

Ocean crowding and plan crowding

(Integrated Ocean Management Update 3)

Ocean crowding is increasing, and as it does there is continued proliferation of governance bodies, reports and instruments that may be termed ‘plan crowding’. We seek to aid decision makers to overcome inertia associated with this plan crowding. Instead of seeking a single comprehensive plan, we propose taking the harmony in aspirations of the crowd of plans as evidence for need to act and move ahead to the next stage of cohesive integrated management – setting common objectives.

Our past

There is jurisdictional complexity in the ocean, with many different approaches to management and regulation¹. The history of sector-based management has resulted in a mosaic of unique or sparsely overlapping plans (**Fig 1**). This fragmented and siloed management of individual activities means that different authorities are managing different activities in different ways, with different objectives, no ability to address trade-offs, and no attention to the cumulative performance of management².

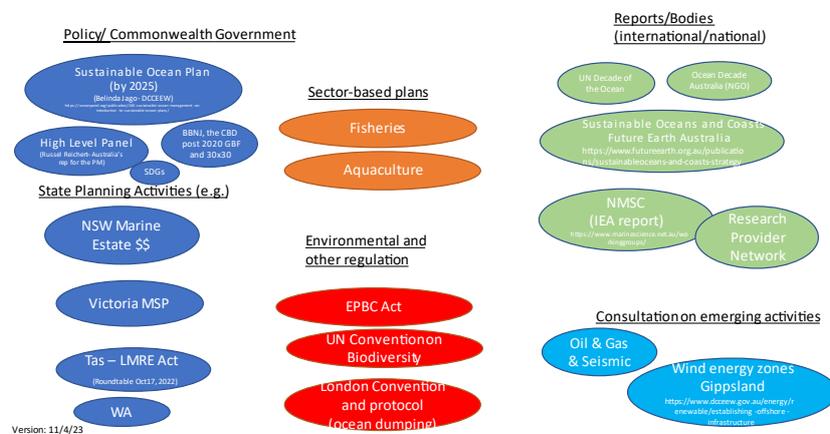


Figure 1. Illustration of the crowded space for recent ocean plans in Australia.

Our current situation

Ocean crowding is expanding with new industries and there are calls for even further development of the Blue Economy. Simultaneously there is need for cohesive and strategic management at a time of great climate and societal change. That is hampered by the fractionated, siloed³ plan crowding³.

As a reaction to the current situation, we have seen:

- Many calls for unification or integration of plans through the development of a new, overarching plan (One ring to rule them all, perfect harmony in a single framework...until the next one)
- Plenty of publications with new frameworks (“we can synthesis all the stuff”)
- Offerings of priorities and actions by siloed parties (“our new plan replaces all the others...until the next one”)

What to do next - Harmony vs Unification

The appeal from many voices and groups for unification/integration could be satisfied by the identification of common objectives and values that could be applied in all plans. This is logical and possible as sector-based plans are increasingly consistent in their recommendations. Instead of seeking a single comprehensive plan (which is only good until the next plan/strategy is published) we contend that these plans are expressions of the need for achieving a broad set of ecological, economic, social/cultural and governance objectives, and therefore that harmony is emerging⁴. This collective similarity in the crowd of plans suggests that we are closer to agreement on what we want to achieve and the values that are commonly held.

A practical way forward is to recognise the harmony in aspiration in this crowded ocean space and to proceed by building on existing plans accordingly. This could be achieved most easily by articulating a core, overarching set of key objectives, that could be adopted by all plans. This influence on plans as they are revisited or enacted allows unification of approach across activities and the possibility of evaluation of trade-offs and cumulative effects of management that have been stymied to date.

The case

Modification of existing plans is possible with minimum system disruption. We suggest that management bodies can improve the cohesion and scope of plans by including key common objectives (**Fig 2**). Importantly, that would allow decision makers to evaluate trade-offs and cumulative effects. This is the important step to improved ocean management in an increasingly crowded space.

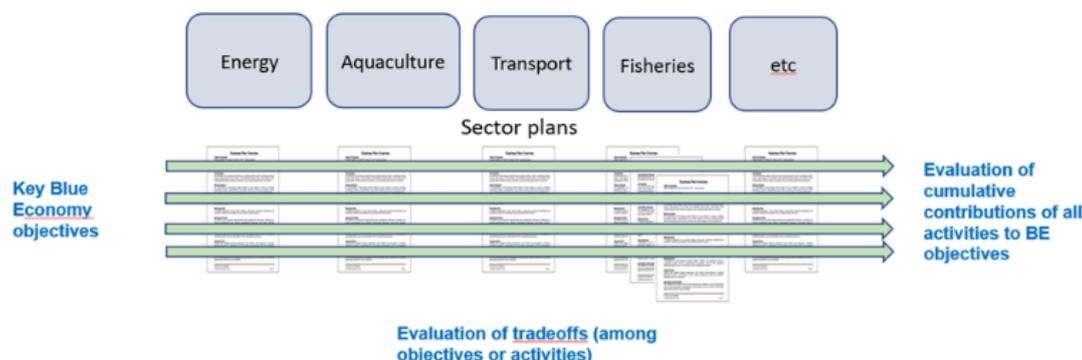


Figure 2. Key objectives (represented by green arrows) applied through sector-based management plans, improve the scope and cohesion of existing plans, and form the basis for evaluation of trade-offs and cumulative performance.

Further reading

1. Stephenson, R. L., A. J. Hobday, I. Butler, T. Cannard, M. Cowlishaw, I. Cresswell, C. Cvitanovic, J. Day, K. Dobbs, L. X. C. Dutra, S. Frusher, M. Fudge, B. Fulton, B. Gillanders, N. Gollan, M. Haward, T. Hutton, A. Jordan, J. McDonald, C. Macleod, G. Pecl, E. Plaganyi, I. v. Putten, J. Vince and T. Ward (2023). Integrating management of marine activities in Australia. *Ocean & Coastal Management*. **234**, 106465
2. Stephenson, R., A. J. Hobday, C. Cvitanovic, K. Alexander, G. Begg, R. Bustamante, P. Dunstan, S. Frusher, M. Fudge, B. Fulton, M. Haward, C. Macleod, J. McDonald, K. Nash, E. Ogier, G. Pecl, E. Plaganyi, I. v. Putten, T. Smith and T. Ward (2019). A practical framework for implementing and evaluating integrated management of marine activities. *Ocean and Coastal Management* 177: 127–138.
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4. Stephenson, R. L., A. J. Hobday, E. H. Allison, D. Armitage, K. Brooks, A. Bundy, C. Cvitanovic, M. Dickey-Collas, N. d. M. Grilli, C. Gomez, A. Jarre, L. Kaikkonen, R. Kelly, R. Lopez, E.-K. Muhl, M. G. Pennino, J. C. Tam and I. v. Putten (2021). The quilt of sustainable ocean governance: Patterns for practitioners. *Frontiers in Marine Science* 8: 630547. doi: 630510.633389/fmars.632021.630547.

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