

83 Community usage, awareness and perceptions of marine parks and sanctuaries in Victoria, Australia.

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National parks and protected areas in Victoria, Australia, are managed by a state government agency, Parks Victoria. Parks Victoria was established in 1998 and are responsible for managing an expanding and diverse estate covering more than 4 million hectares, or about 17 per cent, of the state. In 2002, the Victorian Government established the Marine National Park system, including 13 Marine National Parks (MPAs) and 11 Marine Sanctuaries. MPAs span Victoria's five marine bioregions and aim to conserve and protect ecological processes, habitats and associated flora and fauna.

With 2022 signalling the 20-year anniversary of the Victorian Marine National Park system, there was a desire to better understand Victorian's current awareness, usage and perceptions of marine parks and sanctuaries. Specific aims of this research include to:

- Measure recent community visitation to the MNPS
- Understand community awareness of, and key perceived benefits of the MNPS
- Identify differences in perceptions, if any, between users, non-users and their respective segments
- Identify indicators and metrics that could measure the social, ecological and/or economic value provided by the MNPS
- Understand awareness and reception of current communication tools, and identify avenues to develop and refine communications in general

We used a mixed method approach to data collection. This included a representative, online survey with the Victorian population aged over 18. Respondents were randomly selected from a permission-based panel with a total sample of n=1,009 surveys. We conducted segmentation analysis on the online sample data. An A-Priori approach was used based on the following variables, visitation frequency, attitudes to marine environment conservation, perceived impact of

marine national parks and attitudes to governance of marine national parks. The resulting segmentation model included four visitor segments and three non-visitor segments. We also conducted qualitative, semi structured interviews. A series n=15 in-depth interviews were completed across two target visitor segments and one non-visitor segment.

Results show that 66% of Victorians are aware of the Marine National Park system. When prompted with a list of named marine parks and sanctuaries, awareness increases to 74%. Visitation was moderate with 34-43% of Victorians aged 18+ have visited a Marine National Park. There is uncertainty regarding which coastal/marine areas are part of the Marine National Park system, with just a third of visitors strongly agreeing that the boundaries of these marine parks or sanctuaries are clearly marked. Visitation over the last 12 months was low with visitation impacted by COVID restrictions. The majority of visitors made between one and five visits, with almost half saying they would visit more in a 'usual' year.

There is widespread community agreement that Victorian marine environments are under threat and should be protected (88%). While visitors do have higher levels of support for the Marine National Park system, even amongst non-visitors three quarters agree that more should be done to protect Victorian marine environments. Awareness of visitor impacts on marine parks is very low. Just half of Victorians believe that visitor activity poses a big/very big negative impact. Conversely, most are aware of the issues associated with marine plastics and litter, with 75% agreeing that this has a big/very big negative impact on the Marine National Park system. Despite the majority of visitors claiming adherence to onsite rules and regulations, just over two thirds are aware of the rules and regulations that apply within the boundaries of the marine park or sanctuary that they visit.

The benefits of marine parks are not well understood. Across 10 presented benefits, the impact rating ranges from 64% for 'protecting fragile

areas of Victoria's coastline' to 45% for 'supporting recreational or commercial fisheries'. Furthermore, only half of Victorians agree that marine parks and sanctuaries are successful in 'enabling young people and children to connect with nature' or 'improving people's wellbeing'.

Little is known about the governance of the Marine National Park system. Just 25% of the Victorian general population feel well informed about the planning and management of marine parks and sanctuaries. However, a sizeable proportion of the community (43%) would like to be more informed, with 10% strongly agreeing that they would like to know more.

The research provided seven segments ranging from disengaged non- visitors through to visitors who are advocates. These segments can be used to inform efforts to increase community recognition and stewardship of the Marine National Park system as they are based on engagement with marine parks and sanctuaries, and support for conservation and governance of Victorian marine environments.

Management implications from this research include the need to further raise the profile and awareness of the Marine National Park system among all Victorians. This is first and foremost about an information campaign to ensure all Victorians know the Marine National Park system exists and broadly its role and remit. This could be achieved through leveraging the broad community acceptance that the Victorian marine environment is at risk. There is a need to articulate the benefits of MPAs to visitors and the environment. There is potential to connect with Victorians through their concerns around marine plastics and litter and people's interest in animals. Families with children in local areas and schools are a target market, to build familiarity with, and respect, for marine environments, and to sow the seeds for a lifelong commitment to protection of the Marine National Park system. This group are more likely to donate time and money to marine sites or programs.