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The Battle for Oceania: A Billionaire Donor Gives to Save the Seas Down Under
Tate Williams



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Australia, which is surrounded by vast expanses of ocean, has got its own marine conservation mega-donor, following stateside examples of Wendy Schmidt, the Packard family, Gordon Moore and many others. And, also not unlike some of our own high-dollar philanthropists, he's butting heads with the national government, in this case over controversial proposed rollbacks of the country's marine protections.

Andrew Forrest is the founder and former CEO of Fortescue Metals Group, a mining company that supplies iron ore to China, and while his fortunes have fallen since he was Australia's richest person in 2008, he's [still worth](#) around \$3.7 billion. He's also credited with what is believed to be the country's single biggest charitable donation from a living person—a [A\\$400 million commitment](#) (US\$291 million) to the family's Minderoo Foundation in 2017. Forrest has now committed an additional [A\\$100 million](#) to a new cause for the foundation, marine conservation.

Forrest (who goes by "Twiggy" because, well, it's Australia) is perhaps the country's biggest practitioner of American-style high-dollar philanthropy. He has a flair for public display and has devoted his late career to working

on charitable causes, drawing attention comparable to that given to his business interests.

In 2013, He and wife Nicola Forrest were the first Australians to join the Giving Pledge, and currently are one of two parties in the country to do so. They were members of an early cohort of 12 [non-U.S. pledgers](#), after Bill Gates in particular made it a priority to recruit international billionaires to join in American-style, formalized philanthropy (something that has [not always been welcomed](#)). Today, there are 22 countries represented in the pledge.

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Of course, Australia does have its own philanthropic sector, and Forrest is a major figure within it. Funders like the Ian Potter Foundation and the NAB Foundation have also given large amounts to ocean conservation, and Australian NGOs and universities are major recipients of oceans philanthropy.

Forrest's Minderoo Foundation was established in 2001, supporting education, Indigenous Australians, disaster response, and arts and culture. Ending modern slavery is one of Forrest's biggest issues.

With this latest allotment of funds to marine conservation, they're launching the Minderoo Ocean Research initiative, which will partner with groups like Sea Around Us, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, and a bunch more to study and conserve ocean life. Plans include the creation of

a data-based Global Fishing Index, and the creation of a new research facility.

The timing of the commitment is quite intentional, and reminiscent of the United States' own recurring clashes between our billionaire class and government leaders.

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Australia's federal government is currently [under fire](#) for an ocean management plan that would slash areas protected as no-extraction zones and open up large swaths to the fishing industry. "This is a huge step backwards for marine protection," a representative from WWF-Australia told *The Guardian*. The government is also facing a [scandal](#) over its own oceans grant, \$443 million going to a tiny charity with [ties to extractive industry](#), and that critics say did not follow the appropriate process.

Andrew Forrest's funding isn't quite a direct assault on the management plan itself, but his message is loud and clear, criticizing the proposal in the announcement and [throwing his foundation's considerable stature](#) behind a coalition opposing it. As he said in the announcement: "Minderoo is making this timely commitment to support Australia's oceans at a moment when we are losing sight of our responsibilities to sustainably manage the vast seas under Australia's control."

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