Torres Strait excluded from no-fishing plans

The Torres Strait is not included in a proposal, supported by some of Australia’s most-eminent tropical marine scientists, to make the Coral Sea into the world’s largest, marine-protected area.

The proposal is being driven by the Australian branch of the USA-based Pew Environmental Group as part of a world-wide campaign to include other major oceans seas as fishing-free zones.

A map on their web site could easily be construed as including the entire Torres Strait to the PNG border as part of the exclusion zone.

However, Imogen Zethoven, Director, Coral Sea Campaign, Global Ocean Legacy, Pew Environment Group, told the Torres News from Sydney that the map is misleading and needs reviewing.

Ms Zethoven says the western boundary of the proposed marine park starts at 144 degrees, 40 minutes which is the eastern boundary of the Torres Strait Turtle Fishery and follows along the boundary and then takes in the current Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The western boundary runs between Boot and Ashmore Reefs.

“We deliberately avoided the Torres Strait fisheries zone; it excludes Ashmore Reef and all the Torres Strait Fishery.”

The researchers said that the whole Coral Sea should become a no-fishing area, to protect its immense environmental and heritage values from the escalating threats of over-fishing and climate change.

“There is overwhelming evidence the world’s marine ecosystems have been seriously degraded by over-fishing, pollution and global warming. These trends call for urgent, practical solutions,” says Professor Terry Hughes, Director, ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, James Cook University.

However, the seafood industry has described a campaign to have the entire Coral Sea region declared off limits to fishing as ludicrous.

Industry spokesman Mr Robin Hansen said: “Our fishing and on-shore processing are pretty much run as family-based operations and, even though they may turn over a lot of money and employ a lot of people along the coast, there will be no way to match what is obviously a well-planned, well-funded international campaign.

“We will do the best we can to point out that these international greenies are just emotional and over the top. They are obviously searching for a cause and, for now, the Coral Sea is it.”

The USA-based Pew Environment Group and partners want to secure world-class, no-take marine reserves at key locations around the world, including the Coral Sea.

Professor Hughes said: “Eleven percent of land habitats have been designated as parks to conserve their biodiversity and the ecosystem services they provide to people. In contrast, less than 0.1 per cent of the world’s oceans are fully protected.”

Professor Hugh Possingham, Director of the Ecology Centre, University of Queensland (UQ) said that the Coral Sea provided critical habitats for many species, including critically endangered Hawksbill and endangered Green turtles, 25 species of whales and dolphins, and 27 species of sea bird.

“At least 13 species of seabird breed on Coral Sea islands, including regionally important populations of the Red-footed Booby, Lesser frigate bird and Greater frigate bird. The Coral Sea is one of the few places remaining on earth where large pelagic fishes (tuna, billfish and sharks) have not yet been severely depleted,” he said.

Mr Hansen, Senior Vice-President of the Queensland Seafood Industry Association (QSIA), said the Australian Government was already committed to declaring a Marine Park over the entire region and the local industry would work with Canberra on its implementation.

“The Marine Park will stretch from Torres Strait all the way south into New South Wales and out to the boundary of the Australian 200-mile economic zone.

“However, we expect it will be a multiple-use Marine Park, just like the existing Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, and so will allow some fishing, unlike the Pew demand to ban all fishing. A total fishing ban is just ridiculous.”

The researchers say that fishing pressure in the Coral Sea has grown rapidly in the past 20 years, and catches are already in decline relative to the fishing effort put in. There is also an unsustainable bycatch of turtles, sharks and birds in pelagic fisheries. The rapid decline of large sharks due to illegal finning is also a major concern worldwide.
Professor John Pandolfi from UQ said: “Fishing activities in the Coral Sea contribute to significant declines of sharks, turtles and seabirds on the adjoining Great Barrier Reef. A single large no-take zone is the best approach for protecting these pelagic and migratory species because they cannot be protected inside small reserves.”