

MEDIA STATEMENT  
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
APRIL 26, 2024

## Caring for Sea Country must not trigger a tide of racism

The Esperance Tjaltjraak Native Title Aboriginal Corporation (ETNTAC) is urging community and political leaders to reject a surge in racist and conspiracy-led rhetoric whipped up in the debate over plans for the Wudjari Marine Park.

Traditional Owners and Aboriginal people in Esperance have reported a significant rise in racist comments on social channels in recent weeks, linked to the release of the draft joint management plan for the Wudjari Marine Park.

Under the draft plan, the Wudjari people as represented by ETNTAC will work alongside the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) to jointly manage the Wudjari Marine Park — the third in four connected parks that make up the South Coast Marine Park.

The draft plan is the culmination of more than two years of work between Traditional Owners and the Department, following extensive engagement with stakeholders, and is now open for an extended public consultation until June 16.

But ETNTAC CEO Peter Bednall says Aboriginal people have been subject to appalling racist, threatening and vicious social media commentary by people opposed to the plan.

“Aboriginal people are being painted as the enemy of commercial interests in town, based on misunderstandings, misinformation, myths and outright lies,” he said.

“The Department has done the right thing and made the plans available with a lot of detail. It has extended the consultation period and it is out answering questions.

“But the problem is that some opponents to the plan want more than a say — they want to scuttle the process altogether.

“Many of these people are unable or unwilling to engage with the details of the management plan, and instead are relying on racist messages and conspiracy thinking to try to persuade the Government to step away from this initiative.

“In the past few weeks, we have seen a wave of negative, nasty, racist, conspiracy-fuelled bile on social media, often barely related to the actual plans for the Marine Park.

“We are urging leaders to stand up and acknowledge the right that Aboriginal people have to a seat at the decision-making table and in the planning for the future of their Country.

“Joint management arrangements and Aboriginal Ranger programs have been proven again and again to have positive economic and social benefits for towns like Esperance and yet that contribution is being erased or belittled.”

ETNTAC Chair Gail Reynolds-Adamson said Aboriginal people needed community leaders to lead — and to reject racism as a weapon in the debate.

“By being silent in the face of racism and conspiracy, you allow this behaviour to flourish, your silence speaks volumes,” she said.

“You can’t call yourself a community leader or a representative and not recognise that Aboriginal people are part of this town, part of the economy, part of this electorate, and that they deserve to be represented.

“The social media warriors who make these sorts of comments don’t recognise the worth of Aboriginal people. They don’t want to give us a seat at the table. They don’t believe we have anything to contribute.

“But what is worse is the behaviour of people who will say to our face that they know better but then are happy to ride the tails of racism for their political advantage.

“For First Australians in our Shire this has been just one more bitter and hurtful demonstration that our views are not valued and our perspectives are not heard.”

Ms Reynolds-Adamson said the Wudjari people have cared for Country, on land and sea around Esperance for more than a thousand generations.

“What we see today is just a moment in tens of thousands of years of Wudjari history,” she said.

“We ask all leaders to listen to the representation of Aboriginal people as we seek empowerment and agency in the important role of caring for Country, and to lend their support to the Wudjari Marine Park management plan.”

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**For media enquiries, please contact**

ETNTAC CEO Peter Bednall | 0447 144 182 | [ceo@etntac.com.au](mailto:ceo@etntac.com.au) or

Communications Officer Shraddha Satyapal | (08) 9072 0094 | [communications@etntac.com.au](mailto:communications@etntac.com.au)

### **About the Wudjari Marine Park**

The proposed Wudjari Marine Park is the third of four connected parks that make up the South Coast Marine Park, covering 801,350 hectares of coastal and estuarine waters adjacent to the Shire of Esperance, on the land and sea country of the Wudjari nation.

The draft joint management plan for the Wudjari Marine Park was created in consultation and partnership with the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA).

After two years of extensive stakeholder engagement, and is now available for public review until June 16, 2024.

The Wudjari Marine Park plan builds on the premise that Traditional Owners should be supported in maintaining their connection to Country, by travelling and living on Country, as well as through meaningful employment and enterprise development.

It seeks to achieve some key objectives through the relationship to sea Country — Wadarn Boodja.

**Connection to Wadarn Boodja** (cultural heritage and identity) is achieved by protecting and conserving the values and heritage of the Wudjari People in relation to the proposed marine park.

**Caring for Wadarn Boodja** (custodial obligations and cultural-ecological values) is achieved by enhancing, maintaining and conserving a healthy sea Country, including marine biodiversity and ecological integrity.

**People and Wadarn Boodja** (community and socio-economic values) are supported through the provision of equitable and sustainable opportunities for recreational and commercial activities by allowing communities to safely utilise the marine environment as a source of income, food and enjoyment.

**Understanding Wadarn Boodja** (cultural leadership in research and monitoring) is achieved by encouraging and promoting research and monitoring and the sharing of knowledge from Traditional Owners, scientists and local community to guide and inform best-practice management.