

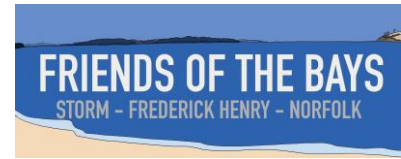
Aboriginal Land  
Council of  
Tasmania



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**AUSTRALIAN  
CONSERVATION  
FOUNDATION**



Mr. Lazare Eloundou Assomo  
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Via email only: [l.eloundou-assomo@unesco.org](mailto:l.eloundou-assomo@unesco.org)

28 January 2025

Mr. Tim Badman  
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[AHC.Secretariat@dcceew.gov.au](mailto:AHC.Secretariat@dcceew.gov.au); [contact@world-heritage-watch.org](mailto:contact@world-heritage-watch.org).

Dear Mr. Assomo and Mr. Badman,

**47th Session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and request for a Reactive Monitoring Mission to assess threats to Tasmania's Wilderness World Heritage Area.**

1. Further to our letter to Mr Guy Debonnet, dated 4 April 2024, we write again regarding an urgent ongoing threat to the heritage value of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA).

2. We thank the World Heritage Centre for transmitting information in relation to our concerns to State Party Australia for their comment, in accordance with the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. We understand the Australian Government may have responded; however, their response has not been published.<sup>1</sup> We are of the view that any official response to UNESCO should be released as a matter of public interest. This accords with Australia's obligations under the World Heritage Convention to “keep the public broadly informed of the dangers threatening this heritage and of the activities carried on in pursuance of this Convention” (Article 27(2)).
3. Marine farming operations in Macquarie Harbour continue to pose an urgent and ongoing threat to the endangered Maugean skate, a species of recognised world heritage value.<sup>2</sup> The skate is a Gondwana era relic, and the only skate in the world known to mostly inhabit brackish waters.
4. We request further assistance of the IUCN and UNESCO to intervene, to protect the Maugean skate and ensure the heritage value of the TWWHA is preserved.
5. In 2021, the 44th session of the WHC reminded State Party Australia of the importance of carrying out impact assessments, and urged submission to the World Heritage Centre, for review by the Advisory Bodies, details of any project that may affect the property's Outstanding Universal Values (OUV), in accordance with Paragraph 172 of the Operational Guidelines.<sup>3</sup>
6. Decision 44 COM 7B.75 further noted some recommendations arising from the 2015 Reactive Monitoring Mission remained outstanding and reiterated the request to the State Party to finalize these, including some as a matter of priority.
7. The last State of Conservation Report produced by Australia in 2022 did not include any reference to the Maugean skate. Nor did it address all the remaining recommendations. Outstanding recommendations include the completion of a Comprehensive Cultural Survey (RMM Recommendation 13), the prevention and management of biosecurity risks, the management of boundary areas to the Tasmanian Wilderness (RMM Recommendation 196), and joint management with the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community (RMM Recommendation 20). Regarding RMM Recommendation 11, the Tasmanian state government has chosen not to protect Future Potential Production Forest (FPPF) Land in the Tasmanian Wilderness within national park tenure, as was committed to through the RMM.<sup>4</sup>
8. Marine farming of finfish in Tasmania has never been fully assessed under Australian law. No such action has ever been determined to be a controlled action and subject to comprehensive environmental impact assessment.<sup>5</sup> This is now being sought through the reconsideration of the 2012 decision that allowed expanded marine farming operations in Macquarie Harbour.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Australian Government's inadequate regulatory action in 2024 is failing to protect the TWWHA and the endangered Maugean skate**

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to the Australian Government requesting the release of Australia's response to UNESCO regarding the TWWHA has been unsuccessful. A *Freedom of Information Act 1982* request has been submitted.

<sup>2</sup> DPIPWE (2016) *Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan*, p 47  
[https://nre.tas.gov.au/Documents/TWWHA\\_Management\\_Plan\\_2016.pdf](https://nre.tas.gov.au/Documents/TWWHA_Management_Plan_2016.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO (2021) Decision 44 COM 7B.75, adopted during the extended 44th session of the World Heritage Committee (WHC/21/44.COM/18), p. 167

<sup>4</sup> World Heritage Watch Report 2024, p.140

<sup>5</sup> Australian Government EPBC Act Public Portal

<sup>6</sup> Australian Government (2023) Reconsideration of marine farming in Macquarie Harbour (EPBC 2012/6406) EPBC Macquarie Harbour

9. Conservation Advice for the Maugean skate prepared by Australia's Federal Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, in effect under Australia's *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth) (EPBC Act) as of 6 September 2023, identified key urgent actions requiring implementation prior to the Australian summer of 2023/2024 to prevent the extinction of the Maugean skate. These included, as the highest priority, the elimination or significant reduction of fish biomass and feeding rates in Macquarie Harbour.<sup>7</sup>
10. Despite this, neither the Federal nor Tasmanian governments have since required any reduction in fish biomass or feeding rates in Macquarie Harbour. Instead, in 2024 there were increases in dissolved nitrogen output from fish farms, approaching the Environment Protection Authority's 2022 cap.<sup>8</sup>
11. It has now been over 12 months since Australia's environment minister commenced the reconsideration of the decision that allowed expanded marine farming in Macquarie Harbour. Over 2,500 submissions were made through the consultation process that closed on 2 February 2024. However, a decision has still not been made, despite it being required as soon as practicable after the close of consultation.<sup>9</sup>
12. A separate but related decision on the eligibility of the Maugean skate for uplisting from Endangered to Critically Endangered on the EPBC Act threatened species list, and associated actions for the species, has been delayed until 30 October 2025.<sup>10</sup> However, it is worth noting that Australian Threatened Species Commissioner, Dr Fiona Fraser, told a Senate Environment Committee in May 2023 that "regardless of the uplisting, conservation action still needs to be taken, and still could be taken to address... the current suite of threats. Addressing that current suite of threats is not contingent on the uplisting occurring or any new conservation advice being agreed. There's sufficient information to know that the species is significantly imperilled."
13. Research in 2024 by the Institute of Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS) confirms the relative abundance of Maugean skate (the best available estimate of population trends) remains at 47% less than the level recorded at the time of the expansion of aquaculture in the Harbour.<sup>11</sup> The extremely small number of juveniles recorded in surveys since 2021 suggest a once-off reproductive event in 2021 with no evidence that subsequent recruitment events have occurred. Successful recruitment has been absent for at least eight years.
14. The extremely limited recruitment confirms the catastrophic condition identified by the Department for Climate Change, Energy Environment and Water's Threatened Species Scientific Committee.<sup>12, 13</sup> By 2021, the overwhelming majority of the Maugean skate population were mature adults. Maugean skates mature at 4-6 years old and live to 10-15 years, indicating what

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<sup>7</sup> Australian Government (2023) *Conservation Advice for Zearajan maugeana (Maugean skate)*, <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species/pubs/83504-conservation-advice06092023> p. 29

<sup>8</sup> ABC News (17 May 2024) *Months after second Maugean skate extinction alarm issued, concerns raised that fish farms aren't changing practices fast enough*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-17/maugean-skate-conservation-pollution-in-macquarie-harbour/103855188>

<sup>9</sup> *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, s.78C

<sup>10</sup> Federal decision on Macquarie Harbour's endangered Maugean skate put off until next federal election - ABC News

<sup>11</sup> Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (2024). Interim Report Number 2 - Macquarie Harbour Maugean skate population, University of Tasmania.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Government (2024) Consultation Document on Listing Eligibility and Conservation Actions – Zearaja maugeana (Maugean skate) (PDF 2.17 MB)

<sup>13</sup> Australian Government (2023) *Conservation Advice for Zearaja maugeana (Maugean skate)*, <https://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/species/pubs/83504-conservation-advice-06092023.pdf>

little recruitment occurred since 2021 is unlikely to contribute to the reproductive potential of the population until at least 2025, assuming they have survived.

15. Despite the success of captive breeding thus far, it must be noted that conditions in captivity are optimal and do not reflect the wild conditions in Macquarie Harbour. Dissolved oxygen in captivity is at or near 100%, nutritional provision of individuals is optimal, and skates are not exposed to predation. This not only demonstrates a clear disparity in the potential for reproductive success in the wild, but also underscores that ongoing success of any captive breeding/rearing initiatives to aid population recovery (i.e. collecting eggs and adults from the wild and their subsequent return to the harbour) requires significantly improved water quality of Macquarie Harbour. With respect to wild recruitment, the small number of juveniles observed in the Harbour now need to contend with the increased risk of predation from seals which are not endemic to Macquarie Harbour but have established colonies in recent years directly because of prey availability in the form of farmed salmon.<sup>14</sup> The impacts of salmon farming may also inhibit reproduction in the Maugean skate, as evidence has shown reproductive success in another elasmobranch, the spiny dogfish, has been negatively impacted as a result of consuming salmon feed.<sup>15</sup>
16. The dissolved oxygen levels in the TWWHA segment of Macquarie Harbour, particularly at preferred depths of 15-35 m (i.e., part of the depth range of the Maugean skate and where eggs can be found), as reported by the Tasmanian Environment Protection Authority (EPA) remain substantially lower than prior to the expansion of aquaculture<sup>16</sup>, despite three years of improved recharge of the Harbour from oceanic inflows. Claims that the Harbour is 'healthier than it has been in a decade' are based on dissolved oxygen values in areas which are not skate habitat and benchmarked against the period when the dissolved oxygen levels were at their lowest ever values. For example, oxygen values measured by the EPA at 10m are from loggers in the middle of Macquarie Harbour taking readings in the water column (i.e. 10m from the surface) and thus are not accurately representing what is happening in skate habitat areas which are 10m deep. These claims also ignore other detrimental impacts that aquaculture continues to have on the Harbour.
17. Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies (IMAS) scientists have confirmed the improvement is due to naturally occurring oceanic oxygen replenishment, which cannot be relied upon alone to address oxygen depletion in the harbour.<sup>17,18</sup> Tasmania's EPA oxygen monitoring results reveal only a gradual increase in oxygen levels which predate the commencement of the Macquarie Harbour Oxygenation Project (MHOP).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Richardson, BJ (2021) *Tasmania's salmon industry detonates underwater bombs to scare away seals – but at what cost?* The Conversation, September 17, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/tasmanias-salmon-industry-detonates-underwater-bombs-to-scare-away-seals-but-at-what-cost-167854>

<sup>15</sup> Moreno D. (2018) *An unusual habitat for a common shark: life history, ecology, and demographics of the spiny dogfish (Squalus acanthias) in Macquarie Harbour, Tasmania*. University of Tasmania, PhD Thesis. Pp 165.

<sup>16</sup> EPA Tasmania (2024) *Macquarie Harbour - Status update for dissolved oxygen – September 2024*, Hobart, Tasmania. <https://epa.tas.gov.au/Documents/Macquarie%20Harbour%20-%20Status%20update%20for%20dissolved%20oxygen%20-%20September%202024.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Professor Jeff Ross, lead scientist of the re-oxygenation project, on improvements in oxygen levels being due to natural recharge from oceanic waters, ABC Tasmania Radio Drive Program, 12 November 2024.

<sup>18</sup> National Recovery Team for the Maugean Skate Meeting 4: 30-31 July 2024 – Public Communique <https://nre.tas.gov.au/Documents/National%20Recovery%20Team%20for%20the%20Maugean%20Skate%20Meeting>

<sup>19</sup> EPA Tasmania (2024) *Macquarie Harbour seabed compliance results best on record since becoming EPA regulated*, <https://epa.tas.gov.au/news/macquarie-harbour-seabed-compliance-results-best-on-record-since-becoming-epa-regulated>

18. The MHOP is a trial that aims to assess the efficacy, feasibility and scalability of offsetting the total oxygen drawdown of salmonid aquaculture in the harbour.<sup>20</sup> It does not seek to remediate oxygen levels in the harbour more broadly, despite recently being awarded AUD\$21 million by the Australian Government.
19. Tasmanian Government media releases have repeatedly asserted that *“it’s clear that industry and research investment in remediation of dissolved oxygen levels in the harbour, along with EPA regulation of the industry is effective and working”*,<sup>21</sup> based on the EPA Tasmania’s June 2024 report and that of compliance with environmental licence requirements at the “35 metres compliance points” in Macquarie Harbour.<sup>22</sup> These conclusions are incorrect, as they respectively conflate the performance of the MHOP with the natural replenishment of oxygenated seawater, and seabed video surveillance monitoring points (located 35 metres from marine farm lease boundaries) that are completely separate to oxygen monitoring results reported by EPA Tasmania addressed above.
20. It is clear that the Maugean skate is in a precarious situation, that the health of Macquarie Harbour remains compromised and that the aquaculture industry’s operations in the Harbour are having unacceptable impacts. International commitments compel Australia to take a precautionary approach to managing threats to a species’ existence. This is also why more than 30 prominent Australian scientists, including five fellows from the prestigious Australian Academy of Science, published an open letter informing Federal Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek and all Australians, that they support the science the Minister is legally required to base her decision on regarding the future of salmon farming in Macquarie Harbour.<sup>23</sup> Signatories to the letter include the immediate former Chair of Australia’s Threatened Species Scientific Committee as well as many who have had leadership roles in national and international marine organisations and institutions. Signatories called on Minister Plibersek to make the decision to remove unsustainable fish farming from the Harbour and to demonstrate global leadership in protecting Australia’s valuable and unique marine life.
21. The Australian Government’s failure to act on Conservation Advice, and its continued delay in making a decision on reconsideration of marine farming in Macquarie Harbour, leave us concerned that Australia is not acting in accordance with its World Heritage management principles nor meeting its obligations under the World Heritage Convention.

## **Request**

22. In light of the above, we request the IUCN and UNESCO to jointly recommend to the World Heritage Committee, for consideration at its 47th session, that a Reactive Monitoring Mission is sent to the TWWHA in the second half of 2025 to:
  - a. Examine the impact of marine farming operations in Macquarie Harbour on the Outstanding Universal Value of the property, and
  - b. Any other relevant matters in relation to the TWWHA.

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<sup>20</sup> FRDC (2023) *Macquarie Harbour oxygenation trial*, <https://www.frdc.com.au/project/2023-087>

<sup>21</sup> Duigan (2024) Media release: More evidence of improvements in oxygen levels at Macquarie Harbour [https://www.premier.tas.gov.au/site\\_resources\\_2015/additional\\_releases/more-evidence-of-improvements-in-oxygen-levels-at-macquarie-harbour](https://www.premier.tas.gov.au/site_resources_2015/additional_releases/more-evidence-of-improvements-in-oxygen-levels-at-macquarie-harbour)

<sup>22</sup> Duigan and Abetz (2024) *Media release: Improvements in oxygen levels at Macquarie Harbour*, [https://www.premier.tas.gov.au/site\\_resources\\_2015/additional\\_releases/improvements-in-oxygen-levels-at-macquarie-harbour](https://www.premier.tas.gov.au/site_resources_2015/additional_releases/improvements-in-oxygen-levels-at-macquarie-harbour)

<sup>23</sup> Top Australian scientists unite in defence of science on Maugean skate

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Eloise Carr, Director, The Australia Institute Tasmania

On behalf of the above organisations