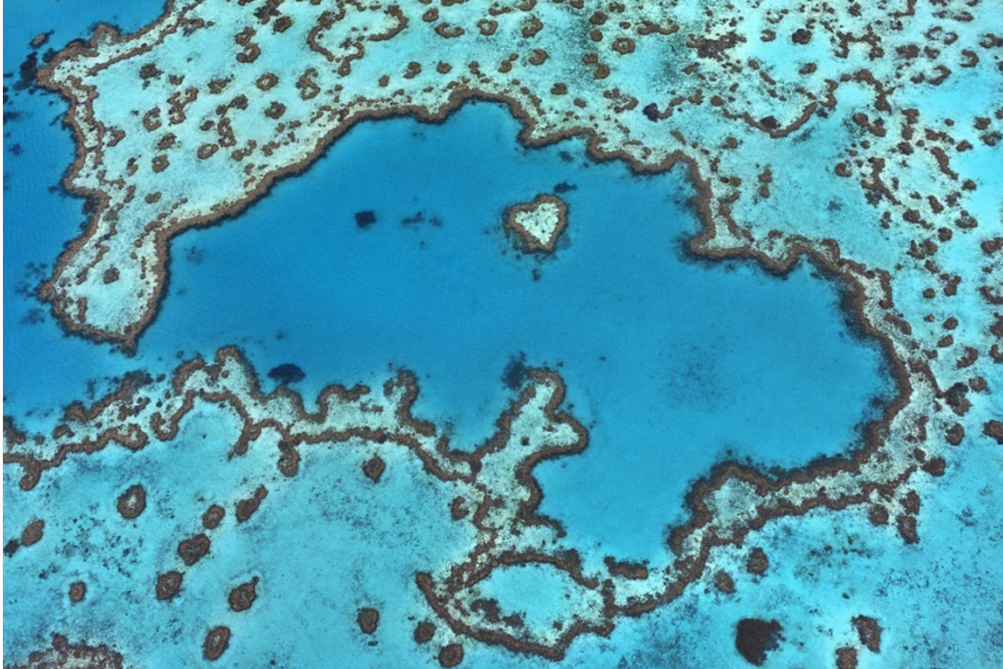


# Marine reserves planned around commercial interests

Australia's seas tend to be set aside only where mining and fishing are not affected, study warns.

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Ingo Amdt/Minden Pictures/FLPA

Hardy Reef, part of Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Every year more of the planet is placed under the protection offered by marine parks and reserves, and Australia has been at the forefront of this trend. But a review of the country's conservation policies published this week argues that the areas most in need of protection are being neglected while politicians cordon off only those spaces that commercial interests are happy to forgo.

Australia has been engaged in a long-running and controversial effort to create a network of marine reserves in its national waters, ranging from the world's most famous collection of corals at the Great Barrier Reef in the east to the whale sharks that gather off Ningaloo in the west.

Now an international team argues that these efforts, most of which have come to fruition only since late 2012, have basically been for naught. Australia's newly created marine-reserve network makes "almost no difference to 'business as usual' for most ocean uses", the researchers write in *Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems*<sup>1</sup>.

The problem, the authors say, is that the system is mainly 'residual' — meaning that many of the areas placed off limits to commercial exploitation are those that will create least argument. The researchers looked at a number of factors in the Australian system of marine protected areas (MPAs), including the extent to which the newly established areas overlap with pre-existing fisheries and with areas exploited for the extraction of oil and gas. The team concludes that Australia's seas have generally been set aside only where doing so would not get in the way of commercial uses.

Rodolphe Devillers, a geographer at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St John's, Canada, who led the study, says that it demonstrates that the areas that are being placed under protection appear to be chosen with the aim of "minimizing conflict between stakeholders that would be politically unacceptable". "The fact that MPAs were residual was expected, but the extent to which they actually are was surprising, if not scary, mostly for the new Australian reserve system."

Robert Pressey, a marine scientist at James Cook University in Townsville, Australia, and a co-author of the study, says that no protected area can be considered pointless, as "something is always protected". But, he says, "residual reservation is also a problem

because, to many, it gives the mistaken appearance of conservation progress.”

Callum Roberts, a biologist who studies MPAs at the University of York, UK, says that he agrees in part with the study’s conclusions. “They are very right that we have done a really bad job up to now of protecting places in the thick of the biggest threats to biodiversity,” he says.

However, Roberts says that although a number of “big and remote” MPAs have been established in areas under little commercial pressure, many smaller MPAs — including some valuable ones — were hard won. “There are hard efforts underway to protect intensively used coastal areas too, resulting in many new MPAs every year. The Pressey paper glosses over them too easily,” he says.

“We need both approaches to run in parallel, but we especially need to get better at setting up MPAs in areas of intensive use, and giving them a high level of protection,” Roberts adds.

[Australia’s marine-reserve plans have already been criticized](#) as inadequate in some other studies, but have also attracted support for their ambition and the cohesive network of protection around the entire island that they stand to produce.

The current Australian government, which inherited the reserve system when it came to power in 2013, has pledged to look again at the network. Although some conservationists fear that this is a prelude to reducing the protection offered in favour of fishing and other commercial interests, Pressey says: “If the present federal government interprets our analyses correctly — and that would not be very difficult — then the obvious way to improve the MPA system is to increase, not reduce, the protection given to ecosystems and species.”

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## References

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1. Devillers, R. *et al.* *Aquat. Conserv. Mar. Freshwat. Ecosyst.* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/aqc.2445> (2014).