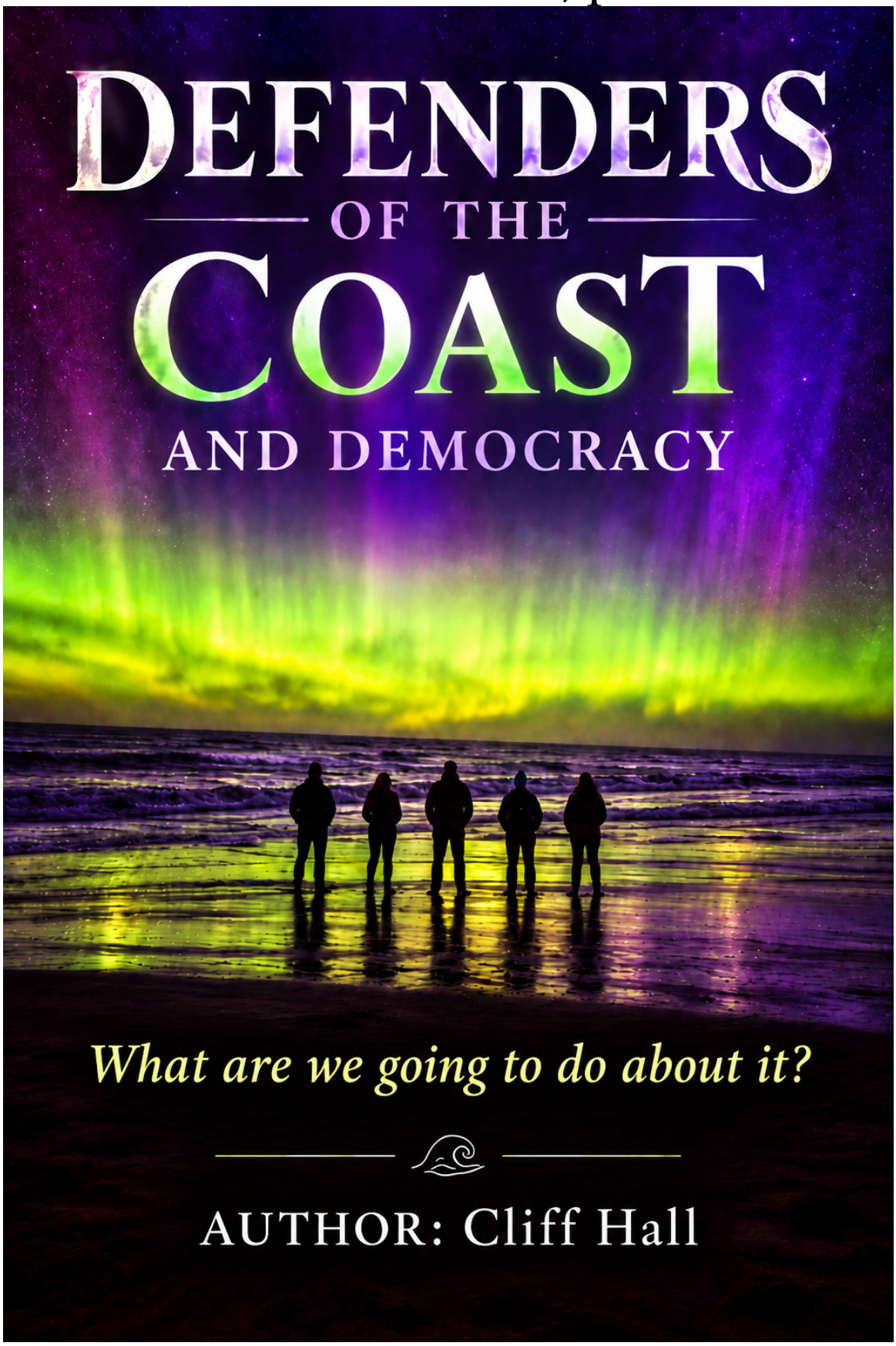
PART ONE; pdf


DEFENDERS
OF THE
COAST
AND DEMOCRACY
What are we going to do about it?
AUTHOR: Cliff Hall

FOR THE DEFENDERS

They did not wake up one morning intending to become protesters.

For many, it was a rude awakening.

Along stretches of the Australian coastline, people began hearing about plans for offshore renewable energy zones and industrial projects on a scale few had previously imagined. Maps appeared. Consultation periods opened. Information sessions were held. Technical documents accumulated.

And ordinary people began asking questions.

What would this mean for the places where they lived? What would happen to fishing grounds, migrating whales, seabirds and coastal landscapes? What would be built offshore, and what would be required onshore to support it? Who had been consulted before the lines appeared on the maps?

For many communities, the deeper concern was not simply what was being proposed. It was the feeling that they had arrived late to a conversation about their own coast.

They attended consultation sessions expecting answers and often left with more questions than answers. They wrote submissions, organised meetings, created Facebook groups, printed brochures, held rallies and contacted politicians. People who had never thought of themselves as campaigners found themselves learning planning processes, environmental assessments, energy policy and legislation.

They were learning as they went.

What governments and developers described as the development of a new offshore renewable energy industry, many of these people came to describe in very different words:

“The industrialisation of our coast.”

That difference in language matters.

It reveals the distance that had opened between national policy objectives and the way coastal communities experienced those policies on the ground. One side saw renewable energy zones, investment, jobs and the energy transition. The other saw familiar coastlines being transformed and decisions they believed were being made without them.

Out of that divide came something that had not been planned by any government, developer or political party.

People began finding one another.

Small local groups appeared. Neighbours who had never met exchanged information. Fishermen stood beside retirees, surfers, business owners, conservationists and families whose connection to the coast stretched back generations. Groups separated by hundreds and eventually thousands of kilometres discovered they were asking remarkably similar questions.

A grassroots movement began to take shape.

Its members would be called many things. Protesters. NIMBYs. Deniers. Activists. Misinformation spreaders. Astroturf.

But those labels do not tell their story.

This book does.

It is the story of people who believed they had been left out of decisions affecting places they loved, and what happened when they decided they would no longer remain on the sidelines.

They became **Defenders of the Coast**.

A NOTE ON THE RECORD

This book tells the story as it stood at the time of publication.

The offshore wind proposals, government decisions, community campaigns and regulatory processes described in these pages were still evolving as this book was written. A line has therefore been drawn across the calendar. The information presented here reflects the evidence available up to that point.

Events that follow belong to another chapter of the story.

This edition will remain as a record of what was known, what was proposed, what communities were saying and what decisions had been made at this moment in time.

A NOTE ON SOURCES
This is a narrative history rather than an academic paper. Where precise figures, government decisions, technical information or significant quotations are used, a brief source is provided close to the relevant passage. Sources have been kept deliberately simple so readers can identify where the information originated without interrupting the story with formal academic referencing.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS?

Mother Nature shows her power and beauty every day through shifting landscapes, changing skies and quiet wilderness. Before going any further, look again for a moment at the image on the cover of this book.

A woman named Emma took that photograph with her phone while walking on Ninety Mile Beach, Victoria. She had gone looking for whales and found the aurora australis instead — an extraordinary display above a coastline where darkness is still part of the landscape.

It is also, as it happens, part of what this community fears losing.

When the Australian Government consulted on declaring the waters off Gippsland as Australia's first offshore renewable energy area, 765 submissions were received. Visual amenity was among the concerns raised, alongside environmental impacts, recreational and commercial fishing, onshore impacts and shipping.

For coastal communities, the view by day — and the character of the horizon by night — became part of a much larger discussion about what offshore development might mean for this place.

So did almost everything else this coast is quietly known for.

Fishers worried about grounds worked by generations before them. Tourism operators wondered what changes to the coast might mean for businesses built around it. Parents asked what the future might hold for beaches where their children were learning to swim.

And beyond the human concerns were whales, dolphins, seabirds and other marine life sharing the same stretch of coast.

That was what all the fuss was about.

It was never just about turbines.

HOW IT BEGAN

Grassroots groups rarely begin with a formal meeting, a committee or a carefully prepared plan. More often, they begin with a conversation.

At Ninety Mile Beach, that conversation was already taking place on a local community Facebook page. Roger and Emma were among those speaking up about the offshore wind proposals and asking a simple question:

What are we going to do about it?

Roger took the first practical step.

He contacted Ben Abbott from Port Stephens, where a community Facebook group had already been established in response to the proposed Hunter offshore renewable energy zone. Using Ben's group as a model, Roger created a Facebook group for the Ninety Mile Beach community.

Roger's partner, Linda, became an administrator and helped get the fledgling group underway. Emma, who had already been talking with Roger about the need to organise, was among its earliest members and soon joined the administrative team.

There was no grand strategy. No campaign headquarters. No professional organisation waiting in the wings.

There were simply local people beginning to find one another.

Several months later, Brad joined the team. Over time, Emma and Brad increasingly took responsibility for the group's day-to-day activities and public presence, while Roger and Linda remained involved in the background, including helping at community markets.

Before there was a national network, before groups separated by hundreds and eventually thousands of kilometres began exchanging information, maps and advice, one coastal community had already reached out to another.

That was how the network began to grow — not through a master plan, but through people finding people.

WHEN POLICY MEETS PLACE

In creating offshore renewable energy zones, the people drawing lines on maps were trying to solve a real problem — an electricity system facing the retirement of ageing power stations and a national policy committed to transitioning toward renewable sources of energy.

But national policy looks different when it arrives at a particular place.

A line on a government map can cross fishing grounds, whale migration routes, shipping lanes and views that have defined a community for generations. What appears at national level as an energy project can look very different from a beach, a fishing boat or a kitchen table.

That is the tension at the heart of this book.

It is not simply a question of whether the intentions behind a policy are good. It is what happens when those intentions meet real places, incomplete knowledge and people who believe they will live with the consequences.

For many of those people, this was where the precautionary principle became important.

The principle has long had a place in environmental law and policy. Put simply, where there is a threat of serious or irreversible environmental harm, a lack of complete scientific certainty should not automatically become a reason for postponing measures intended to prevent environmental degradation.

That idea resonated strongly with coastal communities.

They were not necessarily claiming that every feared consequence would occur. They were asking a different question:

What if it does?

What if migration patterns change? What if fishing grounds become more difficult to work? What if cumulative effects emerge only after several projects have been built? What if changes considered acceptable individually become something very different when viewed together?

Some effects may prove temporary. Others may be manageable. Some fears may never eventuate.

But some consequences may be difficult, costly or impossible to reverse.

That uncertainty became part of the argument.

The unintended consequences were what many coastal communities feared most. Not simply because renewable energy was being proposed, but because they believed the coast deserved something more than reassurance before changes of this scale took place.

They wanted evidence.

They wanted answers.

And increasingly, they wanted a voice in the decisions.

Turn the page. It starts, as it usually does, with the sand.

PART ONE

No Offshore Turbines — Ninety Mile Beach

A coastline, a consultation, and the neighbours who refused to look away.

1.0 Ninety Mile Beach

At first light the beach belongs to no one.



Figure 1: *panoramic view looking south through the Gippsland Lakes and along Ninety Mile Beach, Victoria.*

The sand runs flat and pale for as far as the eye can hold it, a single unbroken line stretching east toward Lakes Entrance and west toward the mouth of the Latrobe, ninety miles of it, give or take, depending on who is counting and where they choose to start. There is no fence here. No gate. No sign telling you where the wilderness ends and the town begins, because out here, most days, it doesn't. The dunes simply rise, spinifex-stitched and wind-worn, and behind them the tea-tree scrub closes over like a hand.

Before the world wakes, the beach keeps its own hours. Mist sits low over the Gippsland Lakes, that great tangle of lagoon and channel and shallow water the Gunaikurnai people have known and tended since before it had any other name. Black swans move through it in loose grey light, unbothered, the way they have moved through it for longer than anyone alive can account for. Further out, past the second sandbar, a shape rolls and vanishes — a dolphin, or the memory of one — and somewhere beyond the break, invisible this morning but not for long, the whales are already moving north, or south, depending on the season, following a map written into them long before Bass and Flinders ever charted this coast at all.

By seven the fishing boats are out of Lakes Entrance, running low and steady toward the grounds their fathers fished, and their fathers before that. By nine there might be a four-wheel drive parked at Paradise Beach, a rod propped in the sand, a thermos going cold on the tailgate. By midday, if it's summer, there will be children — there are always children, on this beach, in every town along it — knee-deep and shrieking at the cold, while somebody's grandmother watches from a folding chair with a hat pulled low.

This is not a beach that announces itself. It has no headland to pose for photographs, no famous rock formation, no name recognition beyond the state that holds it. Ask most Australians what they know about Ninety Mile Beach and you will likely get a shrug. That has always been, in its own quiet way, part of its

protection. It is not the coast people fly in to see. It is the coast people grow old on — Loch Sport, Seaspray, Golden Beach, Paradise Beach, Woodside Beach, McLoughlins Beach, Honeysuckles — small towns strung like beads along the dune line, each one built by people who came for a weekend forty years ago and never quite left.

It is, by any honest measure, one of the last long stretches of Australian coast still permitted to simply be a coast — unbroken by high-rise, undeveloped, unhurried, unwatched by anyone in particular.

The kind of place that exists these days mostly in memory, or in the very small number of spots where memory hasn't yet been asked to make room for something else.

For a long time, that was the whole story. A beach. A lake system old enough to be sacred and lucky enough to still look it. A handful of towns where the loudest sound most mornings, is the gulls, or the tide, or a boat engine somewhere out past the bar.

This book is about what happened when that stopped being the whole story.

But that comes later. First, before the meetings and the maps and the men in suits with turbine diagrams, there was only this: the long white beach, the quiet water behind it, and the people who had settled, without ever quite deciding to, into the business of loving a place enough to notice when someone else began looking at it too.

Part of the waters off Ninety Mile Beach is protected within the Ninety Mile Beach Marine National Park. This is, in other words, a rare kind of place: a landscape that has managed to remain both a genuine natural wonder and one of the nation's most loved and heavily used playgrounds, without those two things cancelling each other out.

That balance — wild enough to be precious, accessible enough to be loved by hundreds of thousands of people a year — is not an accident, and it is not indestructible.

It is the thing that the people who would eventually form “No Offshore Turbines Ninety Mile Beach” believed, above everything else, was worth protecting. To understand why they were prepared to give so much of their time to defending it, you have to understand the place itself first.

1.1 Something Is Coming

Nobody remembers the exact day. That is the strange thing about a change this size — it rarely announces itself with a date worth circling. It arrives sideways, in fragments, easy to miss the first few times, easier still to dismiss.

Somewhere along the beach, someone mentioned a boat working slow, methodical lines a long way out past where the fishing fleet usually ran, and thought little of it. Somewhere else, a paragraph appeared in a local paper, brief and dry, the kind of item that sits below the football results and above the classifieds, about a federal proposal for something called an "offshore renewable energy zone." Somewhere else again, a name — Star of the South — was mentioned at a barbecue, half a joke, nobody quite sure whether it referred to a boat, a mining venture, or nothing at all.

None of it yet had a shape. It was weather on a distant edge of the sky — the kind you notice without quite believing it will reach you, because it never has before. This coast had absorbed a great deal over the years without ever fundamentally changing: shipping channels, holiday crowds, the slow creep of shacks into houses. It was tempting, reasonable even, to assume this would be one more thing that stayed out past the horizon where it belonged.

But horizons, as this book will show, are not as far away as they look.

There is a particular kind of quiet that exists just before a community learns something that will occupy it for decades to come — a quiet made almost entirely of people going about ordinary business, unaware that ordinary business is about to be interrupted. Boats went out. Kids swam. Markets opened on schedule, stalls set up in the same order they always were, sausage sizzle at one end, honey and jam somewhere in the middle. Nothing about that Saturday, or the one before it, or the dozen before that, looked any different from the hundreds of Saturdays that had come before.

Except that somewhere among those stalls, on a morning like any other, a stranger was setting up a table with a different kind of pamphlet on it.

Nobody watching would have known to call that moment the beginning of anything. That is almost always how these stories start — not with an announcement, but with an absence of alarm, in a place that had never needed one before. The coast did not know yet that it was about to be asked to defend itself. It simply went on being what it had always been: beautiful, unhurried, and — for a little while longer — undisturbed.

Something was coming. It just hadn't introduced itself yet.

1.2 More Questions Than Answers

The experience was not unique to one community. At information sessions along the coast and around the country, people arrived looking for answers about projects unlike anything previously proposed off their shores. They wanted to know how the turbines would be built, what the environmental impacts might be, how fishing and other existing uses of the sea would be affected, and what would happen decades later when the infrastructure reached the end of its working life.

Too often, they went home with more questions than answers.

That concern eventually reached the Senate. Giving evidence in February 2026, Responsible Future Illawarra president Alex O’Brien described early consultation panels that were unable to answer many of the questions being put forward by the community. Amanda De Lore recalled attending the first information evening at Bulli and asking what she regarded as basic questions about construction, decommissioning and environmental assessment, only to find that nobody could answer them.

What followed was a remarkable acknowledgement from the committee chair, Senator Peter Whish-Wilson. He accepted that there had been an information vacuum and that “the process was a bad one,” adding that he had warned the department during an earlier private briefing that this would happen.

In many coastal communities, that information vacuum became part of the story. When official information failed to answer the question people were asking, residents began searching for the answers themselves. They found one another online, compared information, attended more meetings and started asking more questions.

In many places, that was where organised community opposition began.

1.3 The Winds of Change

Every fight has a paper trail, and this one begins, as so many do, a long way from the beach it would eventually reach. In June 2022, a piece of federal legislation called the Offshore Electricity Infrastructure Act came into force — the legal machinery that would, for the first time, allow the Commonwealth to declare stretches of Australian sea suitable for wind turbines. It was technical, unglamorous, and almost entirely unnoticed outside Canberra. Within months, it had a coastline attached to it.

Gippsland was named first. Not by accident — the numbers made a strong case for it. The wind off this stretch of Bass Strait is among the most consistent in the country, the kind that keeps blowing long after a land-based turbine would have stalled. The grid infrastructure, built decades earlier for the Latrobe Valley's coal-fired and natural gas power stations, was still sitting there, ageing but usable, offering a shortcut that would cost far less than building transmission from scratch. And the workforce — engineers, tradespeople, fabricators who had spent careers in the energy industry — was already living in the region, looking for the next thing to build. On a spreadsheet in Canberra, Gippsland looked less like a discovery and more like a solution that had been waiting for a problem.

Consultation opened in August 2022 and closed on 7 October. The statutory process was real and open to public submissions, but for many people along Ninety Mile Beach the proposal was still remote and unfamiliar. By the time the significance of the declaration was widely understood locally, the first consultation window had already closed.

By December 2022, the decision had been made. The federal Energy Minister stood at Seaspray beach alongside the Victorian energy minister, the local council and community members, and declared the Bass Strait off Gippsland Australia's first offshore renewable energy zone. On the same day, the Australian Government announced Major Project Status for Star of the South — one of the earliest and largest proposals for the area. Earlier versions of the project had contemplated turbines closer to shore, but the declared area was ultimately moved to a minimum of ten kilometres offshore; Star of the South's current feasibility licence area is likewise at least ten kilometres from the Gippsland coast, between Port Albert and Woodside Beach.

For the people who lived along that beach, the gap between "declared" and "understood" was enormous. A declaration is a line drawn on a map in an office hundreds of kilometres away. It does not, by itself, explain what several hundred turbines look like from a beach house veranda, or what months of undersea cabling work does to a fishing ground, or what happens to a migrating whale's ancient route when it is threaded with new obstacles it has never had to account for before. That translation — from federal paperwork to local reality — would fall, in the end, not to any government department, but to the people who actually lived there.

The scale of commercial interest soon became clear. When applications closed, the Australian Government had received **37 applications for feasibility licences** within the Gippsland offshore renewable energy zone. From those applications, **12 feasibility licences were ultimately granted**.

The declared area itself covered roughly **15,000 square kilometres — about 1.5 million hectares — of Commonwealth waters**. The individual feasibility licences occupied portions of that much larger zone.

Developers began surveying. Consultants began modelling. Companies with names most locals had never heard of, began describing a stretch of coast they had known their whole lives, in language that felt, to more than a few, like it belonged somewhere else entirely.

Somewhere between the spreadsheet and the sand, something was lost — not intention, but scale. Fifteen thousand square kilometres is an enormous area to draw on a map. To government it could be expressed as coordinates, licence areas and megawatts. To the people who woke beside it, fished it, walked it and watched whales move through it every winter, it was something much simpler.

It was their place.

It is a resource, a number, a solution. To the people who wake up beside it, fish it, walk it, and watch whales move through it every winter, it has never been anything else but a place — one they had spent their whole lives assuming nobody in Canberra was thinking about at all.

That assumption did not survive the summer of 2022. And in towns most of the country had never heard of, something began, quietly, to shift. *SOURCE: Australian Government — DCCEEW, Gippsland offshore renewable energy area and feasibility licensing.*

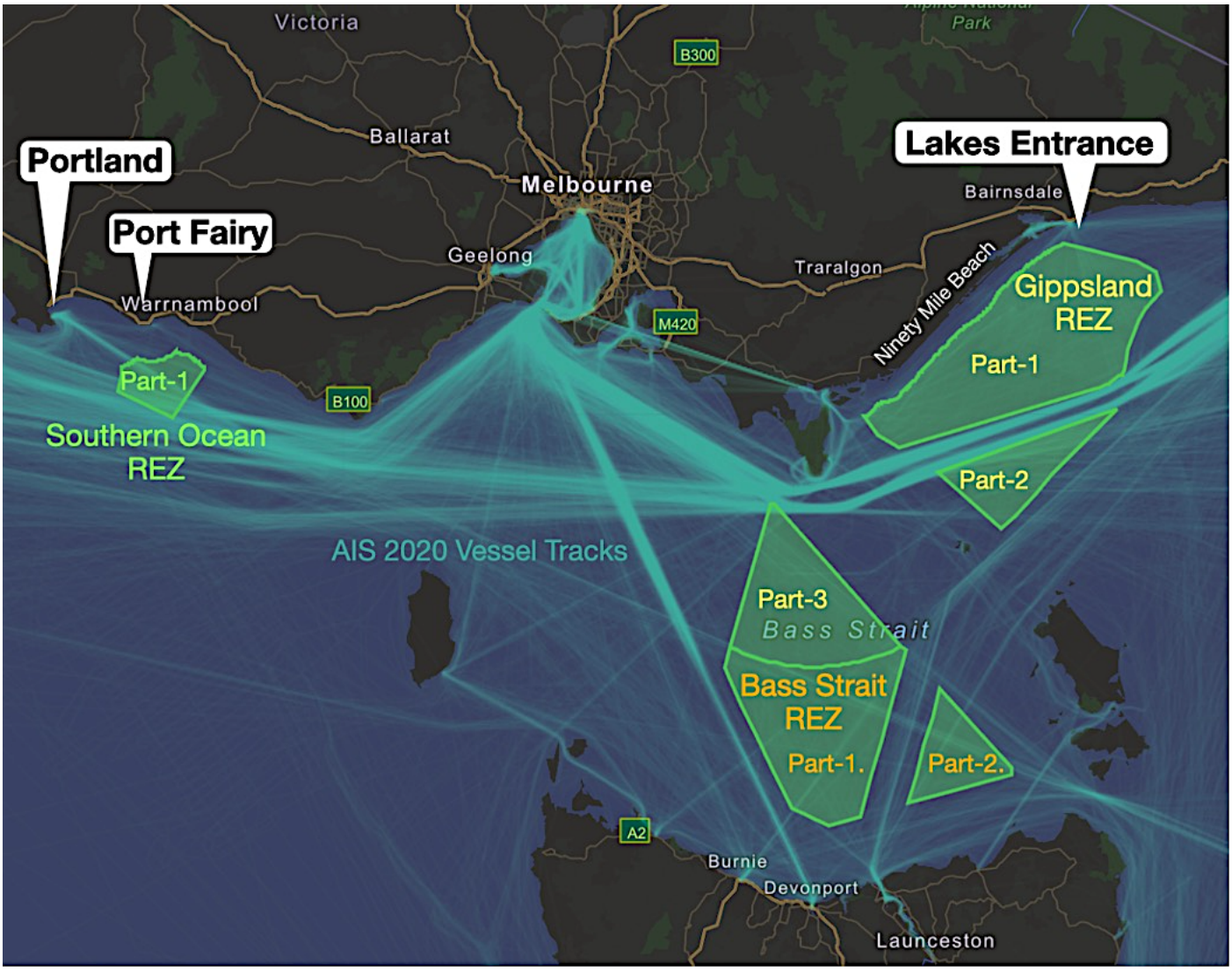


Figure 2: *the green lines are AIS tracking of shipping movements in Bass Strait over an extended time frame. The declared areas of Bass Strait and Gippsland and Southern Ocean are clearly defined.*

1.4 Turbines on the Horizon

For a while, it was still just a word. “Offshore”. People said it the way you say something that belongs to someone else's problem — offshore accounts, offshore drilling, offshore something-or-other that happens out past where you can see it. That was, in fact, more or less the pitch: turbines far enough out to sea that nobody would really notice them. A horizon is a long way away. Surely, it could absorb almost anything.

Then the numbers arrived, and the word stopped being abstract.

The proposals on the table for the waters off Gippsland described turbines up to 350 metres tall, measured from the waterline to the tip of the highest blade — more than double the height of the Sydney Harbour Bridge (134 metres). Some were slated for locations as close as ten kilometres from shore.

A turbine at ten kilometres, at 350 metres tall, does not vanish over that horizon. It sits on it. It becomes part of the view for as long as anyone cares to look — which, on a beach people had spent their lives coming back to, was going to be a very long time indeed.

Word travelled the way it does in small coastal towns — over a fence, at the boat ramp, in the queue at the bakery, in a Facebook comment somebody's cousin had shared. A survey vessel, spotted working slow lines back and forth offshore, farther out than the fishing boats usually ran. A meteorological mast, or talk of one, rising somewhere out past the break, measuring wind nobody local had asked to have measured. An environmental impact statement, hundreds of pages long, appearing online in language built for consultants rather than for the people whose front yard it concerned.

For the first time, the abstraction had edges. It had a height. It had a distance from shore, and a distance from that fisherman's favourite reef, and a distance from that stretch of water where the whales came close enough most winters to see the spray from their blowholes without binoculars. It had, in short, a shape — and the shape did not match the version of "offshore" most people had been quietly reassuring themselves with since the word first appeared.

By the time the maps were being pinned to pub noticeboards and passed hand to hand at kitchen tables, the reaction along Ninety Mile Beach was no longer confusion. It had hardened into something more specific — not blanket opposition to renewable energy, most people were careful to say, but a very particular, very local alarm at what was now, unmistakably, coming into view.

Somebody was going to have to do something about it. Or, as Emma and Roger were already asking:

What are we going to do about it?



Figure 3: *the scene may not be real, but the map is taken directly from the government's website. Beige areas on the map are the nine remaining and active feasibility licence holders' projects.*

1.5 Defenders of the Coast

Every campaign has an origin story people tell afterward, and they are almost always wrong in the same way: they begin with the protest. The signs, petitions and market stalls are where a campaign becomes visible. They are rarely where it actually begins.

For Emma Jade, it began with a piece of land. Her family had acquired a rural block along Ninety Mile Beach and had begun imagining an ordinary future there: a home, children growing up near the coast, and a place that would become part of the family story.

Then, at a local market, Emma stopped at a stall connected with a proposed offshore wind development. Until then, she had not understood the scale of what was being contemplated off the coast. The questions followed her home: What exactly was being proposed? Where would it go? What would happen offshore and onshore? What might it mean for the place her family had chosen?

Her first reaction was not political. It was personal. She began looking for answers and found other local people asking many of the same questions. Concern became conversation, and conversation gradually became involvement.

The plans for the family home were put on hold. It is a small fact, but an important one. Emma had not gone looking for a cause. The cause had arrived at the place her family had chosen to build its future.

She would later explain her motivation in equally personal terms. One day her children might ask what she had done when she knew the coast around them could change. She wanted to be able to say, honestly, that she had tried.

That is where the idea of a defender begins in this book. Not with a placard, a political label or a formal organisation, but with someone looking at a place they value and deciding not to stand aside without asking questions.

How those individual questions became a community is the story that follows.



Figure 4: *Emma's market day, No Offshore Turbines Ninety Mile Beach information stand.*

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?

There was no single moment when No Offshore Turbines Ninety Mile Beach suddenly became an organisation. There was no inaugural meeting at which everybody sat around a table, elected office bearers and decided what happened next.

People arrived at different times, from different places and for different reasons.

Some had been asking questions from the beginning. Others had heard about the offshore wind proposals months earlier but did not become involved until something brought the issue closer to home. One person started a conversation. Another created a Facebook group. Someone became an administrator. Someone attended an information session. Someone bought a T-shirt. Someone stood behind a market stall.

Each step was small on its own.

Together, they became something much larger.

That is why trying to identify a precise number of "founders" probably misses the point. A grassroots community does not necessarily have a birthday. Sometimes it simply grows, person by person, conversation by conversation, until one day something that did not exist before has a name, a logo and people prepared to stand behind it.

The stories that follow are therefore not an attempt to decide who deserves to be called a founder. They are the recollections of some of the people who were there as concern gradually became involvement — and involvement became a community.

Each arrived by a different path.

Each, in their own way, was answering the same question:

What are we going to do about it?

EMMA — "WE HAD TO DO SOMETHING"

For Emma, the beginning was not the Facebook group itself. The conversation had already started.

She and Roger had been speaking up on a local community Facebook page about what was being proposed offshore. They were asking questions, sharing concerns and increasingly arriving at the same conclusion: somebody had to do something.

Roger made the first practical move.

He looked beyond Ninety Mile Beach and found that another coastal community was already organising. Hundreds of kilometres to the north, at Port Stephens in New South Wales, Ben Abbott and others had established a Facebook group in response to the proposed Hunter offshore wind zone.

Roger contacted Ben.

Using the Port Stephens group as a guide, Roger created a Facebook group for Ninety Mile Beach. His partner, Linda, became an administrator. Emma was among the first people to join.

"I was speaking up with Roger on our community page that we had to do something," Emma later recalled.

She was asked to become an administrator almost immediately.

At that point there was little indication of where any of this would lead. A Facebook group is easy to create. Building a functioning community organisation around one is something else entirely.

Emma pushed herself to take it further.

Several months later Brad Anderson became involved, and over time Emma and Brad increasingly took responsibility for running the group, while Roger and Linda remained involved behind the scenes and continued helping at community markets.

Emma remembers another stage in that development. The group had established itself, but there came a period when its members were unsure how to take the next step. That was when Cliff Hall contacted them and offered to help with information material, eventually producing brochures, posters and the group's website.

Emma describes that contribution generously, saying Cliff helped the group gain greater exposure at a time when they were “still finding our feet.”

But by then something much more important had already happened.

A handful of people who had begun by asking questions on Facebook had found one another.

They were becoming a community.

BRAD — WHEN IT ARRIVED ON HIS DOORSTEP

Brad Anderson's path was different.

He had first heard about the proposed offshore wind zone in December 2022, but hearing about something and becoming involved in it are not necessarily the same thing.

For Brad, the turning point came when federal Energy Minister Chris Bowen came to Seaspray. Bowen held a press conference outside the local surf lifesaving club where he announced Australia's first declared offshore wind zone.

Suddenly the issue was no longer somewhere out at sea or buried in a government document.

It was in his town.

Brad remembers being concerned that something of such significance could be announced locally while many people in the surrounding community, knew little about what was being proposed. That experience pushed him from awareness into involvement.

He began attending proponents' information sessions and voicing his opposition to the proposed projects.

And at one of those sessions, Brad noticed two people wearing “No Offshore Turbines Ninety Mile Beach” T-shirts.

They were Roger and Linda.

Brad bought a T-shirt.

It seems an almost insignificant detail in the history of a community campaign, but grassroots movements are built from moments exactly like this. There was no recruitment office and no membership interview. Brad saw two people who shared his concerns, walked over and introduced himself.

A little later he met Emma and her family. They have been working together ever since.

Brad is quick to credit Emma with what he describes as “the lion's share of the hard work,” but his own circumstances allowed him to fill another important role. As the group's only full-time local resident, he could attend information sessions and meetings when others could not. Gradually, he became more involved.

What had begun with individual questions was acquiring something every grassroots organisation eventually needs: people who could step forward when somebody else couldn't.

Brad describes the years since as a “massive battle.” The group has challenged politicians, councils and advocacy groups and debated members of its own community who support offshore wind development.

But something else happened along the way.

They built a community group.

And, as Brad puts it, their voices began to be heard.

“We know there is still a massive fight ahead of us and that the odds are stacked against us,” he says.

“But we will continue defending our coastline.”

ROGER — LOOKING FOR SOMEWHERE TO START

Every network has a first connection.

For Ninety Mile Beach, one of those early connections began with Roger sitting in front of Facebook and doing something remarkably ordinary.

He went looking for somebody who might know what to do.

Roger had concerns about what was happening off his own coast, but no handbook for creating a community organisation. What he found was another group facing a remarkably similar situation at Port Stephens.

So, he contacted Ben Abbott. It was a small decision, but an important one. Roger wasn't asking somebody to run the campaign for him. He was asking how another community had begun.

Ben was willing to share what Port Stephens had learned. That included something immediately recognisable: the whale-tail logo being used by the Port Stephens group. Ben was happy for Ninety Mile Beach to use it too, with the hope that it might eventually become a recognisable symbol linking communities concerned about offshore wind development around Australia.

For the fledgling Ninety Mile Beach group, the logo did more than decorate a Facebook page.

It gave them an identity. And because that identity had been shared rather than invented in isolation, it also connected them with something larger than themselves.

Long before anybody talked about a national network of coastal groups, the basic principle was already operating.

One community had learned something.

Another community asked for help.

And the knowledge was passed along.

Nobody arrived carrying the complete answer.

Roger found Ben. Linda helped Roger. Emma joined them. Brad found Roger and Linda at an information session. Others followed. Knowledge travelled from Port Stephens to Ninety Mile Beach, and eventually from Ninety Mile Beach to communities elsewhere.

Looking backwards, it is tempting to make that sequence appear organised. It wasn't. It was people finding people. And somewhere near the beginning of it all was a question posted into the ordinary noise of a community Facebook page:

“What are we going to do about it?”

The answer did not arrive in a single moment. The people did.

THE MAN BEHIND THE WEBSITE

By now, the pattern was becoming familiar.

Someone had a problem. Someone else had something that might help.

The first connection had stretched from Ninety Mile Beach all the way to Port Stephens, when Roger contacted Ben looking for advice on how to establish a community group. The next connection came from somewhere else again.

Cliff Hall did not live on Ninety Mile Beach. He wasn't there during those first conversations between Roger and Emma, and he wasn't one of the local people who established the Facebook group.

He simply found it.

By the time No Offshore Turbines Ninety Mile Beach appeared, Cliff had already been producing and sharing information with coastal community groups. When he joined this new Facebook group, one small detail caught his attention.

Emma had created an email address.

It gave him a way to make contact.

Cliff sent Emma a message, introduced himself and offered to help. He showed her some of the material he had previously produced for another coastal community group, Keep Kalbarri Beautiful Supporter Group, on the other side of Australia.

Emma accepted the offer.

It started modestly.

The Ninety Mile Beach group was preparing for its Christmas campaign, so Cliff produced some brochures and posters they could use. They were practical things — material for people standing at stalls and talking to their neighbours.

Then he did something Emma wasn't expecting. He built them a website: https://nooffshoreturbines90milebeach.online

There had been no committee meeting to approve it and no carefully prepared digital strategy. Cliff simply saw something the group needed and surprised them with it.

For a small community organisation still finding its feet, a website changed how it presented itself to the outside world. A Facebook group could bring people together; a website gave them somewhere to organise their information, explain their concerns and direct people who wanted to know more.

Emma remembers one moment in particular. At an information session, a representative from one of the offshore wind developers commented on how good the community group's website looked.

Not long afterwards, Emma noticed that the developer's own website had been updated. The group had a laugh about it.

It was a small moment, but perhaps an important one. The people behind No Offshore Turbines Ninety Mile Beach were volunteers. They didn't have a corporate communications department or a professional campaign office. Yet they were beginning to produce material that could stand alongside that of organisations vastly larger and better resourced than themselves.

Cliff continues maintaining the website and producing material for the group without charge. Emma later said that much of what people saw when they encountered No Offshore Turbines Ninety Mile Beach online had his “fingerprints on it”.

But his role was different from those who lived along the coast.

Roger, Linda, Emma and Brad were building something rooted in their own community. They attended the meetings. They stood behind the market stalls. They spoke with neighbours and dealt with the consequences of a debate taking place where they lived. Cliff could not give them their voice.

They already had one.

What he could do was help them carry it further.

And in that respect, his arrival was another small example of what was beginning to happen between coastal communities around Australia. Information travelled. Experience travelled. Logos, maps, brochures and ideas travelled. People who might never otherwise have met began helping one another because somebody, somewhere, had reached out.

Roger had reached out to Ben because he didn't know where to start.

Cliff reached out to Emma because he thought he could help.

Different people. Different coastlines. The same simple instinct.

Nobody had designed a network.

“They were building one anyway.”



Figure 5: OUR COAST — OUR COMMUNITY — OUR FUTURE
Emma's family on the campaign trail, wearing the whale-tail logo shared by Ben Abbott's Port Stephens group and handing out brochures produced by Cliff Hall. In one photograph, two strands of a growing grassroots network had come together for the communities on Ninety Mile Beach.

1.6 The Fishing Fleet

Long before anyone talked about renewable energy zones, Lakes Entrance had already built its identity around a different relationship with these waters — one measured not in megawatts but in tonnes landed, boats moored, and generations of the same family names working the same fishing grounds.

It is, by any measure that matters, the largest commercial fishing port in Victoria, and among the largest in the country. Something over thirty Commonwealth-licensed boats call it home, working the Southern and Eastern Scalefish and Shark Fishery, the Bass Strait Central Zone Scallop Fishery and the Southern Squid Jig Fishery out past the bar. Between them they land several thousand tonnes of seafood a year — flathead, pink ling, whiting, scallops, blue grenadier, shark — a good share of it destined for fish and chip shops the length and breadth of Australia, most of whom have never once thought about where the fish actually came from.

The port itself has been valued at well over sixty million dollars a year to the economy it sits inside, but numbers like that, however true, tend to flatten what the fleet actually means to the town wrapped around it. This is not an industry bolted onto Lakes Entrance from outside. It is very close to the reason the town exists at all — a working relationship with these waters going back more than a century, boatbuilders and skippers and co-operative sheds forming around the entrance almost as soon as it was cut in the 1880s, to let the sea properly meet the lakes.

Not all of that history survived intact. In 2019, the Victorian Parliament passed legislation to phase out commercial net fishing in the Gippsland Lakes. By 1 April 2020, all ten remaining commercial net fishers had accepted compensation packages and exited the fishery.

It marked the end of commercial netting in the Gippsland Lakes, although other licensed activities — including bait, eel and mussel fishing — were not removed by the reform. *SOURCE: Victorian Fisheries Authority — Gippsland Lakes commercial netting phase-out; Parliament of Victoria, Marine and Fisheries Legislation Amendment Act 2019.*

For a district with a long commercial fishing history, it was a significant change. The ocean-going fleet that still works out of Lakes Entrance today, the boats that head out past the bar rather than into the lakes, carries much of that working-water tradition forward.

It is worth sitting with that fact for a moment, because it complicates any simple story about fishers resisting change. This is a community that has already absorbed one entire chapter of loss — watched an industry vanish from the water it was born on, for reasons connected to sustainability and government policy rather than any offshore development at all. The people who make their living from these waters now are not newcomers unsettled by the mere idea of change. They are, if anything, unusually well acquainted with what change actually costs, and unusually clear-eyed about what is worth arguing to keep.

Which is precisely why the prospect of an offshore wind zone landed differently here than it might have somewhere else. A fishing ground is not simply a stretch of water on a chart. It is a set of memorised depths, structures, seasons and habits, refined over decades and, in more than a few cases, generations — knowledge that does not transfer easily to a new patch of ocean, even one only a little further along the coast. Turbine foundations, cabling corridors, and exclusion zones during construction and maintenance do not need to cover the whole fishery to matter enormously to the people working it; they need only sit across the grounds

that particular boats have depended on for years, at exactly the depths and structures those boats were built to fish.

There is also a subtler cost, harder to put a dollar figure on. Commercial fishers spend more hours on this water, in more kinds of weather, watching more closely, than almost anyone else who has an opinion about it. They are, whether the label is ever offered to them or not, among the coast's most consistent witnesses — to where the whales travel, where the bird colonies gather, where the reef systems sit that no map quite does justice to. Their objection, where it exists, rarely reads as anti-renewable in principle. It reads, far more often, as a plea for exactly the kind of marine spatial planning that had already been called for, and had already gone largely unanswered, before a single turbine foundation was ever proposed.

The fishing fleet did not create the resistance to offshore wind on this coast. But it gave that resistance something it might otherwise have lacked: a working, weathered, entirely unsentimental case that this water was already occupied, already valuable, and already, in its own way, being carefully looked after — long before anyone in Canberra had reason to look at it twice.



Figure 6: *Lakes Entrance is home to Victoria's largest commercial fishing fleet.*

1.7 You Don't Know What You've Got till It's Gone

There is a line in an old song, worn smooth from being said so often it has almost stopped meaning anything — that we rarely understand the value of a thing until it is gone. It is the kind of sentence that gets nodded at in passing and then forgotten, right up until the day it turns out to be devastatingly, literally true.

This chapter is an attempt to make sure that doesn't happen here. Everything the reader has heard defended so far — by Emma, by the people who built the group and by the fishers who work these waters — has, up to now, existed mostly as an idea. A coastline. A cause. It is time to actually go there.

So come with me. Leave the maps, meetings and arguments behind for a while. We're going for a drive.

Where the Land Runs Out

Start, as the campaign itself effectively did, somewhere near the western edge of the affected coast, where farmland gives way to melaleuca scrub and the scrub gives way, without much warning, to sand.

McLoughlins Beach sits here, small and unhurried, a fishing and boating hamlet tucked in beside the Merriman Creek estuary, the kind of place with one general store and an enormous quantity of quiet. Push east and the towns arrive in a loose, familiar string — Woodside Beach, Paradise Beach, Golden Beach, Seaspray, Honeysuckles — each one slightly different in character, all of them sharing the same essential ingredients: a caravan park or two, a surf club, a scatter of houses that range from fibro shacks three generations old, to newer builds like the one Emma's family had been planning, and, behind all of it, always, the beach itself, running on with a patience that makes the towns look almost temporary by comparison.



Figure 7: *Seaspray is a town in the Gippsland region of Victoria, Australia, on Ninety Mile Beach, about ten kilometres off the South Gippsland Highway in the Shire of Wellington, 242 kilometres east of Melbourne.*

It was at Seaspray, of all places, that the federal government chose to stand on the sand and announce Gippsland's declaration as Australia's first offshore renewable energy zone — an irony that repays sitting with for a moment. A policy about the ocean, announced from the one place where the ocean cannot be talked about in the abstract, because it is right there, doing what it always does, three steps from the podium.

Further along, past Golden Beach, the character of the coast shifts again. This is where Ninety Mile Beach begins to run properly parallel to the Gippsland Lakes rather than simply beside farmland — a long, narrow spine of dune holding back one of the strangest and most valuable pieces of geography in the country, a body of water so large it is, by area, the biggest navigable inland waterway in Australia. On a map, the lakes look almost accidental, as though the sea had been persuaded to leave a very large, very shallow puddle behind and then changed its mind about taking it back.

A Lake System Older Than Memory

The Gippsland Lakes — Wellington, Victoria and King, along with the smaller lakes, channels and wetlands — form an interconnected system extending across hundreds of square kilometres. The surface area of the lakes themselves is approximately **364 square kilometres**, fed by several river systems including the Latrobe, Avon, Mitchell, Nicholson and Tambo. Together they form the **largest navigable inland waterway in Australia.** Which are separated from Bass Strait by nothing more than that long barrier of dune the whole coast is named for, and for most of their history there was no permanent way through — just a shifting, unreliable natural opening further along, near Lake Bunga, that filled and emptied and moved according to whatever the last big storm had decided. For most of their history there was no permanent opening to the sea.

That changed in **1889**, when a permanent man-made entrance was established at Lakes Entrance, providing navigable access between the Gippsland Lakes and Bass Strait. and Lakes Entrance — the town, not just the geographic feature — properly began.

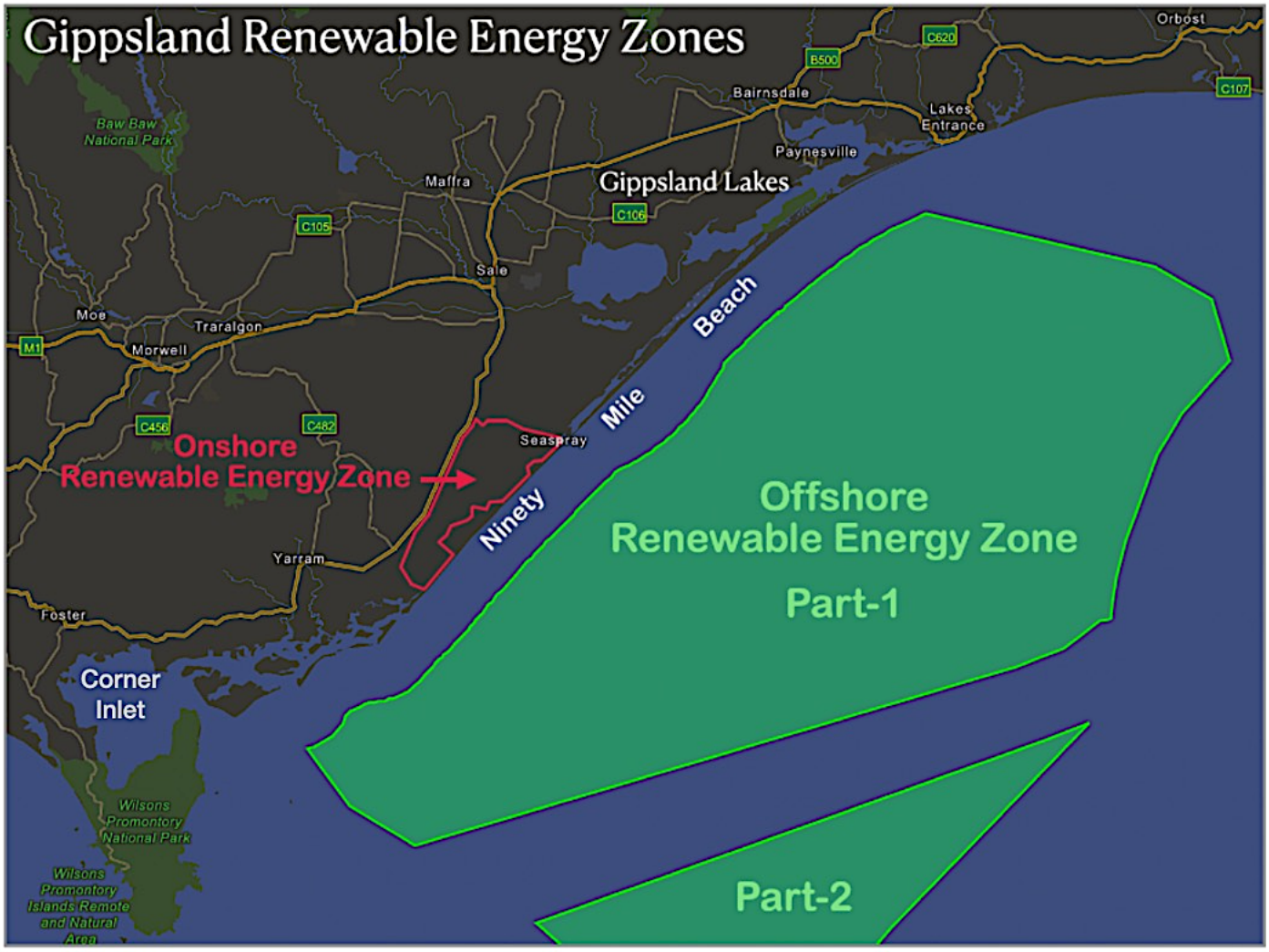


Figure 8: *note the close proximity of the Wilsons Promontory, Gippsland Lakes, Corner Inlet and Ninety Mile Beach to the renewable energy zones.*

The Gippsland Lakes and Corner Inlet are not simply scenic backdrops. Both contain wetlands recognised internationally under the Ramsar Convention. Together they support extensive wetland habitats, waterbirds, migratory species, fish and other wildlife of conservation significance. *SOURCE: Australian Government — DCCEEW, Gippsland Lakes and Corner Inlet Ramsar sites.*

The detailed ecological evidence belongs in Part Two of this book. Here the point is simpler: the long, quiet coastline beside the proposed offshore zone is not empty space. It sits beside an environmental system already carrying obligations, histories and values of its own.

The Whales Offshore

Turn back toward the ocean side of the dune and the scale changes again. Every year whales move along this coast between southern feeding grounds and warmer waters to the north. At times they pass close enough to shore to turn an ordinary day on the dunes into something people remember for years.

It is worth being honest about what is actually known and not known here. The whales' precise relationship to any specific proposed turbine field — how they'd respond to construction noise, to a permanent field of

moving structures, to altered underwater acoustics along a route they have followed for longer than the concept of Australia has existed — is exactly the kind of question an environmental impact statement is meant to answer in detail, and exactly the kind of question this book is not qualified to answer instead of one.

What can be said plainly is this: whatever the answer turns out to be, it will be tested for the first time on a population of animals with no capacity to lodge a submission, attend an open house session, or explain to anyone what they were afraid of losing.

The People In Between

Threaded through all of this — the birds, the dunes, the lakes, the whales — are the people, and it would be its own kind of dishonesty to write this chapter as though the coast were simply nature waiting patiently to be defended by humans standing slightly to one side of it. This has been Gunaikurnai country for longer than any of the numbers in this book can meaningfully express, the Gippsland Lakes themselves sitting within Gunaikurnai Land and Waters, cared for and known in ways that predate every map, survey and consultation report referenced anywhere in these pages.

Loch Sport, Paradise Beach, Golden Beach, Seaspray, Woodside Beach, McLoughlins Beach, Lakes Entrance — these are, by comparison, recent arrivals, most of them barely a century or two old, built by fishing families, farmers, and successive waves of people who came for a weekend and quietly rearranged their whole lives around staying.

Drive through any of these towns on an ordinary weekday and the coast does not look like a battleground. It looks like a caravan park with three vans in it in the off-season. It looks like a general store with a faded surfboard nailed above the door. It looks like a man walking a dog along the tideline at the hour when the light goes gold and flat and every footprint behind him fills in with water before he's twenty metres further on. None of it photographs as urgent. That, this book would argue, has always been part of the problem — and part of the reason a fight like this one is so easy for people far away to underestimate.

Regret, Before the Fact

Most conservation stories are written after the loss — a species gone, a wetland drained, the writer left to describe, in careful, mournful detail, exactly what used to be here. This book is attempting something slightly harder and considerably less certain: to describe what is still here, in enough detail and with enough care that the reader understands precisely what is being weighed, before any decision has been made about it either way.

That is not a neutral literary choice. It is, in its own quiet way, an act of stewardship — the belief, shared by everyone this book has profiled so far, that a coastline like this deserves to be properly seen and properly understood while it still exists in its current form, rather than eulogised afterward in the particular, useless clarity that only ever seems to arrive once something is already gone.

Because that is, in the end, the real weight carried by this chapter's title. Regret is what happens when you finally understand a thing's value at the exact moment it stops being available to you. Remorse is what happens afterward, when you start totalling up everything you didn't do while there was still time to do it. Legacy is what the next generation inherits regardless of which of those two feelings the current one ends up experiencing. And stewardship — the word Emma reached for, the word this whole community keeps

circling back to, the word that appears, in slightly different clothes, in nearly every submission this book has quoted — is simply the decision to act now, deliberately, so that neither regret nor remorse ever becomes necessary at all.

Ninety Mile Beach does not know, this afternoon, what will eventually happen to it. Neither, honestly, does this book. But it can be described honestly, at length, and without hurry, exactly as it stands right now — the dunes, the lakes, the godwits and the growling frogs, the whales moving north or south depending on the month, the fishing boats coming home past the entrance that took twenty years and one very bad storm to finally open. Whatever is decided next, at least it will have been decided about something the reader was actually shown, rather than something merely described to them in a policy document's careful, bloodless language.

You don't know what you've got till it's gone. This chapter is a small, deliberate act of refusing to find that out the hard way. **When it's gone, it's gone.**

1.8 What Are They Defending?

Ask people along the coast what they are defending and the answers will differ.

One person might point to the ocean. Another to the whales passing offshore. A fisherman might talk about fishing grounds that have supported families for generations. Someone else might speak about tourism, a favourite beach, the view from a headland, or simply the character of the community they call home.

But beneath many of those answers lies something harder to measure.

They are defending a place.

A place is more than a location on a map.

A coastline can be described by coordinates, boundaries, water depths and distances from shore. Governments can draw lines around it. Developers can divide it into licence areas. Scientists can map its habitats and migration routes.

But none of those things fully describes what that coastline means to the people who live beside it.

A **sense of place** grows from the emotional, social and psychological bonds people form with a particular location. It is what transforms physical space into somewhere meaningful — somewhere connected with identity, memory, family, livelihood and belonging.

For some, that connection stretches back generations. For others, it began when they moved to the coast, raised a family there, started a business, joined a fishing club, learned to surf, walked the same beach each morning or simply found somewhere they wanted to call home.

These attachments do not appear on a project map.

They cannot easily be entered into a spreadsheet or reduced to a line in an environmental assessment.

Yet they are real.

That helps explain why proposals that may appear distant or abstract when viewed from Canberra can feel deeply personal when viewed from a kitchen table in a coastal town.

People were not necessarily defending the coast because they believed it should never change. Coastal communities had always changed.

They were asking something more fundamental:

What will this change mean for our place?

For the people in this story, that question opened into many others. What would happen to the marine environment? To whales and seabirds? To fishing grounds and coastal businesses? To views and tourism? To cultural connections with Sea Country? And who should have a meaningful say when decisions could permanently alter the character of a place?

That is why the story that follows cannot be understood simply as opposition to offshore wind.

The Defenders were protecting different things, for different reasons, and they did not always agree.

But they shared something important.

They cared about the places they called home.

END OF PART ONE of SIX