

Ocean Agenda 2025

A call for bold leadership to protect our oceans, our climate, our future.



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AMCS Policy recommendations for the 2025 Federal election

The Australian Marine Conservation Society (AMCS) is Australia's leading ocean conservation organisation, representing around 300,000 people from all around the country. Since 1965, we have used scientific research, policy advocacy, community engagement and education to achieve our mission of protecting Australia's oceans and marine wildlife for the sake of current and future generations.

Our oceans are critical to life on Earth. But in Australia and around the globe, our oceans are in deep trouble. Loss of habitat, pollution, overfishing, unsustainable development and the impacts of climate change are devastating marine biodiversity, communities and economies across our blue planet.

The health of Australia's oceans lies in our hands, in our actions and in our decisions.

It is a responsibility of global significance. Australia has one of the largest and the most biodiverse marine jurisdictions on the planet, with high levels of unique species, endemic to our oceans – found nowhere else on Earth.

We have a lot to lose. Our duty to our unique marine life and future generations demands that we achieve greater protection and more effective management of the impacts on our seas. There is vast potential in Australia for the development and implementation of evidence-based policies, legislation and funding to protect and recover Australia's coasts and oceans, together with the support of the community to do so, for local, regional and global benefit.

We're midway through the most important decade of our lifetimes for the future of our oceans. The coming 2025 Federal Election is a crucial opportunity for political leaders to take decisive action on behalf of Australians for our oceans.

AMCS is strictly non-partisan and, during elections, our supporters across Australia look to us for guidance on which parties have policies that will deliver the outcomes our oceans and wildlife need. We will evaluate the policy platforms of parties against our marine conservation priorities.

Below we set out the priorities the next government must deliver. We call on all political parties to commit to these actions and ensure Australia's oceans and marine life are properly protected.

Protect and restore nature

Home to an extraordinary number of species and variety of habitats, Australia's oceans are highly biodiverse. We are custodians of sub-Antarctic territories to shallow tropical oceans, and our coasts are rich with habitats that are vital for the survival of threatened species. Our coasts and oceans are beloved by Australians, are economic powerhouses for local communities and nationally, and their health is vital for our health and prosperity.

The next Australian Government must prioritise enacting policies and legislation to prevent extinctions in Australia's oceans, and ensure that species are protected from further harm, and that threatened species populations can recover.

1. Stop extinctions and protect our unique wildlife

Many species that inhabit our oceans are globally unique, and some areas are the last refuges for species that have been decimated elsewhere. But we are bearing witness to the prioritisation of damaging industries over nature protection and restoration. The critically endangered Maugean skate is just one extreme weather event away from extinction, with industrial salmon farming polluting the waters in the only location it is found.

- a. Introduce and implement strong new nature positive laws. These new laws must:
 - i. Stop extinctions, protect and recover Australia's unique ocean habitats, and address key threats including climate impacts.
 - ii. Include the establishment of a national independent environmental regulator, and strong outcomes focussed National Environmental Standards.
- b. Be prepared for key threats facing wildlife such as H5 Avian Influenza (bird flu).

2. Act faster and further on plastic pollution to protect ocean wildlife

Plastic pollution severely impacts our coasts and marine life, with an estimated 145,000 tonnes of plastic waste leaking into Australia's environment each year. Despite recent progress, including bans on certain plastics and a 70% reduction in plastic bag litter, Australia's plastic consumption has risen from 123 kg per person in 2010 to 147 kg in 2021.

- a. Introduce and enact strong packaging laws that implement mandatory targets for 20% plastic packaging reduction by 2030, sector based 40-70% reusable packaging targets by 2030, ban needless packaging, incentivise packaging minimisation through design, ban harmful chemicals (including PFAS) and ban the use of disposable food and drink serving ware at major events and dine-in venues.
- b. Address plastic pollution that directly impacts Australia's coasts and oceans through introducing mandatory and transparent reporting for businesses on their overall plastic usage.

3. Deliver transformational fisheries reforms for resilient oceans and sustainable commercial fisheries

Australian wildlife is in decline due to commercial fishing. Poorly managed, high risk fishing puts our ocean wildlife and habitats at risk, as threatened and iconic species such as sea lions, turtles and dolphins are caught and killed as bycatch. Once abundant species are being listed as threatened as they have been fished too hard for too long. Sustainable fisheries are crucial to the future of both our oceans and fishing industry, as thriving fisheries depend on healthy ecosystems. Preventing overfishing now is the most cost-effective approach to ensure future wild seafood production is sustainable under predicted climate change scenarios.

- a. Ensure Australia's fisheries minimise bycatch of threatened, endangered and protected marine species, and deliver a rapid acceleration of the roll out of electronic monitoring systems on vessels in all high risk fisheries.
- b. Prioritise fisheries management actions to promote the protection and recovery of endemic and threatened sharks and rays.
- c. Halt overfishing and reform policies to rebuild depleted commercial stocks.
- d. Incorporate the impact of climate change into fisheries management, including addressing impacts on vulnerable marine species.

Protect unique ocean ecosystems

Our oceans contain some of the most nationally and internationally iconic, and ecologically important ecosystems on the planet, including the Great Barrier Reef and Ningaloo. Under international scrutiny of Australian management of its World Heritage sites, the next Australian Government will be held accountable for fulfilling their global responsibility to protect and restore these ecosystems.

1. Protecting the Great Barrier Reef

The Great Barrier Reef is under significant pressure from climate change. In 2024 the Reef suffered its most widespread and severe bleaching event, resulting in the greatest loss of coral cover in large parts of the Reef in the 39-year history of AIMS's Long Term Monitoring Program (LTMP).

Local impacts from water pollution, unsustainable fisheries and crown-of-thorns starfish (COTS) further impact the Reef, decreasing its resilience and ability to bounce back from the increasingly frequent and intense marine heatwaves and coral bleaching events. Greater commitments from the next Australian Government are required to address these local issues, to increase Reef resilience and give this global icon a fighting chance in the face of climate change.

- a. Develop an emergency coral bleaching and cyclone response plan with water pollution, fisheries and COTS actions that promote the recovery of reefs impacted by coral bleaching, cyclones and floods.
- b. Ensure that the revised 2050 Reef Water Quality Improvement Plan includes science-based pollution load reduction targets, and focuses on driving land use change and the protection and restoration of riparian vegetation and wetlands.
- c. Legislate the Water Quality Improvement Plan load reduction targets under the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act.
- d. Legislate to prevent the clearing of remnant native vegetation and high value regrowth, and native vegetation in riparian areas and lands vulnerable to degradation in Great Barrier Reef catchments.
- e. Rapidly phase out coral harvest from the Great Barrier Reef and the Coral Sea and support the industry to transition to aquaculture.
- f. Reinststate the Great Barrier Reef Ministerial Council to better facilitate National and State leadership to protect the Reef.

2. Expand and improve Australia's national network of Marine Protected Areas

Australia has one of the largest networks of marine parks in the world. However, critical gaps in the network remain, and improvements are needed to bring the greatest conservation benefits and meet international commitments to 30 by 30. Science shows that well-designed and managed marine parks are the best way to protect biological diversity and marine habitats, and to build resilience in the face of growing threats such as climate change. Marine parks also bring great economic and social benefits to the communities that live alongside them, including tourism.

- a. Work with stakeholders to complete the management plans for the South-east Marine Parks Network, the newly expanded Heard and McDonald Islands Reserve, and the Christmas and Cocos (Keeling) Islands Marine Parks.
- b. Conduct timely statutory reviews of the national marine parks network, ensuring changes are informed by robust science, stakeholder consultation, and meaningful engagement with First Nations communities. This should be resourced with a \$150 million marine parks package to cover the review, fisheries related grant programs, research and the continuation of programs to enhance effective management.
- c. Progress the establishment of Antarctic marine parks including the East Antarctic, Weddell Sea and Antarctic Peninsula proposals.
- d. Ratify the High Seas Treaty before the UN Oceans Conference in June 2025 and play a leadership role in supporting other nations to ratify the treaty.
- e. Commit to no new fossil fuel exploration or extraction, including Carbon Capture and Storage and pipelines, in Australia's Marine Park Network.
- f. Continue financial support for states and territory governments, like the Northern Territory, to address capacity shortcomings in managing existing and creating new marine parks.

3. Protect Exmouth Gulf, Ningaloo from industrial development

Exmouth Gulf, Ningaloo is a globally unique ecosystem and a stronghold for threatened species, warranting formal recommendations for World Heritage listing. But the Gulf is threatened by industrialisation. Exmouth Gulf's internationally important natural, cultural and social values must be celebrated, not threatened and its outstanding nature-based tourism, marine research, education and joint management potential secured.

- a. Prevent industrial developments in the Gulf, such as the proposed K+S industrial saltworks and Gascoyne Gateway industrial port, which are incompatible with the area's world-class natural and cultural values.
- b. Support National and World Heritage listing for Exmouth Gulf - consistent with previous formal recommendations - and establish a clear process and budget to deliver this.
- c. Boost funding for natural resource management initiatives including for joint management with First Nations people, natural and cultural heritage assessments, restoration and interpretation.

4. Save Scott Reef

Scott Reef is one of the most spectacular and important coral reefs in Australia. It rivals our most iconic reefs for the diversity of ocean wildlife found there, including endangered turtles and sea snakes, and migratory whales, like the endangered pygmy blue whale, and over a thousand other species. Yet, Scott Reef is the target for the massive, dirty Browse Basin fossil fuel proposal. Not only is this completely unacceptable, posing major risks to marine wildlife, but it will also be a major contributor to the proposed Burrup Hub project, a climate disaster that will pour billions more tonnes of emissions for half a century.

- a. Reject the Browse Basin oil and gas proposal to drill for fossil fuels around Scott Reef, Western Australia.

Phase out fossil fuels to limit warming to 1.5 degrees

Australia is the third biggest exporter of fossil fuels to the world, and is responsible for generating approximately 5% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. We currently have an outsized responsibility for climate change and the catastrophic damage it is causing to our coasts and oceans. Our domestic and international emissions are directly and significantly putting the health of our oceans and our economic prosperity at risk across the country.

Rapidly heating waters as a result of climate change are fundamentally changing our coasts and oceans, yet political ambition on the urgency of stopping mining for fossil fuels is lacking. The next Australian Government needs to act faster on stopping the extraction, export and burning of fossil fuels to protect the places people love and our economic prosperity that depends on healthy ecosystems and a functional planet.

The evidence is clear that not only are iconic places like the Great Barrier Reef being decimated by fossil fuel burning, but also what the next Australian Government needs to do to secure the future for our coasts and oceans, and for our nation.

1. Commit to climate policies aligned with a 1.5 degree pathway

To protect Australia's coasts, oceans and the Great Barrier Reef, the next Australian Government must take urgent action to stop ocean heating. Addressing the root cause of the crisis—fossil fuel extraction and burning—is essential for safeguarding ecosystems and the economies that rely on them. Only bold policies aligned with the 1.5°C pathway can defend the places Australians love and ensure a functional planet.

- a. Commit to no new approval of any fossil fuel projects.
- b. Commit to an ambitious, science-based Emissions Reduction Target, setting a 2035 target of a 90% reduction in emissions below 2005 levels, aligning with the global pathway to 1.5°C.
- c. Update the Climate Change Act 2022 to reflect the urgency of the climate crisis, including strengthening the 2030 target by December 2025, committing to at least a 67% reduction in emissions below 2005 levels.

2. Clean up the offshore fossil fuel industry approvals and regulations

The expansion of offshore fossil fuels adds to global warming and is one of the greatest threats to Australia's marine life. To protect Australia's unique ocean environment and take meaningful action to tackle dangerous climate change, there cannot be any further expansion of fossil fuel mining in our oceans. Offshore oil and gas use must be rapidly phased out, as we transition to a renewable energy powered future.

- a. Commit to no new offshore acreage release for either fossil fuel exploration or carbon pollution dumping by Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) by 2026.
- b. Reject proposals for offshore carbon dumping CCS projects.
- c. In the first 100 days of government, introduce reforms to the fossil fuel regulatory regime that:
 - i. Remove all commercial confidence limitations on existing data from historic seismic projects, to allow for data reprocessing and in turn reduce demand for more seismic blasting exploration applications.
 - ii. Abolish Special Prospecting Authority (SPA) seismic blasting permits.
 - iii. Implement an immediate moratorium on seismic blasting, and prioritise undertaking recommendations of the 2021 Making Waves Senate Inquiry.

Fund nature protection and restoration

Protecting nature, people and the economy means stopping funding fossil fuel expansion, whether through direct subsidies or research and development avenues, and investing in the protection and restoration of nature.

Climate change is forecast to cut the nation's economic output over the next 40 years by between \$135 and \$423 billion. The economic toll from the impacts of the climate and biodiversity crises on Australia is immense and growing. Beyond the immediate threats to human health and safety on land, the loss of jobs dependent on healthy oceans will significantly add to the nation's challenges. This includes the \$6.4 billion tourism industry dependent on a healthy Great Barrier Reef, and an annual \$3.15 billion commercial fishing industry, dependent on functioning marine ecosystems that support fish production.

Community and business expectations of the Australian Government include action on climate, and the protection and restoration of biodiversity and ecosystems to ensure a healthy planet. The next Australian Government must significantly increase investment in protecting and restoring nature to build climate resilience and reduce threats, to stop the extinction crisis and safeguard healthy, functioning ecosystems that are vital to the nation's health and our economic prosperity. It must also end subsidies for offshore oil and gas exploration.

1. Increase investment in nature protection

Currently just one in every thousand of our tax dollars goes towards protecting Australia's unique wildlife and their habitats – or just 0.1% of the federal budget. This is not enough to prevent extinctions and protect our unique wildlife. To achieve our national and international commitments and deliver on national policy goals, funding for nature must rapidly and radically increase to halt the biodiversity crisis.

Investing just 1% of the federal budget would stop the decline by 2030.

- a. Invest 1% of the federal budget in the protection and recovery of Australia's unique wildlife and habitats. This should include funding the protection and recovery of threatened marine species.

2. End subsidies and R&D funding for offshore fossil fuels

Australia's subsidies to fossil fuel producers and major users from all governments totalled \$14.5 billion in 2023–24, an increase of 31% on the \$11.1 billion recorded in 2022–23. The total financial, social and environmental costs of Australia's fossil fuel subsidies are hard to fathom. The economic and social opportunities that their rapid phase out brings should be front and centre in developing policies to rapidly transition Australia from fossil fuel reliance to renewable energy. Essential to expediting that transition is ending the subsidies, research and development funding and underwriting of offshore fossil fuel proposals and existing projects.

- a. Commit to ending subsidies for offshore fossil fuel projects, including carbon dumping via carbon capture and storage.
- b. Commit to ending research and development funding for carbon dumping via carbon capture and storage.

3. Invest in the renewable energy transition

The offshore renewable energy transition is underway in Australia's oceans. With six offshore renewable energy zones now declared, communities are increasingly concerned about the impact of offshore wind development in areas of the ocean they love and care about. As there are relatively poor data sources that can underpin government assessment and approvals processes, and ensure nature is protected in the transition, the next Australian Government will need to dedicate investment in offshore data collection.

- a. Commit dedicated funding to collect data on environmental and cultural values and potential impacts in the offshore renewable energy zones.
- b. Commit to ensuring data transparency from data collected from development companies, making environmental and benthic data publicly accessible.
- c. Commit to genuine consultation with First Nations people and local communities, based on First Nations aspirations, science and clear and accessible information.

4. Greater investment, transparency and accountability in reducing water pollution in the Great Barrier Reef

Current water quality funding is not sufficient to meet the water quality targets, and there is a lack of understanding as to how current investment will contribute to the targets. The timeline to meet the water quality targets has now been pushed back three times, and it is imperative that investment is increased, co-ordinated and targeted if there is any chance of achieving them by 2030. There should be greater transparency in where the funds are going and how they are delivering progress to meet the targets.

- a. Improve coordination with the Queensland Government to deliver Great Barrier Reef water quality programs, and assure greater transparency and accountability of government investments.
- b. Commission an updated costing of investments required to meet the revised 2030 pollution load reduction targets, and develop an investment roadmap to target priority management actions in priority catchments.
- c. Invest \$350 million in ongoing five-yearly funding into an Australian and Queensland government wetland restoration program, focussing on the rehabilitation or land use change of marginal agricultural land along water courses. The program needs to target catchments that contribute the highest Dissolved Inorganic Nitrogen (DIN) pollution to accelerate progress towards water quality targets.

Demonstrate international leadership in ocean conservation

Australia plays a critical role in ocean conservation in international fora. The leadership of successive governments on the creation of marine protected areas in Australian waters, the ambition at Global Plastics Treaty negotiations, the development of the High Seas Treaty and the critical role it plays at the International Whaling Commission demonstrate Australia's regional and international relevance.

The Australian Government is also rightly held to account on management of Australia's oceans under international conventions it is signatory to. The World Heritage Committee, on the advice of its scientific advisors, has consistently signalled concern over climate and nature protection

policies that are inconsistent with the protection of the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage Listed Great Barrier Reef. Concerns over management of World Heritage areas have also been raised by Australian civil society on the impact of industrial salmon farming on the Macquarie Harbour World Heritage Wilderness Area.

The next Australian Government must build this international leadership position, and meet its obligations under international conventions. Translation into domestic commitments and policy priorities is a key mechanism to demonstrate this international leadership.

1. Progress international ambition in implementing marine protected areas in international waters

Australia must play a leading role in advancing the protection of the global oceans, including Antarctica and the high seas, and in ensuring the delivery of key commitments like the Kunming-Montreal global biodiversity framework 30 by 30 pledge. These vast ocean regions are under increasing pressure from overfishing, deep-sea mining and pollution and the incredible marine life desperately needs Australia's leadership.

- a. Play a leadership role at the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), to secure three new MPAs in the Southern Ocean around the Antarctic – the East Antarctic, Weddell Sea and Antarctic Peninsula MPAs.
- b. Ratify the High Seas Treaty by United Nations Oceans Conference 2025.
- c. And take a leadership role in supporting other nations to do the same, while championing its ambitious and effective implementation.

2. Drive international ambition to deliver a strong Global Plastics Treaty

As global negotiations on a landmark United Nations treaty to end plastic pollution enter the final stages, it is critical that nations deliver on the unique opportunity to deliver lasting global reductions in plastic pollution. Australia has so far held high ambition at treaty negotiations, a position which must be maintained.

- a. Maintain high ambition at Global Plastic Treaty negotiations, to deliver a strong treaty that stops plastic pollution at the source through binding measures and targets to reduce plastic production.
- b. Binding obligations addressing the full lifecycle of plastic fishing and aquaculture gear to prevent ghost gear from occurring, and ecologically safe retrieval of any gear that is lost, abandoned or otherwise discarded.

3. Deliver transparency and traceability in domestic and imported seafood

65% of seafood we eat in Australia is imported. Yet Australia currently has no laws that prevent the import and sale of unethical, destructive or exploitative wild-caught or farmed seafood. There are no requirements to trace seafood from the point of catch to your plate, which leaves buyers in the dark. Internationally, there is a growing movement to ensure that seafood imported into countries is subject to stronger rules to close markets to illegal, unreported or unregulated (IUU) seafood, a process that Australia has started. It is essential that this ambition is delivered upon, to avoid Australia from becoming a dumping ground for IUU seafood.

- a. Implement an ambitious IUU seafood imports framework to strengthen the traceability, transparency and labelling of all imported seafood.
- b. Expand the framework to address fisheries and supply chains at risk of human rights abuses.
- c. Stop fraud and mislabelling throughout the supply chain and strengthen seafood labelling laws to include the species, its origin and how it was caught or farmed.

4. Prevent environmental damage to global deep sea environments from deep-sea mining

Seabed mining is a significant and unprecedented threat to marine life and loss of sacred sites and Dreaming tracks in the sea. Dredging and dumping of the spoil has devastating impacts on local sea life including fish breeding and nursery areas and important habitats, causing the death and disruption of seafloor organisms and affecting the ability of plants to photosynthesise.

- a. Demonstrating international leadership by excluding all seabed mining in Australian Commonwealth waters.
- b. Supporting a moratorium on deep seabed mining in international waters, working with like-minded nations to implement this via the International Seabed Authority.

5. Champion whale conservation at the International Whaling Commission

Many whale species are still recovering from the immense commercial whaling industry of the last century, and face a growing number of threats today. Japan, Norway and Iceland continue to undertake commercial whaling in their coastal waters, and to push within the International Whaling Commission (IWC) to lift the global moratorium on commercial whaling and establish new forms of whaling. With Australia the current Chair of the IWC, and hosting the 70th meeting of IWC in 2026, the next Australian Government must continue to be a strong voice for the conservation of whales at the IWC and beyond.

- a. Australia must continue to be a strong, leading advocate for the conservation of whales, and the modernisation of the IWC towards conservation.



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