

AN OPEN LETTER TO COMMUNITY LEADERS FROM THE ESPERANCE TJALTJRAAK NATIVE TITLE ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

Community leaders must reject racism in the Marine Park debate

As the representatives of the Wudjari Traditional Owners, we call out the surge in racism and conspiracy theory that has exploded in Esperance around the issue of the Wudjari Marine Park.

We urge community and political leaders, and the community more broadly, to reject attempts to whip up racial division in this debate.

It harms Esperance, it hurts Aboriginal people, and it undermines the good work of people in town trying to negotiate and find agreement on plans for the South Coast.

For more than two years, Esperance Tjaltjraak Native Title Aboriginal Corporation (ETNTAC) sat across the table from different stakeholders and worked through the draft management plan for the Wudjari Marine Park, alongside the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions.

Throughout that process, we negotiated in good faith and listened to perspectives of different groups, to help get the draft management plan to a point it could go to public consultation.

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

Anyone can put a submission forward on the plan, they can show support or they can disagree with zones and details — that's the right way to engage.

But the approach of some opponents is driving a wave of racist and conspiracy-led comments on social channels.

We have seen people smear the idea of Aboriginal input into the draft management plan. People have made wild claims about our capability to help manage Country we have cared for over thousands of years.

Aboriginal people are being painted as the enemy of commercial interests in town, based on misunderstanding, misinformation, myths and outright lies.

We are urging leaders to stand up and say 'enough'.

You cannot lead this community if you are silent in the face of racism and conspiracy, allowing this behaviour to flourish. Your silence speaks volumes.

You can't call yourself a political representative and not recognise that Aboriginal people are part of this town, part of the economy, part of this electorate, and our interests also deserve to be represented.

You can't say to our face that you know better but then be happy to ride the tails of racism for political advantage.

Aboriginal people have a right to a place at the decision-making table, and our record of success in joint management and in Aboriginal Ranger programs deserves to be acknowledged.

Our work does more than maintain our connection to Country, as important as that is.

It contributes directly to the environmental management of our region and the economic performance of our Shire, with local employment and reinvestment in local business.

There is no group more committed to the future of this region than the people who have always been here and who will remain here for generations to come.

Throughout this process we have sought one thing: to empower our people by formalising our important role of connecting to and caring for sea Country — Wadarn Boodja.

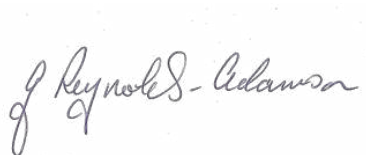
We believe the Wudjari Marine Park offers enduring opportunities, not only for Aboriginal people but for our region overall. We believe it will create a focal point for marine and cultural tourism, new research investment, and ocean conservation while balancing these with commercial and recreational interests.

Others might disagree and they are welcome to argue otherwise.

But we call on leaders to urge all sides to make their case through the submission process — and to leave racist slurs out of the debate.



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