



Sustainable Oceans and Coasts

Northern Territory Perspectives



Sustainable oceans and coasts

In 2020, the United Nation declared this coming decade as the 'United Nations Decade for Ocean Science for Sustainability'. Their vision for the coming decade is underpinned by participative and transformative values:

"The Decade is embracing a participative and transformative process so that scientists, policy makers, managers, and service users can work together to ensure that ocean science delivers greater benefits for both the ocean ecosystem and for society.

This Decade will be designed to facilitate global communication and mutual learning across research and stakeholder communities. It will work to meet the needs of scientists, policy makers, industry, civil society and the wider public, but it will also support new, collaborative partnerships that can deliver more effective science-based management of our ocean space and resources."

Critically, the UN vision and activities that underpin it recognise the interconnectedness of land and sea. For Australia, explicit recognition and appreciation of this connectedness of our oceans and coasts is essential for our future prosperity. The oceans surrounding Australia are vast and comprise a multitude of economic, social, environmental, and cultural interests, and a majority of our population lives in coastal zones. Indeed, what we do on inland Australia has consequences for our coasts and oceans; our waterways flow into our coastal and ocean space and are important connectors of land and sea.

In light of this, in May 2018 the Future Earth Australia Steering Committee elected that the 2020 focus for the Future Earth Australia secretariat and Future Earth network be a ten-year national strategy for Australia's sustainable oceans and coasts.

The strategy will outline the steps we need to transform how we think about, govern, and protect oceans and coasts across Australia. Importantly, we take a systems approach to transforming oceans and coasts, as many sectors will need to work together to achieve our goal: social services, tourism, industry, land use experts, ocean and coastal researchers, and decision makers from all levels of government. This Outcomes Paper reports on the deliberations of a broad cross section of sectors in the Northern Territory.

The importance of a national strategy

Australian oceans and coasts are threatened by the fragmented way we manage and govern the ecological and social processes that connect them; we do not have a clear path forward to ensure that these areas are healthy and resilient. The national strategy will outline clear, actionable pathways for achieving healthy and resilient oceans and coasts for all of Australia, incorporating common themes from the series of consultative workshops held by Future Earth Australia throughout 2020.

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Northern Territory workshop

On 25 September 2020, Future Earth Australia hosted the seventh in a series of online consultation workshops in each state and territory across the nation, for its Oceans and Coastal Sustainability initiative.

Eleven attendees in the Northern Territory contributed to the discussion, representing:

- the research sector, from Charles Darwin University and CSIRO,
- Traditional Owners and managers across Country,

- Territory Government, including fisheries and primary industry,
- civil society and community, namely natural resource management groups and advocacy groups.

This document summarises discussions held around the fundamental elements, both from a Northern Territory perspective and pertaining to the Northern Territory and Australia more broadly, which will define the National Strategy: vision, knowledge, institutional design and governance, community engagement, and implementation.

Vision

Participants were asked to consider their vision for a sustainable future for oceans and coasts in Western Australia and the nation. They entered applicable words into an online poll to generate a word cloud, then discussed the thought processes behind those visions.

Vision for the Northern Territory

Northern Territory participants aspired for oceans and coasts to be managed in a way that honours the multifaceted values that make up the whole. These values include not only the economic benefits that can spring from resource use, but also factor in the economic values associated with non-use choices, social and cultural connections, and ecological values.

Participants expressed a desire for a greater degree of collaboration and coordination, both at Territory and national levels. For instance, one participant

pointed out that there is already a coastal and oceans strategy for the Northern Territory and this must be acknowledged and understood to ensure that we are not duplicating efforts. Rather, synergies and collaboration between stakeholder groups are needed, though this process is made complex by overlapping jurisdictions, complex legal requirements, and a high number of relevant stakeholders.

In the next 10 years, Northern Territorians expressed their enthusiasm to see Indigenous people playing a central role in defining and managing oceans and coasts on their Country. Traditional Owners have legal rights to over around 80 percent of coastal areas in the Northern Territory, yet there is not a strong legal structure to enable them to access economic benefits from ownership and activities on their Country. At the national scale as well, attendees suggested that a Country-based approach that makes space for the views and boundaries stipulated

What is your vision for the future of oceans and coasts in the Northern Territory by 2030?



What is your vision for the future of oceans and coasts in Australia by 2030?



by Traditional Owners would be an important compliment to ecosystem-based governance approaches. To make progress on ocean and coastal stewardship, environments and livelihoods should be considered along with science.

Finally, participants stressed that the management of oceans and coasts needs to be done in a collaborative, holistic manner, and must be backed by baseline evidence that is currently lacking.

National vision

Territorians spoke to a need for clarity around the respective roles of federal and territory governments in ocean and coastal spaces; while oceans are under Commonwealth jurisdiction and coasts are Territory matters, this is a complex and changing continuum in practice. It is not clear to many what role the federal government plays, and this uncertainty poses a range of management issues. Yet, it also heralds

the opportunity for reshaping how governments take responsibility for oceans and coasts.

Some participants felt that ocean and coastal governance can be highly politicised and defined by passion. There are many interests and groups that use oceans and coasts in different ways, so a core issue that will define their future will be ensuring these areas are well-managed and that decisions are evidence-based.

In terms of specific issues to address, participants spoke to the rapid changes facing the marine environment and the pressing need to learn more about those threats. Yet they also highlighted on-land and planetary forces including climate change, population growth, and development as the greatest threats to marine and coastal systems. They suggested that a long-term strategy for ocean and coastal health would benefit from a risk-based approach.



Knowledge

Key points:

- **To better understand risk and define management priorities, more systematic knowledge based in many research disciplines and cross-sectoral communication are needed**
- **We have a real opportunity for real-time monitoring and surveillance of the land- and seascape to be undertaken by Traditional Owners and ranger groups in collaboration with the broader community of practice**
- **To improve information sharing and build relationships, we can create cross-sectoral fora in which groups working in government, industry, on-Country, and research can collaborate.**

Northern Territory participants spoke about the need for more systematic knowledge of marine and coastal environments, for greater communication and collaboration between sectors to build shared knowledge, and for a better grasp of risk as we make decisions about the future.

With respect to marine knowledge, some participants pointed out that much of our knowledge about fisheries has been gleaned on a commercial, project-by-project basis, rather than on a systematic basis. A better working knowledge of ecosystem processes and habitat data would be a valuable supplement to contextualise existing information. In a broader sense, the impacts of agriculture and groundwater systems on oceans and coasts are not comprehensively understood, and this knowledge is needed to inform how a swath of land use decision might affect marine environments. Additionally, cumulative impacts and changes require further study, as they are not currently well understood.

Attendees suggested that more granular data at a regional level would be highly useful as a means of improving management planning. Furthermore, this data would assist in decision making and conversations that can sometimes become emotional, by giving all involved access to the same dependable information.

Better baseline information on coastal and ocean systems is important for Northern Territory attendees, as this would assist in defining priorities

and effectively managing change. Some attendees pointed out that without baseline information, it is difficult to pre-emptively manage threats such as invasive species and disease until after they have already struck. One attendee expressed discomfort at the lack of understanding of land and seascapes in the Territory and how they will be affected by climate change, and therefore the risk that an ambitious Territory development agenda will proceed without first understanding how the landscape and its ability to host life will be affected. Similarly, another participant spoke to a lack of adequate information to underpin spatial planning, and that without good knowledge of priority habitats, there is a significant risk that rapid development will damage or destroy environments that are economically, socially, culturally, and environmentally important.

A systematic review of known processes and threats, as well as past consultations, was suggested as a valuable activity. This could be complemented by an analysis of overlaps between different management plans and legislations to guide improvements to governance.

Northern Territory participants emphasised that more support should be given to Traditional Owners and ranger groups to undertake monitoring and surveillance, given their extensive experience on Country, to build a more systematic and dynamic knowledge of ocean and coastal systems. Equally important is the development of relationships, trust, and knowledge exchange between a range of groups for decision making on how resources should be managed, particularly on a Country basis.

Territorians pointed to the need for greater collaboration, partnership, and sharing between sectors and groups for knowledge building. The lack of extensive cross-sectoral connections and communication between groups constitutes a significant barrier to collaboration in research. It was suggested that the fostering of fora in which government, industry, Traditional Owners, communities, and researchers could share information would be highly valuable, particularly for consolidating information from consultations.

Institutional design and governance

Key points:

- **The governance of oceans and coasts requires mechanisms to bring a range of sectoral interests and stakeholders to the table for common gain; this is difficult but necessary in the context of a fractious history of resource and land use**
- **Cultural and environmental values must not be lost in the context of a strong development agenda across the Territory**
- **We should aim to forge institutions and work approaches that invite strategic oversight by a range of players and break down barriers to working across silos.**

Attendees identified a number of institutional design and governance priorities for the Northern Territory, including building cross-sectoral trust and collaboration, institutionalising strategic coordination and oversight of governance, and prioritising local and regional priorities in a Territory strategy for oceans and coasts.

There was a strong sense among Northern Territory participants that careful attention must be paid to ensuring that local and regional priorities for governance are streamlined within a Territory framework to ensure that on-the-ground values are not lost at higher levels of governance. On-Country and regional scale governance were seen by a number of participants to be the unit-of-best-fit for governance of oceans and coasts. Plans and actions at this level must include proper consultation and approval from the Indigenous groups that belong on Country in those areas, and this involves taking serious consideration of their views on resource use and economic participation. Local, regional, and Territory-wide governance strategies should be matched carefully to prioritise coherence across the landscape before the Territory integrates into a national framework.

Attendees felt that governance of oceans and coasts at all levels should take note of, and build on,

previous successes, while also seizing on existing strengths, such as Indigenous ranger groups and networks.

Participants identified a major priority to underpin successful governance in the Northern Territory, which is a framework for improved collaboration and communication that would formalise knowledge and bring varied sectors and interests to the table. These structures already exist within institutions, and should be shared; for instance, governments and Councils form committees, peak bodies socialise and consult their membership, and ranger groups and community representatives play an important role in grassroots conservation. The history of resource and land use and development has been fractious in the Northern Territory, so building trust over time is critical if a range of groups are to buy in to collective priorities.

There was a sentiment among some participants that the strength of the development-oriented agenda in the Northern Territory means that other cultural and environmental values can be marginalised. One suggestion that was made to improve cross-sectoral governance was to increase integration across government portfolios and industries. For example, focusing activities on interactions (as opposed to the disparate ecosystems or sectors themselves) – such as between gas, mining, estuaries, groundwater, and fisheries – can attract different stakeholders to the table.

Attendees felt that institutions need to be designed and established to ensure that there is strategic oversight of major initiatives that have a significant impact on the Territory, to ensure that stakeholders and a diversity of values are represented in decision making. For example, the Darwin Harbour Advisory Committee plays an important role in ensuring the Harbour activities are managed properly and in-line with strategic priorities.

Community engagement

Key points:

- There is a distinction between community consultation and community engagement – both have different uses and must be respected as such
- Active networks are useful for ongoing engagement, whereas committees do not usually attract active engagement
- We need to properly balance when and what type of expertise and input are required on a case by case basis; community engagement is critical in setting priorities and contributing knowledge but may not be as useful for a technical issue.

Northern Territory attendees considered community engagement to be a critical factor for ocean and coastal stewardship. A range of networks and groups are already active in incorporating environmental and social protection into their work. Community groups, arts and craft groups, action-oriented groups, and school networks are all valuable sources of energy and ideas.

Community engagement is important for understanding the impacts of decisions and change across different groups and for setting governance priorities. It is also important to be clear about the role of community engagement as it pertains to a particular matter. Community views may not be the highest priority input, for example, in resolving technical issues.

Committees alone were not seen to be a viable solution to community engagement, as they can be somewhat static and are not often attractive to critical stakeholders. Rather, committees are most effective where they are situated in a pre-existing network.

Participants also stressed that community engagement requires resourcing not only for those conducting consultation, but also for the communities themselves, as they require energy and time to be effective.

Implementation

Key points:

- We must create improved accountability for respecting and incorporating Indigenous decision making into planning, and support a bottom-up led approach to defining governance priorities
- A repository for data and improved information sharing would greatly improve our ability to make sound choices across sectors
- Decision making is highly politicised, and might be improved by the presence of an advocate or body to monitor how decisions are influenced.

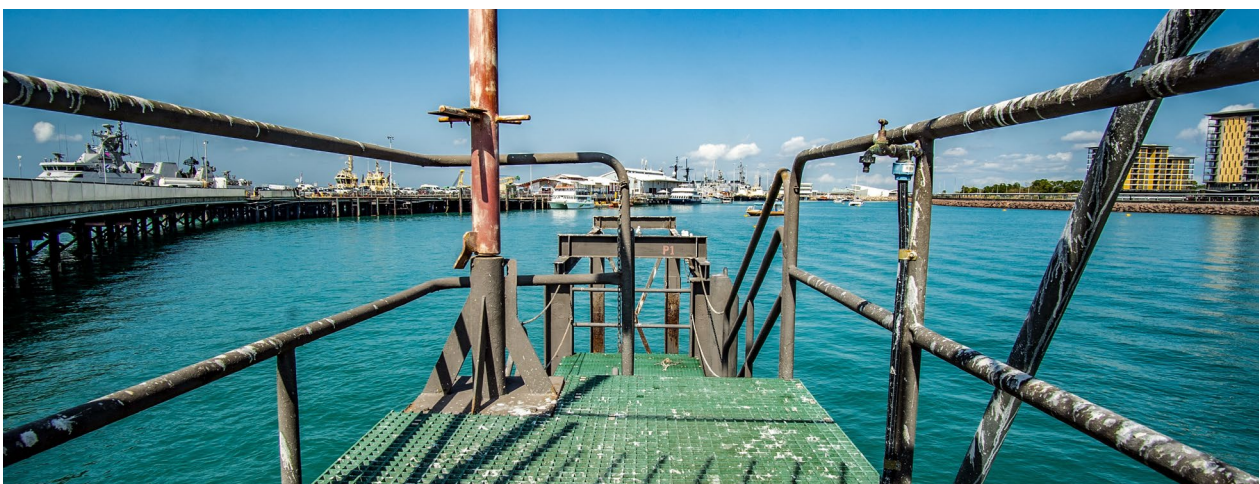
Northern Territory attendees discussed a range of measures for implementation of an ocean and coastal strategy. Boosting the capacity for Indigenous and community input, improving accountability and integrity of decision making, and making quality information available to decision makers were all seen as priorities. From the outset, it was asserted that implementation is driven by political support, and as such, obtaining support is a key practical consideration for other suggestions.

Some attendees asserted that ocean and coastal policies and practice would look different if a bottom-up approach were adopted, so that a range of local and regional voices could define priorities. They suggested an investigation of how policies, for example in land use and fisheries, would come to be different if they emerged from a bottom-up approach.

When environmental, cultural, and development pressures come into conflict, decision making was seen to be highly politicised and intensified by election cycles that make it difficult for the government to stabilise governance using a long-term strategy. Establishing an independent third party that is capable of monitoring issues and areas of value conflict, which can also advise on a range of perspectives such as Indigenous views and inputs from scientists, could be a useful improvement for bringing greater oversight. Similarly, a special advisor within government who can give guidance on the latest evidence and solutions and balance different values was suggested.

An essential foundation of good decision making across sectors is reliable information and rigorous evidence. The establishment of a data repository was suggested as a major infrastructural improvement that could bolster the capacity for quality decision making. This would likely be a national entity.

Some attendees also pointed out that there are many government structures working across oceans and coasts, but their work is not necessarily communicated or shared well, which can result in misinterpretation and decision making without proper consultation. Actions could be taken to diminish the disconnect between government activities, stakeholders, and the public.



Northern Territory

The Northern Territory (NT) is the third largest state or territory in Australia covering 1,347,791 km², and has most island area of any state or territory.² There are 887 islands totaling 13,387 km², and some of these – the Tiwi Islands, Melville Island, Groote Eylandt Island, and Bathurst Island – are the largest in the country.³ More than 100 Indigenous languages and dialects are spoken in the NT. Traditional Custodians play central roles in land use and governance throughout the Territory with native title rights extending across much of the NT⁴.

Much of the NT is sparsely populated, with deserts in the centre and south of the Territory, and rivers running north to wetlands and flats on the coast.⁵ A large proportion of the land area is conserved as national park, including some of Australia's most iconic landforms such as Uluru and Kakadu National Park.

The Northern Territory has 245,400 residents making it the smallest state or territory by population. Most of the NT, around 147,255,⁶ lives in the capital Darwin and its surrounds on the north coast. Alice Springs and Katherine are important regional centres, with 37,317 and 20,820 citizens respectively.⁷

The marine and coastal environment is suggested to support around 6,300 jobs in the Northern Territory,⁸ with some of the major industries including commercial and recreational fishing, marine and coastal tourism, and ports and shipping.

The NT has a coastline that runs for almost 11,000 km and has a great number of remote and pristine beaches. The NT waters of the Timor Sea are shallow and warm, and among the last thriving tropical marine systems on earth.⁹ The marine environment features reef and underwater pinnacles, sea grass meadows, and soft seabed that attracts a range of sea fauna including threatened sea turtles, dugongs, snubfun dolphins, whale sharks, and heart urchins.¹⁰ Indigenous sea rangers and Traditional Custodian groups are central in managing Sea Country.

The Territory has two marine parks, the Garig Gunak Barlu National Park (which includes surrounding waters) and the Limmen Bight Marine Park. There are 6 Australian Marine Parks that extend from the NT and cover a large area of continental shelf.¹¹

[Explore Aboriginal language groups in Australia](#)

[See more information and maps on Australian Marine Parks](#)

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.oceandecade.org/about?tab=our-vision>
- 2 Geoscience Australia, 2020. *Area of Australia – States and Territories*. Available at: <https://www.ga.gov.au/scientific-topics/national-location-information/dimensions/area-of-australia-states-and-territories>
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- 11 Australian Marine Parks, 2020. *North Marine Parks*. Available at: <https://parksaustralia.gov.au/marine/parks/north/>