

Re: Save Our Marine Life submission for the Fitzroy–Derby Water Resources Management Plan

The Save Our Marine Life alliance (SOML) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the draft Fitzroy–Derby Water Resources Management Plan from a marine conservation perspective, with a emphasis on the connectivity between the Martuwarra Fitzroy River and the Kimberley coast.

The Kimberley coast is widely recognised as one of the last largely intact tropical coastlines on Earth. Stretching over 12,000 kilometres, its relative isolation has helped protect it from large-scale industrial and commercial development. This global significance is reflected in the Great Kimberley Marine Park network, which protects extensive marine habitats of high conservation value along the coast.

King Sound estuary links the Martuwarra Fitzroy River with the Great Kimberley Marine Park network, connecting river, estuarine and marine ecosystems. This includes the three recent additions to the marine park network, the Bardi Jawi Gaarra, Mayala, and the Lalang-gaddam Marine Park, that were established in 2022. Maintaining the health of the Martuwarra Fitzroy River is essential to sustaining the ecological integrity of these connected marine park environments.

The Martuwarra Fitzroy River is not only one of the last large free-flowing river systems in Australia, but also a critical driver of ecological health along this Kimberley coast. Seasonal flows, sediment transport, and nutrient exchange from the river support coastal habitats, fisheries productivity, and species that depend on both freshwater and marine environments.

SOML is concerned that proposed increased groundwater extraction and any changes to the natural flow regime pose risks not just to the river itself, but to downstream estuarine and coastal ecosystems, as well as the industries and communities that depend on them remaining healthy. Water extraction could significantly reduce flows, disrupting natural flood cycles that underpin ecological processes.

These flows are essential for maintaining connectivity between the river, King Sound estuary, and coast - including sustaining the integrity of the marine parks along the Kimberley coastline. Changes to flow timing, volume, or groundwater inputs can have cascading impacts on a wide range of species, including:

- Freshwater species such as barramundi and cherabin, which rely on healthy river systems and floodplain productivity
- Estuarine and marine species, including many fish that depend on seasonal connectivity between freshwater and coastal habitats
- Critically endangered freshwater sawfish, which require intact floodplain and river–coast linkages to complete their lifecycle. The Martuwarra remains one of the last strongholds for freshwater sawfish globally.

Changes to the natural hydrology of the river system also pose risks to coastal marine industries that depend on a healthy and functioning river-to-reef system, including:

- Nature-based tourism, which depends on intact ecosystems (such as the dramatic Montgomery Reef phenomenon) and on iconic wildlife experiences (such as the world's largest humpback whale migration).
- Recreational and commercial fishing, supported by nursery habitats influenced by river flows
- Pearling, where water quality and coastal ecosystem health are critical

To ensure the Fitzroy–Derby Water Resources Management Plan protects both the river and the iconic Kimberley coast, SOML strongly recommends adopting a precautionary approach that recognises the full connected system from groundwater to river to coast:

- Maintain and strengthen the commitment to no additional surface water extraction and no dams, to preserve natural flow regimes that sustain downstream and marine ecosystems. Importantly, this commitment can be strengthened by ensuring that floodwater harvesting is prohibited within the Martuwarra Fitzroy River catchment.
- Significantly limit groundwater extraction, recognising its role in maintaining baseflows and ecological connectivity across seasons.
- Explicitly recognise river–coast connectivity, including impacts on freshwater, estuarine and marine species, habitats, marine parks, and dependent industries.
- Recognise the role of river flows in maintaining the ecological integrity of the Great Kimberley Marine Park network.
- Adopt a precautionary, science-based approach in a system with high variability and limited baseline data, to avoid irreversible impacts.
- Ensure strong monitoring and compliance, including the ability to detect delayed impacts from groundwater extraction.
- Embed meaningful Traditional Owner leadership and co-management, including in monitoring and decision-making, recognising their knowledge of the river–coast system.

Getting this plan right is critical not only for protecting the National Heritage Listed Martuwarra Fitzroy River, but for maintaining the health, productivity, and resilience of one of the world's most intact tropical coastlines. The river's flows underpin a connected system supporting endangered and iconic species plus coastal industries that depend on a healthy natural environment. A precautionary, whole-of-system approach that protects flows, limits extraction, and fully recognises river-to-reef connectivity is essential to ensuring these values are safeguarded for future generations.

Yours sincerely



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