristine one, making it hard for individuals and managing authorities to appreciate the urgency of decline. The Australian government has taken great care in managing our reefs, with the landmark 2004 zoning which designated > 30% of the GBR Marine Park as no-take areas. However, we still have no real sense of how to restore degraded habitats – what the restoration targets should be and how much time we have before it will be too late to achieve them. A great deal of time and effort has been placed in setting up management plans – but providing specific measures against which to measure success is a gaping hole in our reef conservation strategy. Measuring success is contained within the tabled National Strategy document, but much more specific emphasis with funding and timelines need to come from the federal government.

*What needs doing?* Targets need to be implemented that consider historical ecosystem states. Management actions need to be implemented only after specific goals for them have been elucidated. Only then can success be truly measured.

*Innovative funding for management initiatives.* The Society recognizes the importance government has placed on coupling the scientific and management aspects of Australia's coral reefs – two examples are the Reef Rescue program recently initiated as part of the larger 'Caring for Country' initiative, and the Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTSRF). Yet, we see no departure from the 'business as usual' model of funding presently in place. The coral reefs of the world are in clear and imminent danger, not only from the severe impacts of human exploitation and development, but also from the excess of greenhouse gases that is changing the chemistry and temperatures of the world's oceans at unprecedented rates. Moreover, >20% of Australian fisheries are overfished. It is not enough to comment on the need for environmental preservation without a specific and visionary roadmap of funding. It is not unreasonable to link

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the environmental issues that face the coral reefs of Australia with economic issues about carbon trading and the like. Now is the time to achieve synthesis and close cooperation among the various ecological and economic disciplines and their practitioners throughout Australia to provide the needed integrated approach to solving our biodiversity crisis.

*What needs doing?* Biologists and economists need to urgently communicate with each other and with the public on a regular basis in an effort to devise innovative and cost-effective strategies for reef management. Government needs to explicitly facilitate this interaction.

*Time frames to measure success.* The scientific literature conveys the urgency needed to recover Australia's biodiversity, and thoughtful management of, and policy changes on, coral reefs is especially pressing. We therefore urge the government to consider as part of the National Strategy specific time frames that match with the immediacy of decline. For example, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that over 70 percent of our planet's fish species are either fully exploited or depleted, caused primarily by unsustainable fishing techniques. At current rates, which are four times higher than they were 40 years ago, oceans are cleared twice as fast as forests. How do we position ourselves in such a dwindling global resource? What are present levels of sustainability and how do we confidently set them, fund their management, and measure their success? And how much time do we really have? Similar questions need addressing for climate change – especially given that even the most dire IPCC 2007 predictions are turning out to underestimate the magnitude and rates of change in climate variables.

*What needs doing?* A sense of urgency needs to be conveyed to all sectors of Australian society, and conservation initiatives need to come about through legislative reform and policy changes. Both NGO's and government need to accelerate science outreach - public support, stakeholder consultation and community drive are critical for such change.

In conclusion we again wish to applaud the government's intense concern over the state of Australia's environment and the commitment to positive action involving all aspects of the Australian community. We feel that this document could be an adequate representation of an appropriate government approach if it provides more specific details concerning management directions, measuring success, and timelines for achieving goals. Outlining specific and innovative funding attributes will go a long way in convincing the Australian people that a responsible conservation strategy will be achievable in a time of utmost urgency.

The Australian Coral Reef Society (ACRS) is the oldest professional organisation in the world concerned with the study and protection of coral reefs, and it has played a significant role in the nation's history. The ACRS has played a prominent role in bringing major scientific and management issues to the attention of governments and the general public, notably the crown-of-thorn starfish outbreaks and the Royal Commission into oil drilling on the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) which was the catalyst for the establishment of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. While the Society has historically concentrated on the Great Barrier Reef, its focus has expanded to include all coral reefs in Australian waters, particularly in Western Australia. Consistent with the concept of ecologically sustainable development, the Society encourages members of government, management and commercial/industrial communities to join academic researchers in contributing to the scientific knowledge and management of coral reefs.

The Australian Coral Reef Society recommends that the current draft of the National Strategy be revised in accordance with the themes outlined above. We offer input into such a revision and would be pleased to discuss any of the matters mentioned above or other aspects of the National Strategy. Please direct enquiries in the first instance to the present Society office bearers:

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