

MEDIA RELEASE

7 March 2024

CRA Calls for Strengthened Protections for Sea Country

Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) supports strengthening Traditional Owners' consultative rights when offshore energy projects are proposed which impact Sea Country, which includes the marine components of First Nations' Peoples traditional estates and their connectedness to land, as well as the cultural, social, and economic values attached to these seascapes. In a recent submission to a Senate Inquiry into proposed legislative amendments, CRA expressed concern that the current legislative framework fails to adequately safeguard First Nations Peoples' cultural heritage in marine areas.

"The current laws that protect First Nations' cultural heritage in Australia are a disjointed patchwork of cultural heritage, native title and environmental legislation, spread across local, state, and federal jurisdictions. These are not working cohesively or comprehensively to protect Sea Country," said CRA President, Peter Jones OSA.

"This became evident when energy company, Santos, was given regulatory approval for its Barossa Gas Project, despite the company having demonstrated minimal consultation with Tiwi Island Traditional Owners about possible impacts to Sea Country, as later determined by the Federal Court," he added.

CRA applauded the proposed *Protecting the Spirit of Sea Country Bill 2023* (the Bill) for seeking to enhance Indigenous rights within Sea Country but called for further protections.

"It is commendable that the proposed Bill clearly stipulates that Traditional Owners from First Nations communities must be consulted by companies when preparing an environment plan for any offshore energy projects, and that the consultation must uphold the Indigenous right of 'Free Prior and Informed Consent'," said Anne Walker, CRA National Executive Director.

"However, existing Australian legislation lacks an overarching identifier for who speaks for Country, as well as any provision for Indigenous groups to veto projects," she added.

The worrying rate of the destruction of First Nations' Cultural Heritage has been recognised by the Federal Government, which is currently undertaking a co-design process with First Nations bodies to reform national cultural heritage protections.

"This reform is imperative to ensure a more robust and cohesive legislative framework that truly protects First Nations' cultural heritage, and we urge the government to adopt a timely and genuine consultation with First Nations' peoples to urgently progress this process." Anne concluded.

Read CRA's [submission](#).

MEDIA ENQUIRIES: Yvonne Diab | M: 0461 472 041 | E: comms@catholicreligious.org.au