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PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 15 1981

ELECTORATE TALK

The Commonwealth Government took the decision to proceed without further delay towards proclamation of the Cairns section of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park after about two years of discussion and negotiation with the Queensland government about the boundaries. We felt that it was time for decisions to be made and I had indicated earlier in the year that the Commonwealth's patience was not inexhaustible.

The proclamation of the Cairns section will open the way to the development of management and zoning arrangements by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and I hope Queenslanders will be very much involved in the planning of these arrangements. In developing this plan, the Authority will be seeking public submissions, and a draft will be published in due course for further public comment. The management and zoning arrangements will be designed to protect the Reef, and as with the Capricornia section, there will be perfectly satisfactory provision for recreation, shipping, touring, commercial and amateur fishing and other activities.

The proclamation of the Cairns section will be a further significant step in the strategy of progressive proclamation of the various sections of the whole Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Since 1975, the whole of the Reef has been protected by the Commonwealth Government under the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act. The strategy of proclamation by sections provides scope for effective and realistic planning, and enables the Authority to take account of the special requirements of each particular section of an enormous marine park area.

The planning itself takes time - eighteen months to two years in the case of the Capricornia section - and the further delays caused by this part of the whole process makes it even more important that the decision to proclaim the Cairns section should be taken now.

The selection of the boundaries of the Cairns section of the marine park has been made only after the most careful consideration of alternatives by the Government and by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. The only point at issue was whether the western boundary along the 550 kilometre coastline should be the low water mark on the mainland or a line some distance off the coast. And in the event, the actual area in dispute affects only 30% of that 550 kilometre coastline.

The Commonwealth Government has taken the view that this boundary would go out five kilometres from the coast for about two thirds of its length, but that the low water mark on the mainland must form the boundary where features of ecological significance are involved, and some of these areas which need protection right up to the low water mark are adjacent to land areas that Queensland has itself designated as national park. Among the ecological features included will be the sea grass beds north of Cape Flattery, which are an important habitat for Dugong - an internationally recognised endangered species, and high quality reefs fringing the mainland and islands. The marine park concept and the way it is being implemented will ensure the conservation of the Reef ecosystem.

The decision that has been made is a reasonable one, and it takes account of all the interests and issues involved. It is a decision which deserved the support of the whole community and the concern for the Reef which all Australians share will now be best served if all parties work together to get the right management arrangements into operation.

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