

EDITOR'S COMMENTS

The possibility of ecological damage to the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) is an issue that has attracted considerable discussion and expenditure of money, even before the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (GBRMP) was created.

In the early 1970s the possibility of oil exploration, drilling and mining on the Reef led the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments to establish joint Royal Commissions which investigated the exploration and production drilling for petroleum in the GBR. They reported in 1974.

In recognition of this concern, the *Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act (1975)* was passed with support of all political parties. It banned oil drilling or production in that part of GBR Region (an area defined by the Act) which was to later become the Marine Park. Regulations were also later introduced to extend this ban to those small areas of the GBR Region not included in the Park. This was a significant event because the Marine Park is a multiple-use protected area: that is, it is not an area set aside for only nature conservation but rather it is an area where a range of activities are permitted consistent with an overall objective of conservation.

During the 1980s most energy was directed towards developing an oil spill contingency plan, the first version of which was finalised in 1987. It has been since tested twice and revised. The Marine Park Authority also employed for the first time an officer to work almost full time on oil-related issues.

Towards the end of that decade there was a growing recognition of the need to also consider how spills could be prevented. IMO introduced a recommendation that ships carry a pilot in the northern waters of the Marine Park. This had partial success but in 1990 the Australian Government gained the support from the maritime nations to establish the GBRMP as the world's first "*particularly sensitive area*" and to allow Australia to require ships travelling through parts of the Reef and in international waters, to carry a pilot. This was a significant diplomatic achievement by Australia. Pilotage of certain vessels in parts of the Reef was made compulsory by an amendment to the Marine Park Act 1991.

Despite these developments, there has been an undercurrent of public concern about a spill, which surfaces whenever there is a large shipping accident or spill elsewhere. In the last four years there have been well publicised spills including the *Exxon Valdez* off Alaska, the *Haven* off Italy, the *Kirki* off Western Australia, the *Aegean Sea* off Spain and the *Braer* off the Shetland Islands. These events have raised concern in Australia to such a level that the Marine Park Authority decided to focus even more on prevention, recognising that the effectiveness of action after a spill is very limited. There were public and industry claims that changes to ship construction and operation would reduce the risks of spills but the Marine Park Authority was not in a position to assess these claims.

In February 1993, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) agreed to organise jointly with the Marine Park Authority, as a matter of urgency, a meeting of experts in ship design, construction, operation, safety, maritime law and the GBR. It would be by invitation, would focus explicitly on the GBR and the output would be views and ideas that could be used as a basis for recommendations to the Government from AMSA and the Marine Park Authority.

There was immediate and enthusiastic support by all invited participants, who are listed in Appendix B. The program is in Appendix A.

There was a strong co-operative spirit during the meeting and many participants mentioned that it was the first time that they had all met together to discuss this issue. The five workshop sessions highlighted many useful points, with the following two

forming the basis of a media release issued by the Marine Park Authority:

- the most effective way of reducing the risk of oil or toxic cargo spills in the Marine Park is through accelerating the development and introduction of Electronic Chart Digital Information System (ECDIS) and related Differential Global Positioning System (DGPS) and through undertaking a DGPS pilot project in the Marine Park; and
- the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) should be established as soon as possible to improve the enforcement of existing laws that aim to prevent or minimise pollution from oil and toxic cargoes.

Other key point that arose from the meeting can be summarised as:

- the average size of ships transiting the Marine Park is increasing, but more vessels are choosing to go outside the Marine Park;
- an area of great concern is Torres Strait, where Australia's ability to control shipping is less than that for the GBRMP;
- banning ships from the Marine Park is not a realistic option;
- accident can be reduced if the survey of Reef waters is extended to identify and rank areas suitable for navigation by smaller vessels, and the data that are to be collected be in such a form as to be useable when electronic charting technology becomes available;
- the risk of accident can be reduced through better education and training of crews, and provision of information, to minimise the human-error element in accidents;
- making mandatory the use of double hulls before the rest of the world is not feasible and this technology may be ineffective in high energy groundings or collisions;
- a traffic separation scheme should be investigated;
- Australia should work actively with other maritime nations to pursue initiatives including the introduction of compulsory ship reporting systems and higher crew competency standards;
- waste facilities in some ports adjacent to the Marine Park are inadequate and therefore it is difficult to encourage ships to not discharge operational oil waste at sea; and
- Australia should investigate the feasibility of seeking to have the IMO recommend a safe outer route to assist those ships that choose to go outside the Marine Park.

These points have been drawn from the workshop and do not necessarily represent the policies of the GBRMPA or AMSA.

This report comprises three sections: the first records all papers presented and the questions and answers that followed each paper, the second records the outputs of the five workshops and the third section is the Appendices.

The participants agreed to the release of a media statement, which is in Appendix C. Also included is a bibliography of papers written by Authority staff and research project reports commissioned by the Authority on oil-related matters (Appendix D).

It is hoped that this report will be a source-document that will contribute to the development of policies to reduce risks of shipping related spills.

The organisation of such an event is a challenge that sometimes seems to equal the complexity of the issue being considered by the meeting. Laurie Mayer (AMSA) in particular, Colin Trinder and Denyse Freedman (Canberra Office, GBRMPA) and Malcolm Weatherup (Townsville Office, GBRMPA), provided valuable assistance.

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