

**Critical Gaps in the Marine Sanctuary  
Network proposed by the Federal  
Government for Australia's  
unique South-west.**

Executive Summary

**Centre for Conservation Geography**

*Applied Strategic Tools and Conservation Innovation*

Report as at June 2011

## Executive Summary

On Thursday the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, 2011 the Australian Government proposed a number of marine sanctuaries for the Commonwealth waters of the South-west planning region. The south west of Australia is a globally important region for marine life with very high levels of unique species (for example the Australian south west contains higher levels of unique species than the Great Barrier Reef). This report uses a simple accounting approach to provide information on whether the proposed marine sanctuaries are likely to protect the South-west's unique marine life. We then use this information to identify 33 critical gaps in the network of marine sanctuaries proposed by The Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (DSEWPaC).

## Key Findings

1. Almost 75% of the areas recommended for protection by scientists from the University of Queensland, remain unprotected.
2. Less than 5% of the proposed marine sanctuaries occur on the shelf and upper slope where scientists report marine life to be most threatened.
3. Inadequate or no protection has been provided for eight of the ten underwater icons of the South-west.
4. Inadequate or no protection has been provided for thirteen of the sixteen key ecological features of the South-west.
5. Inadequate or no protection has been provided to four of the flagship species of the South-west planning region including the endangered southern right whale and the threatened Australian sea lion, Australian lesser noddy and white shark.
6. Of the 165 biologically important areas mapped within the South-west planning region, 163 fail to meet minimum scientific benchmarks for protection. For example, no protection has been provided for the critical feeding grounds of the endangered blue whale.
7. The proposed marine sanctuaries are biased towards waters off Western Australia with less than 3% of the proposed marine sanctuaries occurring within the waters off South Australia.
8. The proposals do not establish the comprehensive, adequate and representative network of marine sanctuaries required to protect marine life. Specifically:
  - a. Of the ten bioregions contained within the South-west planning region all ten contain unprotected features that are critical for the protection of biodiversity. Three bioregions contain no proposed marine sanctuaries.
  - b. Overall, the median representation of features important for the conservation of biodiversity within the South-west planning region is 0%.
  - c. Six of the seven proposed marine sanctuaries located on the shelf and upper slope fail to meet world's best practice guidelines for minimum size.

- d. The marine sanctuaries proposed for the shelf and upper slope fail to form an interconnected network, with marine life protected within each proposed marine sanctuary likely to face major connectivity issues.
9. A number of areas critical to the protection of marine life are missing from the proposed marine sanctuary network. Thirty three of these critical gaps are identified in this report.

The marine sanctuaries proposed by DSEWPaC are not comprehensive, adequate, or representative of the South-west planning region. The complete lack of proposed marine sanctuaries for three entire bioregions and an overall median representation of 0% imply that the Commonwealth government is not making a genuine effort to meet the primary goal set by the Howard government in 1998 of establishing a national system of marine sanctuaries to protect Australia's unique marine life.

A 2009 study completed by scientists at the University of Queensland provided the Commonwealth Government with advice on how a comprehensive, adequate and representative network of marine sanctuaries could be established for a minimum cost. This advice appears to have predominantly been ignored.

In this report we document, for each key ecological feature mapped by the Commonwealth government, for biologically important areas mapped by the Commonwealth government and for the mapped biodiversity within each bioregion, the locations where particularly unique, rare, iconic, or significant habitats overlap with other important conservation features that require protection. These areas represent critical gaps in the proposed sanctuary network and their protection is a minimum requirement for the Commonwealth Government to demonstrate a genuine effort to protect the unique and unprotected biodiversity of the South-west (Figure 1).

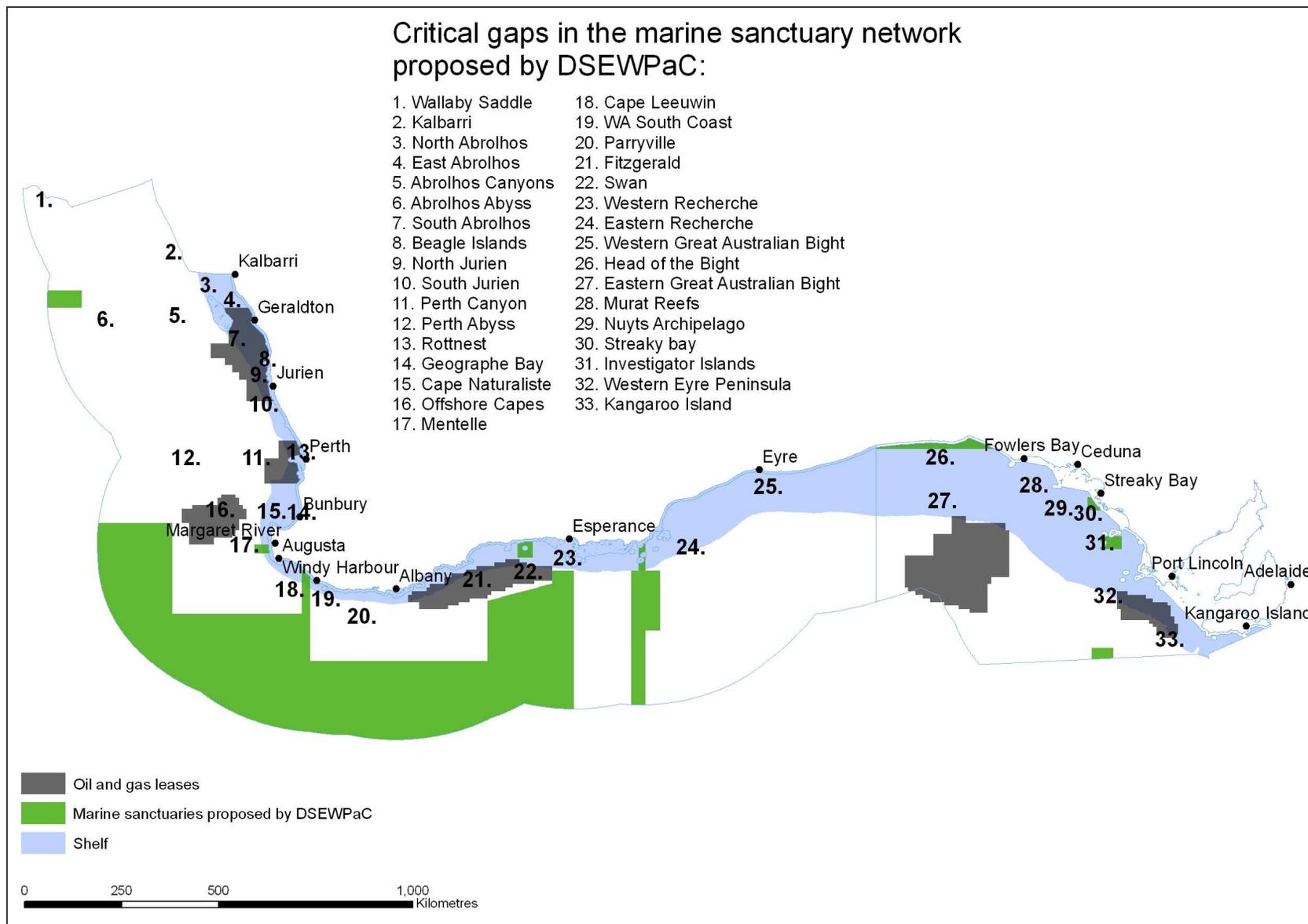


Figure 1 – Critical gaps in the marine sanctuary network proposed by DSEWPaC.