

# The Sydney Morning Herald

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## Gillnets banned to protect Great Barrier Reef's threatened dugongs, turtles



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Gillnets will be banned in the Great Barrier Reef by mid-2027 to protect threatened species, the federal and Queensland governments have announced, as part of sweeping changes to better protect the World Heritage-listed area.

Under a \$160 million funding announcement on Monday, the two governments will seek to create more net-free zones and implement greater protections for threatened marine species.



Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek made the announcement to protect the Great Barrier Reef on World Environment Day. AAP

Gillnets nets are used to catch fish - such as barramundi and mackerel - but they can also injure and kill threatened dugongs, turtles, dolphins and protected shark species.

The wall of netting allows the head of a fish to pass through but not their body. As the fish tries to escape, their gills are caught in the net and they become entangled. There are 240 licensed gillnet fishers in Queensland, using 159 kilometres of gillnet - more than the distance between Brisbane and Noosa.

Monday's funding announcement will also accelerate the implementation of sustainable fishing strategies and introduction of legislation to mandate the use of independent data validation on commercial fishing vessels. The latter will ensure overfishing is minimised.

Federal Minister for the Environment and Water, Tanya Plibersek, said one of the greatest risks in the Great Barrier Reef was unsustainable fishing.

"It causes damage throughout the reef," Plibersek said. "The removal of gillnets in net-free zones on the reef has already helped boost local fish populations. We want to see this happen right across the reef."

"The Great Barrier Reef is one the most beautiful places on Earth. We want to better protect it for our kids and grandkids."

The federal government will also request the Queensland government declare threatened hammerhead sharks a no-take species for commercial fishers within state waters.

Queensland Minister for Agricultural Industry Development and Fisheries, Mark Furner, said the investment in the reef would help future-proof it, as well as the commercial fishing industry.

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Tanya Plibersek, Federal Environment and Water Minister

WWF chief executive officer Dermot O'Gorman said the announcement was a globally significant moment for ocean conservation.

"If all goes to plan, by June 2027 we'll have a Net-Free Reef where dugongs, turtles, dolphins and other threatened species can swim without the threat of becoming entangled and drowning in a gillnet, and that's a cause for global celebration," he said.

The wildlife preservation group's head of oceans in Australia, Richard Leck, said the other changes, such as independent data validation on fishing vessels, were also overdue.

"It means we'll have a much better understanding of what's happening out on the water, including how many threatened species are being accidentally caught," he said.



Gillnets will be banned on the Great Barrier Reef by mid-2027 under new changes announced on Monday. iStock

The federal government has invested more than \$1.2 billion into protecting the Great Barrier Reef, but the site's outlook remains grim. The Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) listed the outlook for the reef's health as "very poor" in [last year's annual report](#).

Another key concern is coral bleaching as ocean temperatures continue to warm. With [another El Nino looming](#) this summer, bleaching could occur on the reef again. Last year, AIMS' chief executive, Paul Hardisty, said the increased frequency of mass coral bleaching events was "uncharted territory" for the reef following the fourth mass bleaching in seven years.

Bleaching is forecast to reduce global [coral cover by 95 per cent under 2 degrees of warming](#), and 70 per cent under 1.5 degrees. If all countries deliver on their climate commitments, the world would still be on track for 2 degrees or more of warming. If the rest of the world followed Australia's current commitments and policies, global warming would exceed 3 degrees, [according to Climate Action Tracker](#).

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