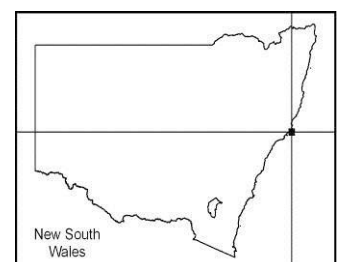


# Plan of Management



## Seal Rocks Nature Reserve





# Seal Rocks Nature Reserve Plan of Management

**NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service**

**March 2014**

**This plan of management was adopted by the Minister for the Environment on 18 March 2014.**

### **Acknowledgments**

This plan of management was prepared by staff of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), part of the Office of Environment and Heritage, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

NPWS acknowledges that this nature reserve is in the traditional country of the Worimi Aboriginal people.

Front cover: **Australian fur seal.** Photo: Wayne Reynolds

**For additional information or any inquiries about this reserve or this plan of management, contact the NPWS Great Lakes Area Office, 'The Ruins' campground, Booti Booti National Park, The Lakes Way, Pacific Palms NSW 2428, or by telephone on (02) 6591 0300**

Published by:  
Office of Environment and Heritage  
59–61 Goulburn Street  
PO Box A290  
Sydney South 1232

© Copyright State of NSW and the Office of Environment and Heritage: With the exception of photographs, use permitted with appropriate acknowledgment. For permission to use photos contact the OEH Image Library <http://images.environment.nsw.gov.au>

ISBN 978 1 74359 647 0

OEH 2014/0402

**Printed on recycled paper**

## Foreword

Seal Rocks Nature Reserve was established in 1972 and consists of two exposed low-lying rocks, less than 1 hectare in size. It is situated 3 kilometres offshore from Myall Lakes National Park in the Lower North Coast of New South Wales.

Seal Rocks once supported the most northern rookery of the Australian fur seal in NSW where seals were seen regularly until the 1970s. There are still occasional sightings of Australian fur seals, and suitable habitat also exists for the New Zealand fur seal. Seal Rocks may be used occasionally by little penguins and sea birds. The waters surrounding the reserve are within the Sanctuary Zone of the Port Stephens – Great Lakes Marine Park and the waters around Seal Rocks form a key aggregation site for the endangered grey nurse shark.

The nature reserve is in the traditional country of the Worimi people.

The NSW *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* requires that a plan of management be prepared for each nature reserve. A draft plan of management for Seal Rocks Nature Reserve was placed on public exhibition from 11 May to 20 August 2012. The submissions received were carefully considered before adopting this plan.

The plan contains a number of actions to achieve the *NSW 2021* goal to protect our natural environment, including providing for protection of Australian and New Zealand fur seals through monitoring programs, information provision and cooperative management and to foster partnerships with Aboriginal people through consultation.

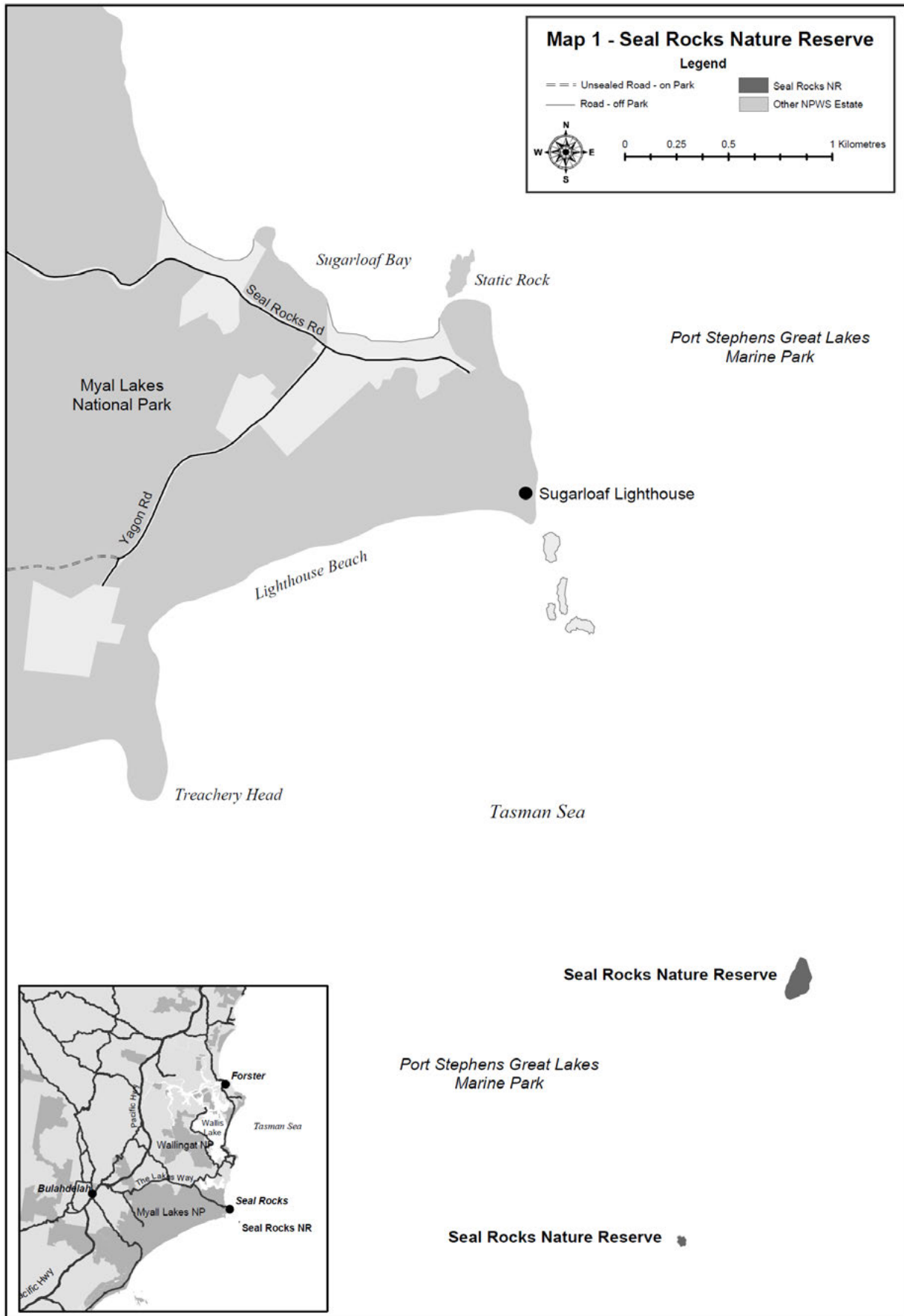
This plan of management establishes the scheme of operations for Seal Rocks Nature Reserve. In accordance with section 73B of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*, this plan of management is hereby adopted.



**Robyn Parker MP**

**Minister for the Environment**

# Map of Seal Rocks Nature Reserve



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Location, gazettal and regional setting

Features	Description
Location	Seal Rocks Nature Reserve is located 3 kilometres offshore from Treachery Head (part of Myall Lakes National Park) and 32 kilometres south of the entrance to Forster on the NSW lower north coast.
Area	Seal Rocks Nature Reserve consists of two exposed low lying rocks, less than one hectare in size.
Reservation date	Seal Rocks Nature Reserve was reserved on 28 April 1972 to provide habitat protection for Australian fur seals. It once supported the most northern rookery of the Australian fur seal in New South Wales.
<b>Regional context</b>	
Biogeographic region	<p>Seal Rocks Nature Reserve is located in the NSW North Coast Bioregion. It is surrounded by the Port Stephens – Great Lakes Marine Park, with the area around the reserve zoned as a Sanctuary Zone. Myall Lakes National Park is located along the coast adjacent to the reserve.</p> <p>A number of offshore island reserves are located to the south, including Little Broughton Island and Stormpetrel nature reserves, and Broughton Island which is part of Myall Lakes National Park.</p>
Other authorities	The reserve is located within the area of the Forster Local Aboriginal Land Council and the Great Lakes Council.

## 1.2 Statement of significance

Seal Rocks Nature Reserve is considered to be of significance for its biological values.

Seal Rocks once supported the most northern rookery of the Australian fur seal (*Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*) in New South Wales. During the 1960s approximately 20 seals inhabited the rocks all year round with seasonal population increases over summer. The seals used the rocks as a haul-out site and for occasional breeding until the 1970s. There are still occasional sightings of Australian fur seals at Seal Rocks Nature Reserve.

## **2. Management context**

### **2.1 Legislative and policy framework**

The management of nature reserves in New South Wales is in the context of a legislative and policy framework, primarily the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* (NPW Act) and Regulation, the *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* (TSC Act) and the policies of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

Other legislation, strategies and international agreements may also apply to management of the area. In particular, the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (EPA Act) may require assessment of environmental impact of works proposed in this plan. The Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) may apply in relation to actions that impact on matters of national environmental significance, such as migratory and threatened species listed under that Act.

A plan of management is a statutory document under the NPW Act. Once the Minister has adopted a plan, the plan must be carried out and no operations may be undertaken in relation to Seal Rocks Nature Reserve unless the operations are in accordance with the plan. Should management strategies or works be proposed in future that are not consistent with this plan, an amendment to the plan will be required.

### **2.2 Management purposes and principles**

Nature reserves are reserved under the NPW Act to protect and conserve areas containing outstanding, unique or representative ecosystems, species, communities or natural phenomena.

Under the Act (section 30J), nature reserves are managed to:

- conserve biodiversity, maintain ecosystem functions, and protect geological and geomorphological features and natural phenomena
- conserve places, objects, features and landscapes of cultural value
- promote public appreciation, enjoyment and understanding of the reserve's natural and cultural values
- provide for appropriate research and monitoring.

The primary purpose of nature reserves is to conserve nature. Nature reserves differ from national parks in that they do not have the provision of visitor use as a management purpose or principle.

### **2.3 Specific management directions**

In addition to the general principles for the management of Seal Rocks Nature Reserve (refer section 2.2), the management of the reserve will give priority to the protection, management and population monitoring of Australian and New Zealand fur seals.



### 3. Values

This plan aims to conserve both natural and cultural values of the reserve. The location, landforms and plant and animal communities of an area have determined how it has been used and valued by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. These values may be attached to the landscape as a whole or to individual components, for example to plant and animal species used by Aboriginal people.

#### 3.1 Natural heritage

Seal Rocks Nature Reserve consists of two exposed low lying rocks. The northern-most rock is approximately 0.59 hectares in area and rises about 9 metres above sea level. The southern rock is approximately 0.33 hectares in area and rises only 3 metres above sea level and is frequently covered by water.

Both islands (rocks) are unvegetated, subject to tidal influence and wave action, and inaccessible most of the time.

Seal Rocks Nature Reserve once supported the most northern rookery of the Australian fur seal in New South Wales. During the 1960s, approximately 20 seals inhabited the rocks all year round with seasonal population increases over summer. The seals used the rocks as a haul-out site and for occasional breeding until the 1970s.

Australian fur seals have returned to offshore islands in Port Stephens area with anecdotal records of seals hauling out at John Gould Nature Reserve (Cabbage Tree Island) annually since 2009. There are still occasional sightings of Australian fur seals at Seal Rocks Nature Reserve and, given that the Australian fur seal population is recovering at a rate of 6 per cent per year (Shaughnessy et al. 1995a), there is a good chance that the numbers of Australian fur seals will increase in the reserve. If there is suitable habitat and foraging grounds at Seal Rocks there is also potential for New Zealand fur seals (*Arctocephalus forsteri*), whose population has been increasing at a rate of up to 17 per cent per year in Southern Australian waters (Shaughnessy et al. 1995b), to haul-out or possibly pup at Seal Rocks Nature Reserve.

The reserve may also be used occasionally by little penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) and sea birds. There have been no threatened animals recorded on the reserve.

The waters around Seal Rocks and Little Seal Rocks have been declared 'critical habitat' under the NSW *Fisheries Management Act 1994*, as they form a key aggregation site for the endangered Grey Nurse Shark. These rocky features and the associated rich and diverse marine ecosystems form the centrepiece of the largest sanctuary zone in the Port Stephens – Great Lakes Marine Park.

#### Issues

There is no existing program to monitor the presence/absence of seals at Seal Rocks Nature Reserve. As the reserve is located approximately 3 kilometres offshore, management access for monitoring is likely to be infrequent and weather dependent.

Seals are known to be very sensitive to human disturbance, and the impacts from human activity pose the greatest potential threat to wildlife populations or individual animals in the nature reserve. Whilst entanglements in commercial and recreational fishing gear can severely reduce individual fitness of marine mammals and seabirds, the restrictions on fishing to protect endangered grey nurse shark greatly minimise the impacts of these activities around the islands.

The area is a popular dive site, and direct impacts of this activity on seals and seabirds from recreational disturbance may be of concern if a colony re-establishes. Hunting or harassment may also impact on the ongoing sustainability of seal or seabird colonies.

### **Desired outcomes**

- Populations of fur seals are conserved.

### **Management response**

- 3.1.1 Develop and implement an appropriate monitoring program for seals at Seal Rocks Nature Reserve.
- 3.1.2 If seals return to Seal Rocks Nature Reserve, develop and install off-site signage informing the public of the importance of not attempting access onto the rocks and not disturbing the seals.
- 3.1.3 Work cooperatively with the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), the Marine Parks Authority (MPA) and other agencies or non-government organisations to minimise anthropomorphic impacts on seals at the site and adjacent waters.

## **3.2 Cultural heritage**

The reserve lies within the traditional country of the Worimi people and is now within the area of the Forster Local Aboriginal Land Council. The land, water, plants and animals within a landscape are central to Aboriginal spirituality and contribute to Aboriginal identity. Aboriginal communities associate natural resources with the use and enjoyment of foods and medicines, caring for the land, passing on cultural knowledge, kinship systems and strengthening social bonds. Aboriginal heritage and connection to nature are inseparable and need to be managed in an integrated manner across the landscape.

The Worimi people travelled to Broughton Island and may have travelled to the reserve during times of lower sea levels, however there are no known Aboriginal sites in the reserve.

### **Issues**

There are no known Aboriginal or historic sites or values associated with the reserve.

### **Desired outcomes**

- Aboriginal people are involved in management of any Aboriginal cultural values of the reserve.

### **Management response**

- 3.2.1 Continue to consult and involve the Forster Local Aboriginal Land Council, the Minimbah Elders Group and other relevant Aboriginal community organisations and custodial families in the management of their Country, including the management of any Aboriginal sites or values relating to the nature reserve.

## 4. Threats

**Pest species** are plants and animals that have negative environmental, economic and social impacts and are most commonly introduced species. Pests can have impacts across the range of park values, including impacts on biodiversity, cultural heritage, catchment and scenic values. There are no known pests on the reserve.

**Fire** is not an issue in the reserve.

**Climate change** may significantly affect biodiversity by changing population size and distribution of species, modifying species composition, and altering the geographical extent of habitats and ecosystems. Anthropogenic climate change has been listed as a key threatening process under the TSC Act.

Sea-level rise is one of the projected outcomes of climate change. A sea-level rise of more than 90 centimetres is expected by 2100 (DECC 2009). This will result in an increased intensity and frequency of storm surges, which will be exacerbated by the expected increased frequency of extreme storm events. It is not known how this will affect use of the reserve by seals.

### **Desired outcomes**

- Negative impacts of pests on the environment are minimised.

### **Management response**

- 4.1.1 Implement the Regional Pest Management Strategy if necessary and update as required.

## 5. Implementation

This plan of management establishes a scheme of operations for the nature reserve. Implementation of this plan will be undertaken within the annual program of the NPWS Lower North Coast Region.

Identified activities for implementation are listed in Table 1. Relative priorities are allocated against each activity as follows:

- **High priority** activities are those imperative to achievement of the objectives and desired outcomes. They must be undertaken in the near future to avoid significant deterioration in natural, cultural or management resources.
- **Medium priority** activities are those that are necessary to achieve the objectives and desired outcomes but are not urgent.
- **Low priority** activities are desirable to achieve management objectives and desired outcomes but can wait until resources become available.
- **Ongoing** is for activities that are undertaken on an annual basis or statements of management intent that will direct the management response if an issue that arises.

This plan of management does not have a specific term and will stay in force until amended or replaced in accordance with the NPW Act.

**Table 1: List of management responses**

Action no.	Management response	Priority*
<b>On-park ecological conservation</b>		
3.1.1	Develop and implement an appropriate monitoring program for seals at Seal Rocks Nature Reserve.	Ongoing
3.1.2	If seals return to Seal Rocks Nature Reserve, develop and install off-site signage informing the public of the importance of not attempting access onto the rocks and not disturbing the seals.	High
3.1.3	Work cooperatively with DPI, the MPA, and other agencies/NGOs to reduce anthropomorphic impacts on seals at the site and adjacent waters	High
<b>Aboriginal cultural heritage</b>		
3.2.1	Continue to consult and involve the Forster Local Aboriginal Land Council, the Minimbah Elders Group and other relevant Aboriginal community organisations and custodial families in the management of their Country, including the management of any Aboriginal sites or values relating to the nature reserve.	Ongoing
<b>Pests and fire</b>		
4.1.1	Implement the Regional Pest Management Strategy if necessary and update as required.	Ongoing

## References

DECC 2009, *Scientific Basis of the 2009 Sea Level Rise Benchmark: Draft technical note*, Urban and Coastal Water Reform Branch, Department of Environment and Climate Change NSW, Sydney

Shaughnessy, PD, Testa, JW & Warneke, RM 1995a, 'Abundance of Australian fur seal pups, *Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*, at Seal Rocks, Victoria, in 1991-92 from Petersen and Bayesian estimators', *Wildlife Research*, vol. 22, pp. 625–632.

Shaughnessy, PD, Goldsworthy, SD & Libke, JA 1995b, 'Changes in the abundance of New Zealand fur seals, *Arctocephalus forsteri*, on Kangaroo Island, South Australia', *Wildlife Research*, vol. 22, pp. 201–215.