In his book on the world's oceans, *Seven-Tenths*, James Hamilton-Paterson laments how little we still know about them. "Until the late 18th-century the average European's mental image of the sea was literally superficial, of a navigable surface above an abyss," he writes. Has this view really changed? Do those of us who cling to the Earth's three-tenths of terrestrial space, have any notion of what happens beneath the surface of the greater, and wetter, proportion? 

Yesterday was World Oceans Day, and a cause for international celebration as well as a call for greater international conservation. Amid the more frivolous activities, including Monday's world-record attempt at naked snorkelling on Magnetic Island, the occasion yielded a more serious, concerned side. As *The Age* reported yesterday, 245 scientists from 35 countries have called for stronger action from governments to create "ocean-scale" national parks to protect the world's vulnerable marine environments. The statement, organised by the environmental group Pew International, has identified a small number of large marine ecosystems that are still able to be preserved as "no-take" areas: they have not been fished intensively, are still relatively intact and are within close range of capable political jurisdiction. The establishment of such reserves is essential, the scientists say, not only for preservation reasons, but to improve the sustainability of fisheries and resilience to climate change.

One of the five proposed ocean-scale parks, the Coral Sea, falls within Australia's maritime area. One of the signatories, Hugh Possingham, director of the ecology centre, University of Queensland, says the Coral Sea is one of the few places in the world largely untouched by humanity but still big enough to sustain a large and abundant wildlife population. Under the Pew proposals, the Coral Sea marine park would extend from the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef to the edge of Australian waters near Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia.

While Australia has come a significant way towards establishing a national system of marine-protected areas by 2012 — a process begun by the Howard government and continued by the Rudd government — it could go even further. Environment Minister Peter Garrett has ruled out overall protection, but is considering setting up a series of smaller marine parks within the sea, some of which could allow fishing and oil or gas drilling. One large park would be bigger and better.