



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Conservation groups welcome Government's 'first big step' to protect the Coral Sea

SYDNEY, 19 May 2009 – Conservation groups today welcomed the announcement by Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett to establish a Conservation Zone over the entire Coral Sea within Australian waters and called on the Minister to ensure sufficient resources for his Department to carry out a full and prompt assessment of the area.

The conservation groups believe the Minister's announcement signals a clear intent by the Government to permanently protect this tropical marine jewel in its entirety, a decision that would make the Coral Sea the largest protected area on Earth.

"Despite its environmental and historic importance, less than one percent of Australia's Coral Sea is protected from extractive industries and its future is not secure," said Elise Hawthorne of the Pew Environment Group - Australia. "The extraordinary historic and natural value of the Coral Sea offers the Australian Government an unparalleled opportunity to protect a vast area of the world's threatened ocean, right next to the Great Barrier Reef."

In September last year, a unique alliance including Australia's leading tropical marine scientists, former Chiefs of the Navy, and regional, national and international conservation groups launched a call for the Coral Sea to be protected as a no-take marine reserve in recognition of the region's importance to Australia's national maritime history and its natural heritage.

The Coral Sea has an important maritime history. In May 1942, it was the site of a naval engagement that turned the tide of World War II in the Pacific. A number of Allied and Japanese ships were sunk during the Battle of the Coral Sea and more than 200 sailors lost their lives; they should be allowed to remain undisturbed.

In addition, the Coral Sea hosts spectacular coral reefs, remote islands, towering underwater mountains and deep-sea canyons. Its abundant wildlife includes approximately 25 species of whales, dolphins, sea turtles, sharks and rays; seabirds; large ocean fish such as tuna, marlin, barracuda and swordfish and a diverse range of corals and reef fish.

"The Coral Sea is one of the last remaining places on Earth where populations of large ocean fish - sharks, tuna and billfish - have not been drastically reduced," said Nicola Temple of the Australian Marine Conservation Society. "With 90% of large ocean fish gone from the world's oceans over the last 50 years due to overfishing, this makes the Coral Sea worthy of a high level of protection."

"The proposed Heritage Park lies between the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and our maritime boundary with Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia. Due to its remoteness from land, the Coral Sea has remained relatively unspoiled," said Steve Ryan of the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre.

"The Coral Sea (within Australian jurisdiction) is about 1 million square kilometres," said Chris Smyth of the Australian Conservation Foundation. "A single large no-take reserve, like a National Park on land, is the most appropriate way to protect it, in order to conserve the highly mobile ocean species found in the area."

Contacts:

Elise Hawthorne, Communications Manager, Coral Sea Campaign, Pew Environment Group - Australia

Mob: 0413 363 232; Email: ehawthorne@pewtrusts.org

www.globaloceanlegacy.org

Nicola Temple, Coral Sea Campaigner, Australian Marine Conservation Society

Mob: 0425 359 068; Email: nicolatemple@amcs.org.au

Steve Ryan, Marine Campaigner, Cairns and Far North Environment Centre

Mob: 0425 344 746; Email: campaign@caf nec.org.au

www.cafnec.org.au

Chris Smyth, Healthy Oceans Campaigner, Australian Conservation Foundation

Mob 0438 123 536; Email: C.Smyth@acfonline.org.au

www.acfonline.org.au

For a full copy of *An Australian Coral Sea Heritage Park* report that describes the natural and maritime heritage value of the Coral Sea, see: http://www.globaloceanlegacy.org/resources/CoralSea_Web_100808.pdf

The Australian Coral Sea Heritage Park initiative has the support of a broad range of agencies, non-governmental groups, and civic leaders including:

- Vice Admiral (Rtd) David Shackleton AO (Chief of Navy 1999-2002)
- Vice Admiral (Rtd) Chris Ritchie AO (Chief of Navy 2002-2005)
- Professor Terry Hughes, Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies, recent winner of the international Darwin Medal
- Battle for Australia Commemoration National Council