

Background and rational for MPA Campaign focus on Coral Sea

Australia's Coral Sea is an enormous region that is extraordinarily rich in marine biology, yet is virtually unprotected. Its main feature is a series of spectacular reefs rising thousands of metres from the seafloor that play host to some of the marine environment's most stunning underwater life.

WWF Australia is embarking on a new campaign to protect the Coral Sea.

Background:

Biodiversity – The Coral Sea reefs are home to some of the underwater world's most magnificent marine animals. Divers compare its teeming abundance and vast undeveloped expanses to the great plains of the African Serengeti. Thriving fish populations including vast schools of grey and white tip reef sharks, hammerheads, manta rays, tuna, barracuda, and trevally inhabit the area, alongside an amazing and diverse range of corals.



Due to its remoteness the Coral Sea is a rare example of a place that has yet to experience the pressures that so many other marine regions have suffered from.



Threats - The impacts of legal and illegal fishing pose a significant risk to the marine region. Alarming reports of illegal fishers raiding the reefs, mostly for shark fins for the Asian market, are increasing. The Australian Government has also earmarked the region as a zone for future oil and gas exploration and, with climate change increasing water temperatures, the Coral Sea reefs are also highly susceptible to coral bleaching.

Location - The Coral Sea stretches from the outer boundary of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park to the extent of Australia's territorial waters – in some places more than two hundred nautical miles from the Queensland coast. Scattered through the Coral Sea are a series of reefs extending from around 200km north-east of Port Douglas to its southern boundaries. The Coral Sea (the orange area below) is approximately 780,000 km^2. This is more than twice the size of the adjacent Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The opportunity:

WWF Australia has chartered chartering the *Undersea Explorer* on a trip to the Coral Sea, from September 1 – 6, with some of Australia's leading marine scientists, underwater film-makers, photographers and conservationists. We'll be using the opportunity to raise public awareness of the Coral Sea, monitor, tag and research key marine species such as tiger sharks, manta rays and the rare nautilus as well as register the impacts of climate change on the reef.

The trip:

Saturday September 1 - Depart Port Douglas. Everyone would need to be aboard by approx 6pm.
Sunday Sept 2 – Arrive at the Cod Hole - outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef, and one of its most famous and best dive sites, where we do up to 4 dives. In the evening we depart for Osprey Reef.
Monday Sept 3 & 4 - Osprey Reef – home to one of the most spectacular dive sites in Australia. Here we will observe shark tagging, retrieve and tag nautilus, dive a manta ray cleaning station and of course relax and chat.
Wednesday Sept 5 – Return to the Great Barrier Reef for a couple more dives, and a visit to Lizard Island where it is possible for guests to depart from if they wish.
Thursday Sept 6 – Arrive in Port Douglas in the morning.





The Crew:

On board Undersea Explorer will be:
Dr Gilly Llewellyn – Head of WWF's marine program and one of Australia's leading marine conservationists.
John Rumney – A veteran of more than 30 years experience on the Great Barrier Reef and the Coral Sea – a fabulous skipper with boundless enthusiasm.
Richard Fitzpatrick – a leading underwater filmmaker and a pioneer in shark research. His stories and footage of tagging tiger sharks will leave you breathless.
Jurgen Freund – a world class underwater photographer. His images have been featured around the globe. Check out his work at www.jurgenfreund.com

For more details about the vessel and its crew check out www.undersea.com.au

Conclusion:

The Coral Sea has remained pristine due to its remoteness, not due to good management. In fact the Coral Sea is virtually unprotected. The Australian Government is now only just beginning to consider whether or not this spectacular area should be declared a Marine Park.

WWF believes that with a strong public campaign – similar to our highly successful Great Barrier Reef Campaign – we can convince the Government to ensure the Coral Sea is protected. This would ensure future generations can enjoy nature's heirloom, just as we have.