(GENTLE MUSIC PLAYS)

SPEAKER:
Imagine yourself surrounded by nature. Plant life grows on every surface. Animals scurry about your feet and glide overhead. Are you imagining some far off place, distant from the busy life of the city? What if this was closer than you think? What if all you need to visit this place was a mask and snorkel? Right at the heart of Australia's largest urban sprawl is a small area of coast known as Ricketts Point.

Protected from fishing since 2002, it is one of only three marine sanctuaries in the north of Port Phillip Bay and the only one to protect the unique limestone reefs of Melbourne's eastern coastline. The soft rocks here provide perfect attachment for a myriad of algae, such as leafy Ecklonia kelps, towering strands of Sargassum, or brightly coloured Sea Lettuces. Amongst this vegetation, gentle giants can be found. Looking like a cross between a shark and a stingray, Banjo Rays come here to bask in the warm shallows during the day. Reaching 1.5m in length, they can be intimidating to those unfamiliar with them. But they have neither the barb of a stingray or the teeth of a shark, rendering them harmless to humans.

Also found swimming through the abundant foliage are Dusky Morwongs. Because of their curious disposition, these fish will often approach divers for a closer look, following or even surrounding swimmers as they explore. But the canopy of algae is not what makes this place special. Taking a closer look below the surface reveals hundreds of caves and overhangs, a complex network of negative space home to creatures of all shapes and sizes. Tiny Hulafish seek shelter here from the dangers of open water, blennies occupy any available hidey-hole, and larger animals like Sea Sweeps, Old Wives or Magpie Perch use the reef as a home base from which to forage.

The larger caves are also host to one of Australia's lesser known mass migrations, a migration of sharks. From October to January, Port Jackson sharks come here from far and wide to mate and lay their eggs. While these harmless sharks are mostly active at night, they can be found packed into the shelter of the reef during the day, stacking one on top of the other. While these aggregations can be seen elsewhere in Victoria, the shallow waters of Ricketts Point offer unparalleled ease of access to those new to snorkelling.

But reef habitats are not the only habitat found in this area. Between the rocky structures stretch seemingly endless meadows of seagrass. While it might look empty of animal life at first, closer inspection reveals an entire world of small critters. Pebble Crabs make their way through strands of vegetation, looking for scraps of food while also avoiding large schools of Smooth Toadfish that would gobble them up in a flash. Juvenile fish like Leatherjackets and Moonlighters hang around, taking advantage of the clouds of Mysid Shrimps found here. The top dog in the seagrass meadow, however, is the Flathead. Using its camouflage to stay hidden, it lies in wait until prey comes close. Ricketts Point offers us a small window into the amazing marine life of Victoria.

The plants and animals that occur along the interconnected reef systems from New South Wales to Perth are known as the Great Southern Reef, a bioregion whose species are found nowhere else in the world. For anyone who has been to Ricketts Point, it is obvious what a special place it is and why it deserves the protection it is given.