Monitoring our coast a vital role

The current situation for Tasmanian coastal waters sees haphazard and ad hoc assessment of values, allocation of resources and approval of developments, often involving overuse of specific habitats and marine biota already under pressure. In sharp focus now is the salmon fish farming industry with the environmental damage that it has done and is continuing to do in waterways, such as Macquarie Harbour, and Huon Estuary and D’Entrecasteaux Channel.

The solution to such harmful blunders is long overdue: the adoption and implementation of rigorous marine spatial planning for all of the state’s coastal waters, including estuaries and terrestrial influences (e.g. runoff and waste discharges). This cannot be an exercise that gives precedence to one industry or sector, or favours the economy over society and the environment—the three pillars that enrich Tasmanian life. It must also be inherently transparent to all.

Marine spatial planning is an holistic and comprehensive process that sees initial consultation with all stakeholders translating into effective mapping of values (natural, economic, cultural, social, etc.). Its planning and action phases are evidence based, drawing on local (including Indigenous) knowledge and infused with global experience; it is also regularly calibrated with environmental monitoring as a feedback mechanism.

Unfortunately, the recent history of marine monitoring in Tasmania is also one of decline. It is longer than a decade since the State Government reported on the condition of our marine environment. Even in that 2009 Tasmanian State of the Environment Report, it was acknowledged that environmental information was insufficient to discern status or trends.

In parallel with sweeping improvement of tools for planning and management, the outdated and patchy state legislation and regulatory framework for estuaries and coastal waters (and their resources) is sorely in need of attention and streamlining. Tasmania is the laggard among states and territories in modernising marine law.

The expertise and capacity for an incoming Tasmanian Government to develop marine spatial planning and ancillary tools (e.g. ecosystem-based management) is conveniently at hand in state-based institutions, such as the CSIRO and the University of Tasmania. A resolutely independent review, informed by both government and non-government representatives, is the pathway to develop marine legislation and regulatory framework that is truly fit for purpose for an innovative and equitable island state.

Better governance is needed for our coastal waters now, not the blindness, disinterest or worse of current politicians and arms of government.