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Our \$10b “Great Southern Reef”

Scientists have put a dollar value on Australia's other reef, the “Great Southern Reef”, finding it contributes more than \$10 billion to the nation's economy each year.

The Great Southern Reef covers 71,000sqkm and straddles five states along the southern coastline of the Australian continent, from Brisbane to Perth.

University of Western Australia

Oceans Institute marine biologist Dr Thomas Wernberg said that while everyone had heard of the Great Barrier Reef, its southern equivalent was “unique, beautiful and a biological powerhouse”.

And it is on Walpole's doorstep.

But is it a “reef”?

Dr Wernberg told the *Weekly* that there is no formally accepted

definition of a reef.

“The Great Barrier Reef is a series of 3,000 individual coral reefs—and countless structures—that are physically unconnected,” he said.

“What connects those reefs are ecological, oceanographic, and evolutionary processes.

“This is no different to the rocky ridges and kelp forests off Australia's southern coastline—it is hard to define where they start and end,” he said.

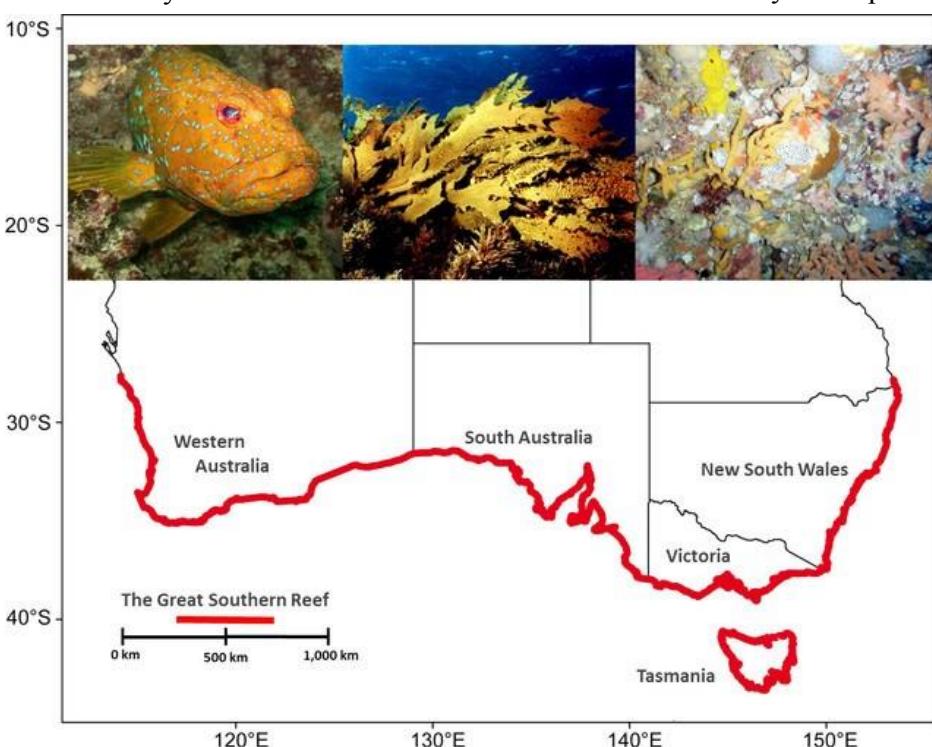
Dr Wernberg wants to see them recognised as a single entity for several reasons:

“While many species are only found in certain parts, the entire reef is dominated by a few closely related species of large seaweeds and therefore looks and functions in much the same way throughout.

The reef is clearly different from the coral reefs to its north; “kelps are plants, and corals are animals, for a start,” he said.

“The majority of the reef has also been isolated from the rest of the world for many millions of years and shares a long evolutionary history.

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Photos: T Wernberg; Infographic design: theconversation.com

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"This explains the very high rate of entirely unique flora and fauna.

"Finally, the reef is geographically connected through the two major ocean currents—the Leeuwin and East Australia currents—which carry water and organisms south along the coasts.

"This oceanographic connectivity has a clear footprint in the genetic make-up of organisms [and] biological communities in different regions.

Biological engine

The Great Southern Reef's kelp forests—"highly productive and structurally complex communities of large brown seaweeds—are its biological engines, producing as much as 65 tonnes of biomass per hectare per year [which is] more than 16 times the yield from Australia's most fertile wheat fields," Dr Wernberg said.

"They provide both a habitat and a rich food source in our coastal ecosystems; critical for the energy and nutrient cycles supporting the rich marine life of the reef and the wider ocean beyond shelf waters."

The reef is a biodiversity hotspot for not only seaweeds but also sponges, crustaceans, chordates, bryozoans, echinoderms and molluscs.

Depending on the group, 30-80% are not found anywhere else on earth.

Economic powerhouse

The reef is integral to the Australian lifestyle and culture "due to its sheer scale and close proximity to almost 70% of the Australian population," Dr Wernberg said.

"It plays an important role in our national economy, supporting a broad range of tourism, recreational and commercial activities."

New research by a team of scientists—due for release by the CSIRO this week—found that in regional coastal communities such as Walpole total tourism expenditure on reef-related activities, including fishing, scuba diving, surfing and whale watching, was estimated at around \$9.8 billion per year—or up to 15% of the local economy in some areas.

Dr Wernberg said the Great Southern Reef was "relatively healthy" and relatively well managed but warned it was under growing pressure from climate change, population growth, and urban development.

"Although most Australians live and play around the southern reef they have little awareness of its value and significance, and too few resources are allocated to understanding it," he said.

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