BIG OIL HAS NO FUTURE IN THE BIGHT
OIL SPILL MODELLING
The Great Australian Bight lives up to its name — endless cliffs tower over a vast unspoiled ocean full of wild and wonderful marine life, including one of the largest populations of the protected southern right whale.

In 2011, the Australian Government began issuing permits to oil and gas companies to commence risky deepwater oil exploration in this pristine region. The oil giant, BP, was the first to seek approval to commence drilling.

In response, as it has done so often in the past, The Wilderness Society was the catalyst for the development of a strong and empowered grassroots movement. This groundswell of local, national and international opposition to protect the Great Australian Bight was impossible to ignore.

From tourism operators, to fishermen, local mayors, Traditional Owners, and everyday Australians living along our southern coastline, BP faced a mounting wave of opposition. And in late 2016, people power prevailed with the announcement that BP would not continue to pursue its deepwater drilling program in the Bight.

But the campaign is far from over. There still remains the threat of six other oil companies vying to exploit the oil found deep under the surface of the Great Australian Bight. As the Australian Government continues to issue more exploration permits to oil companies, the threat of Big Oil to this region remains.

If these projects are allowed to go ahead, the risk of a catastrophic oil spill could wipe out the natural values of this region and the livelihoods of the communities who depend on them.

Further, scientists tell us that we cannot afford to burn the massive amounts of fossil fuels that these projects will extract. These ‘carbon bombs’ will blow out Australia’s carbon budget and risk our safe climate future.
The Great Australian Bight is a pristine ocean environment, flanked by the Nullarbor and the longest sea cliffs in the world. It is a haven for whales, fish, plants, birds, marine mammals and an array of invertebrate ecosystems. The area has unique nutrient upwellings and scientists estimate that around 85% of all species found in the Bight are found nowhere else in the world — a figure that trumps the endemic diversity of the Great Barrier Reef. What happens in the Bight impacts species’ survival at the global level.

The Bight is a critical sanctuary for many protected marine species — including blue, pygmy blue, sperm, killer and humpback whales; Australian sea lions; great white sharks and albatross.

The Head of the Bight and Twilight Reserve are internationally important southern right whale calving and nursery areas. The Head of the Bight alone is a critical gathering area for this endangered species with up to half of the Australian population (around 10% of the global population) using the region. Each year, between 25 and 55 calves are born here.

The Wilderness Society has worked to protect the natural and cultural values of the Great Australian Bight for over a decade. This includes establishing Australia’s first representative marine park network outside of the Great Barrier Reef, with 19 marine parks in state waters and extensive Commonwealth marine reserves throughout the entire region.

“Protection of the whales and their habitat in the Great Australian Bight Marine Park is important for the global conservation of the species. It is one of the best places in the world to see southern right whales.” — DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT & HERITAGE
The waters of the Great Australian Bight support important industries. South Australia has established many of its coastal regions as successful tourism destinations over the past decade. Kangaroo Island, located within the waters of the Bight, is one of Australia’s best known and loved tourist destinations.

Employment from the tourism industry throughout the Great Australian Bight is estimated to be worth $1.2 billion annually, and directly and indirectly accounts for over 10,000 full-time equivalent jobs.

The region’s fisheries are some of the most valuable in Australia. In 2012-2013, the total volume of production of South Australia’s commercial wild fisheries was worth an estimated $199 million per year. The aquaculture industry was estimated to be worth $243 million per year of which tuna accounted for 63%.

What happens in the Bight affects the entire southern coastline of Australia, with currents from the region moving across much of Western Australia, Victoria and Tasmania. The temperate reefs and kelp forests extend west from the Bight right along the southern coastline of Western Australia and east around the coastlines of Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales.

New research by some of Australia’s leading marine scientists has identified this Great Southern Reef system as a global biodiversity hotspot. They found that its ecological function is fundamental to the livelihoods of the communities that depend on it, and estimated the region supports fishing and tourism activities generating over $10 billion per annum. The research also found that the Great Southern Reef’s proximity to almost 70% of the Australian population (living within 50km of the reef) makes it an integral part of Australian culture and society.

“The biggest threat that we’re going to contend with is these oil companies moving into the Great Australian Bight. So many people rely on the sea for their livelihood.” — ANDREW NEIGHBOUR, KANGAROO ISLAND MARINE ADVENTURES

VIBRANT COASTAL COMMUNITIES
Big Oil companies are now trying to enter and exploit the Great Australian Bight seeking vast reserves of oil and gas. In 2011, the Federal Government started releasing new offshore oil and petroleum exploration licences in the Commonwealth waters of the Great Australian Bight.

In 2014, full responsibility for the environmental assessment and approval of offshore oil drilling projects in Commonwealth waters was removed from the Federal Department of Environment (and Environment Minister) and transferred to the National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority (NOPSEMA).

This new arrangement is inappropriate as it applies specifically to current proposals to undertake deepwater drilling activities in the pristine oceans of the Great Australian Bight because:

- **The Great Australian Bight is a pristine marine area.** Its significant and endemic ecological values provide critical (in some cases globally important) habitat for threatened and migratory whale, sea lion, fish and bird species. There’s still much to learn about the importance of the Bight’s ecosystems and the life forms that rely on it.

- **The potential impacts of a large oil spill in this region could have large-scale impacts across jurisdictions.** Given the scale of the risks, it is completely inappropriate that no minister will have direct responsibility for the standards of assessment or final approval of these drilling projects. Drilling in the Bight could significantly damage matters of national environmental significance, the values of protected marine parks in the Bight, local communities, and the fishing and tourism industries across much of southern Australia.

- **The exploration drilling plans represent attempts to develop the ‘Bight Basin’ as a new oil and petroleum deepwater drilling precinct.** A thorough and fully transparent process of assessing the cumulative impacts and risks of this is needed to inform any project-based environmental assessments and approvals.

Map shows location of granted oil exploration permits in the Great Australian Bight and the companies that own the permits.
“WE ARE MORE THAN JUST SOME GROUP. WE ARE A MOVEMENT.”

— LINDA IRWIN
This unique and pristine marine environment is under threat, with plans to turn the Great Australian Bight into an oil field, and with it comes the potential for a catastrophic oil spill.

Just over five years ago, BP was responsible for the Deepwater Horizon well blowout resulting in a catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Oil and gas spilled into the Gulf of Mexico for 87 days until the well could be capped. It is now estimated that 4.9 million barrels of oil spilled from the well, with a flow rate reaching 62,200 barrels per day in April 2010. Inaccurate flow rates were originally reported at an order of magnitude less than this — 1,000–6,000 barrels per day — raising concerns about oil companies’ capacity to accurately determine such factors during assessment processes.

BP’s catastrophic Gulf of Mexico rig blowout and oil spill occurred during exploration drilling — the same activity that other Big Oil companies now propose in the extraordinarily rough, unpredictable and remote seas of the Great Australian Bight.

A spill catastrophe of the scale seen in the Gulf of Mexico could be disastrous for the marine life of the Great Australian Bight and marine industries (notably fishing and tourism) across southern Australia.

When BP failed to provide any information on its oil spill modelling, The Wilderness Society commissioned independent expert oil spill modelling to enable the community to understand and consider these risks. The results demonstrate the unacceptable scale of the risks presented by drilling in the Bight.

Late last year, BP finally released some of its own oil spill modelling findings which demonstrated that the risk from an oil spill in the Bight was in fact even more catastrophic than that presented in our oil spill modelling.

Conducted by oceanographer and oil spill modelling expert Laurent C. M. Lebreton, MSc., the modelling shows that due to the strong winds and highly energetic waves of the Southern Ocean, the trajectories of an oil slick and particles have the potential to cover vast areas of Australia’s southern waters and coastline.

If a blowout and spill were to occur in summer, aside from the direct and severe impact in near water, the oil would very likely impact the shores of Western Australia. Simulations show oil contamination could reach as far as Albany and Denmark. Under these conditions, the model predicts that within four months, an area of roughly 213,000 km² would have an 80% chance of having surface oil thickness above levels likely to trigger the closure of fisheries.

If a blowout and spill were to occur in winter, the oil would very likely impact the Eyre Peninsula, Kangaroo Island, and Spencer Gulf in South Australia. Simulations show oil could impact much of the Victorian and Tasmanian coastline, right through to the Bass Straight towards New Zealand. Under these conditions, the model predicts that within four months, an area of roughly 265,000 km² would have an 80% chance of having surface oil thickness above levels likely to trigger the closure of fisheries.

These potential impacts would devastate marine life, fisheries and coastal communities, and seriously tarnish the clean, pristine image of Australia’s Southern Ocean and beaches.

“Do you want to get up in the morning and walk down the beach and see dead whales, dead prawns and dead fish and dead seals and penguins? … So we’re going to have to help them because we’ve got to be their main speaker, talk for those guys, help them out…” — BUNNA LAWRIE, MIRNING TRADITIONAL OWNER AND WHALE DREAMER
DISASTER IN THE GREAT AUSTRALIAN BIGHT?

The Gulf of Mexico oil spill took 87 days to plug, despite this disaster occurring in one of the most established oil fields in the world (with considerable resources in the region to deploy in response to the spill).

- The spill covered 180,000km² — twice the size of Tasmania.
- 4.9 million barrels (779,100,000 litres) of oil were pumped into the ocean.
- The explosion killed 11 workers on the rig and injured 17 more.
- More than 900 bottlenose dolphins have been found dead or stranded in the oil spill area.
- The oil spill has likely harmed or killed more than one million birds from over 102 species; approximately 6,165 sea turtles; and up to 25,900 marine mammals.
- The cost of the oil spill is estimated to be more than USD $90 billion. BP has been ordered to pay USD $20.8 billion in penalties for the spill.
- BP spent USD $90 million in advertising during the first three months of the spill trying to win public favour — while greatly underestimating how much oil was spilling into the Gulf to reduce its fines.
- The oil spill has cost the Gulf Coast tourist industry USD $23 billion in lost revenue, and directly resulted in 12,000 people in New Orleans becoming unemployed.
Burning fossil fuels for our energy needs is the single most significant driver of global warming. Recent research conducted by University College London clearly demonstrates that, to prevent more than 2°C global warming, we cannot extract and burn most of the world’s known fossil fuel (coal, oil and gas) reserves.

The research identifies that, of known reserves in the OECD Pacific Region — which includes Australia — 49% of existing oil reserves, 51% of existing gas reserves and 95% of existing coal reserves must not be extracted and burnt.

These figures make it clear that, in order to act consistently with the current science, we are already at the stage where existing reserves cannot be burnt. Globally, there are already more known oil reserves than can be burnt without risking dangerous climate change impacts.

In light of these figures, new reserves cannot be exploited if we are to limit dangerous global warming to the internationally agreed maximum of 2°C — let alone limit global warming to 1.5°C as agreed at the Climate Paris Agreement.

Opening a new fossil fuel precinct like the ‘Bight Basin’ flies in the face of our global commitments to do our part to prevent dangerous climate change and risks our safe climate future.

“A MAJOR CLIMATE THREAT

“Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels — especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas — needs to be progressively replaced without delay.” — ENCYCLICAL LETTER LAUDATO SI’ OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME
The Great Australian Bight is one of the most significant, pristine ocean environments left on earth.

As Big Oil companies line up to exploit the Bight, the decision whether or not to allow a new oil drilling precinct here has significant implications. The cumulative impacts of industrialisation of the Bight for frontier oil and petroleum development, and any oil spill occurring here, could have national or even globally significant impacts for threatened and migratory species, including the southern right whale.

Further, the risks from an oil spill disaster could be far-reaching beyond the Bight itself and impact communities and industries across a number of states.

The Great Australian Bight is an entirely inappropriate place for oil and petroleum drilling. The risks of oil spills, industrialisation of marine species’ migratory pathways and blowing the global carbon budget are far too high. The communities across southern Australia that are put at risk by the industrialisation of the ‘Bight Basin’ must be fully consulted and have confidence that their views are heard.

Our governments must work together to properly protect our oceans, marine life and the coastal communities that rely on a clean and abundant marine environment.

Together, we can insist upon it.

We are not powerless to stop these oil giants if we stand together. BP’s exit last year has proven that we can ensure that they make the right decision and recognise that the marine wilderness of the Bight is no place for oil and gas drilling.

We are urging communities across southern Australia—our local businesses, our tourism and fishing industries, our community groups, our schools and our local councils to come together to protect our Great Australian Bight from the reckless, risky oil and gas drilling still being planned by other oil companies in the Bight.

You can help by joining the Great Australian Bight Alliance through signing on to the Statement of Concern, and requesting a campaign champion toolkit.

We need to raise our voices now. By spreading the word in your community, you can help tell our politicians and Big Oil companies that we want to see the Great Australian Bight protected and oil exploration in the Bight stopped.

Big Oil has no future in the Bight.
Statement of Concern

The Great Australian Bight is home to a unique and extraordinary array of marine life. Whales, sea lions, birds, turtles, fish and sponge gardens all depend on its pristine waters. The Indigenous people of the Nullarbor and Western Eyre Peninsula have been its custodians for tens of thousands of years — and remain so today. We have formed this Alliance to stop Big Oil companies drilling in the Bight.

An oil spill disaster in the Great Australian Bight would be devastating. In the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, the United States was subjected to one of the world’s worst oil spills. The clean up still continues today. But the loss of life and livelihoods, the horrific fate of tens of thousands of oil coated fish, birds and mammals, cannot be recovered.

This must never happen to the Bight where clean and healthy waters support people’s lifestyles and local industries right across southern Australia.

Coastal communities — from Western Australia’s southern coastlines, across the coasts and peninsulas of South Australia and Victoria, to the beaches of Tasmania — value and rely on our clean oceans, beaches, islands, reefs and fisheries.

We need to support them and protect our environment and our fishing and tourism industries.

Together, we will call for the protection of the Great Australian Bight and we will oppose plans by Big Oil companies who would risk this pristine ocean for an oil field.

Sign the Statement of Concern at FightForTheBight.org.au