



6 November 2020

Northern Territory Environment Protection Agency (NTEPA)
Public Consultation: Review of sea bed mining in the NT – Environmental
impacts and management.

Dear Committee,

We respectfully request you accept this document as our comment on the NTEPA draft review and move to uphold the moratorium (expiring 2021) and legislate a permanent ban on sea bed mining in Northern Territory Waters.

The Northern Territory (NT) marine environment is diverse, unique and includes some of the most healthy tropical waters in the world, due largely to the limited development in the region. Having one of the world's most intact marine environments, it is a critically important region for biodiversity. The ongoing quality of the NT marine environment, impacting tourism, culture and conservation value, depends greatly on how its marine resources are used and managed.

The NT boasts more than a third of Australia's mangroves along its coastlines, rivers and estuaries, providing vital nurseries for fish stocks, along with sea grass meadows, filtering and stabilising coasts and providing vital food sources for marine life.¹

The North Marine Region, as defined in the Marine bioregional plan (MBP for the North Marine Region, 2012), prepared under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, is recognised as an area of global conservation significance for marine species.

Waters in and/or adjacent to the region provide important bird, marine turtle and dugong breeding, feeding and nursery sites.

¹<https://www.marineconservation.org.au/northern-territory-marine-parks/>

Six of the world's seven species of marine turtle are found in the region and all are listed as endangered or vulnerable under the EPBC Act. Protected species in the region also include sawfish, 28 of the 35 known Australian species of sea snakes, the saltwater crocodile, and a vast array of seahorse and pipefish species. The reef systems of the region support coral, invertebrates and phytoplankton that are all highly diverse, while fish such as snapper, emperor and grouper are common higher-order predators of coral and rocky reef habitats.²

Increasing numbers of migrating humpback whales, often including calves, also visit the region, usually between August and October and it is still not clear whether they are calving within NT waters.³

In addition, of the 45 cetacean species (whales, dolphins and porpoises) recorded in Australian waters (at 2012), 9 are known to occur in the North Marine Region and a further 15 species may also occur.

The MBP identified biologically important areas for three migratory cetacean species in the NT region, endemic to the Australian continental shelf and found along the coastline:

- The Australian snubfin
- The Indo-Pacific bottlenose
- The Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins (the Australian humpback dolphin (*Sousa sahalensis*) was described as separate species in 2014)

Biologically important areas are areas that are particularly important for the conservation of the protected species and where aggregations of individuals display biologically important behaviour such as breeding, foraging, resting or migration⁴

Both the Australian Snubfin and Australian humpback species are listed on the IUCN Red List of threatened species as Vulnerable.

²<https://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/pages/0fcb6106-b4e3-4f9f-8d06-f6f94bea196b/files/north-marine-plan.pdf>

³https://nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/376152/humpback-whale.pdf

⁴<https://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/pages/0fcb6106-b4e3-4f9f-8d06-f6f94bea196b/files/north-report-card-cetaceans.pdf>

An assessment of the conservation status of coastal dolphins in the Northern Territory, 2017 identified Australian snubfin dolphins (*Orcaella heinsohni*) across the entire range of the Northern Territory Coast and was the most sighted species followed by Australian humpback dolphins and bottlenose. There were also sightings of dwarf spinner dolphins (*Stenella longirostris*), false killer whales (*Pseudorca crassidens*) and killer whales (*Orcinus orca*).⁵

Further, The Australian Whale Sanctuary comprises the Commonwealth marine area and covers all of Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone which generally extends out to 200 nautical miles from the coast and includes the waters surrounding Australia's external territories such as Christmas, Cocos (Keeling), Norfolk, Heard and Macdonald Islands. The Australian Whale Sanctuary was established under the EPBC Act to protect all whales and dolphins in Australian waters.

Within the Australian Whale Sanctuary it is an offence to kill, injure or interfere with a cetacean.⁶

Advocating Wild urges the Northern Territory Government to consider these important points and the following further critical notations from the draft review:

- Seabed mining is considered a relatively new and controversial industry in Australia, and other countries.
- The methods most likely to be used in coastal waters of the Northern Territory involve scraping or excavating the seabed using hydraulic or mechanical dredges.
- There is limited experience in regulating seabed mining in tropical environments in Australia and the world.
- The gaps in knowledge about the marine and coastal environments of the Northern Territory have not been adequately assessed to make decisions about the potential impacts of seabed mining and their management.

⁵<https://www.inpex.com.au/projects/ichthys-Ing/our-commitments/conservation-status-of-coastal-dolphins-in-the-northern-territory/>

⁶<https://www.environment.gov.au/marine/marine-species/cetaceans/australian-whale-sanctuary>

- Currently, the lack of adequate environmental information and knowledge about the existing condition of environmental values and the potential impacts from seabed mining is a major barrier to the robust environmental impact assessment, approval and appropriate conditioning of seabed mining in the Northern Territory.
- There is difficulty in applying known management measures to poorly understood marine environments. This contributes to uncertainty about the effectiveness of management and mitigation measures.

The marine environment, already and increasingly stressed due to the accumulative impacts of pollutants, plastics, over fishing, gas and oil exploration, acidification, shipping and more, will be severely compromised if sea bed mining is introduced. The Territories mangroves, seagrasses, tidal flats, coral reefs and estuaries would be devastated. Marine animals, including threatened species of marine turtles, dolphins, dugongs, migratory shorebirds would suffer from habitat destruction and fragmentation, reduced water quality, food loss, increased noise, and the irreversible general decline in the health of the precious NT marine environment.

The economic benefits from seabed mining would likely be relatively small compared to the negative impact on the NT's tourism, reputation, recreational and commercial fishing, and on conservation value.

Should the Northern Territory Government introduce seabed mining at the expiration of the Moratorium March 2021, it will set an unacceptable precedent that carries with it a devastating environmental cultural and social risk to not only the Territory, but Australia as well.

We urge the committee to commit to a permanent ban on seabed mining in Northern Territory seas.

Yours Sincerely,
Founders, [Advocating Wild](#)

CONTACT