

DEFENCE OPERATIONS

Introduction

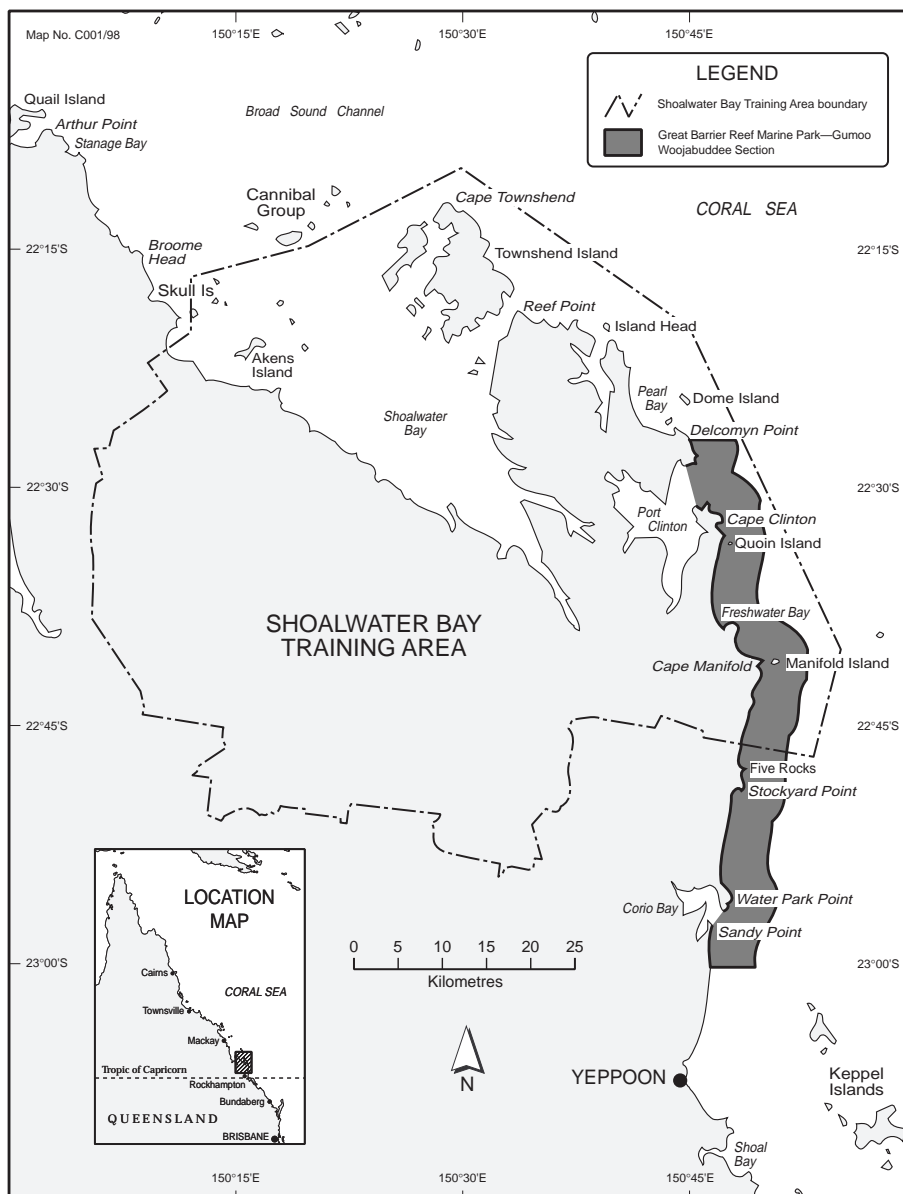
The northern part of the zoning area forms part of the Shoalwater Bay Military Training Area (SWBTA). The training area was acquired by the Commonwealth Government in 1965 for defence training purposes. The area has considerable strategic importance to the Department of Defence being the only location on the east coast of Australia where large-scale joint and combined exercises can be conducted.



The training area is managed by the Australian Army from a base in Rockhampton but is also used by the Australian Navy and Air Force as well as overseas forces.

A number of sites within the training area are used for landing by military amphibious vessels and landing craft. These include Freshwater Bay and South Arm which is in Port Clinton. Sea Hound Hard on the south arm of Port Clinton is one of only two locations which can accept heavy landing craft. The other is located on Townshend Island in Shoalwater Bay which is outside the zoning area.

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park—Gumoo Woojabuddee Section



Defence activities in the training area involve the following operations.

Royal Australian Navy (RAN) Operations:

- amphibious landings onto the beach at Freshwater and Sea Hound Hard. Troops are deployed onto the beach during these activities and conduct patrols of the beach and hinterland.
- naval gunfire support of the Navy's Destroyer Force, *this does not occur within the zoning area*, and,
- clearance diver training comprises individual and collective training in underwater demolitions, explosive ordnance disposal and beach disposal. *This training is conducted outside the zoning area.*

Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Operations:

- most weapons practice takes place in Shoalwater Bay
- tactical equipment drops for ground forces
- the Air Force has long-term plans to construct a tactical air weapons range on Cape Clinton.

Australian Army Operations:

- Most army training activity occurs on the land and includes infantry training, amphibious operations and live fire support.
- The camp at the southern end of Freshwater Beach is used as a major campsite for troops. Access to the beach is also located here for vehicle movement.

Existing army procedures and controls

Under the Zoning Plan for the Mackay/Capricorn Section a defence area exists around the greater Shoalwater Bay area.

Defence requires that all training activities within the training area conform to an *Environmental Certificate of Compliance* (ECC) which specifies procedures to minimise environmental damage. In addition, Defence personnel must conform with Standing Orders. Standing Orders and the ECC specify the manner in which operations are conducted in marine areas within Port Clinton or Freshwater Bay and they also specify risk minimisation strategies.

A Land Management Plan has been in place for a number of years and has recently been revised. The plan provides guidelines and performance indicators for land management practices within the training area. This includes the maintenance of water quality which is of particular relevance to the adjacent marine environment.

A number of exclusion areas exist within the training area that are permanent 'No Go' areas to vehicles and personnel. These include mangroves, beach fronts and environmentally sensitive areas such as significant sites for rare and protected species during critical breeding and roosting periods.

The eastern dune fields of the Freshwater Bay area have been identified as particularly sensitive to disturbance and for this reason are not used for land-based defence training activities.

Sea Hound Hard on South Arm in Port Clinton is one of two sites within the training area where heavy landing craft can be offloaded at high water, the other (Sea Turtle) is on Townshend Island.

For defence purposes, the training area has been divided into a number of sectors. The sectors covering the zoning area are Gibraltar, Freshwater and a small segment of the Clinton sector. During major exercises the beach at Freshwater Bay is used for beach landings of personnel and equipment. The waterways into Sea Hound Hard are used for rafting and bridge training.

Issues

The impacts from defence use on the marine environment relate to the use of weapons, in particular the detonation of underwater explosive devices by the Navy. This particular activity is carried out in the vicinity of Townshend Island which is outside the Zoning area.

Impact on bird life from bombing practice is minimised where possible by avoidance of major bird breeding islands and reduced activity during the summer period when most nesting occurs.

Major exercises

The conduct of joint exercises at the training area has been a regular activity which involves many units of the Defence Force and foreign military forces. The training cycle is based on a number of small exercises in the beginning of the year and larger exercises in the latter part of the year. Major exercises are held every two to three years and can involve up to 20 000 personnel. The number and frequency of exercises is anticipated to increase over the next few years. Measures are in place to minimise the effect of these exercises.

Information needs

The impacts of all defence activities within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park must be managed sensitively in an ecologically sustainable manner, and with regard to the precautionary principle in keeping with its status as a significant part of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. The nature and impacts of Defence activities are poorly understood by the general public. They often view them as involving an indiscriminate use of bombs and bullets. The activities of Defence within the training area are closely scrutinised and controlled to minimise impacts on the environment and to conform with environmental obligations.

For twenty years, Defence has contracted the CSIRO to conduct research on the environment in the training area. However, until recently, little was known of the marine resources. This is being addressed through an ongoing program of research. Areas requiring greater attention are the management of ballast water and the prevention of oil spills during transfer of fuel. In addition, research is currently being conducted to assess the impact of acoustic devices on dugongs.

Consultative mechanisms

There are a number of levels at which the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority communicates with the Australian Defence Force:

- at the ministerial level,
- through joint environmental advisory committees,
- through negotiations with the Defence Estate Organisation, and
- by participation in regional management committees.

Of particular relevance to the area within the Gumoo Wojobuddee Section is the Environmental Advisory Committee for Shoalwater Bay. The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the Queensland Department of Environment are members of these committees together with various other government and non-government organisations.

Sources

The information in this report was obtained from Department of Defence publications and submissions to the Commonwealth Commission of Inquiry–Shoalwater Bay into defence use of the Shoalwater Bay Military Training Area. Other references included the Land Management Plan and Strategic Plan for the Shoalwater Bay Military Training Area.

This report has been prepared as background material for preparation of a draft zoning plan for the Gumoo Wojobuddee Section of the Great Barrier Marine Park and adjacent areas including the waters of Port Clinton, and the intertidal areas of Freshwater Bay and the Byfield coast. There are no management proposals contained in this report. If you have any other questions about the process contact:



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