

# Shortcuts threaten Great Barrier Reef

*The Great Barrier Reef is unique, its importance marked by World Heritage status. But it's also a well-known hazard to shipping. So why is it allowed to be used as a shortcut by bulk carriers such as the ship that ran aground at the weekend?*

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On June 11, 1770, six weeks or so after becoming the first European to make landfall on the east coast of Australia, Lieutenant James Cook unexpectedly ran aground. His ship, the *Endeavour*, had struck a reef now known as the Endeavour Reef, within a manifestly far bigger reef system, nearly 40km from shore. Only the urgent jettisoning of 50 tonnes of stores and equipment (including all but four of the ship's guns), a delicate operation known as fothering (in which an old sail was drawn under the hull, effectively plugging the hole), Cook's expert seamanship and a great deal of hard pumping saved the vessel and her crew.

It would be another 30 or so years before the great English explorer and cartographer Matthew Flinders, having circumnavigated the entirety of Terra Australis Incognita, the Unknown Southern Land, gave the vast reef system its name. But despite his astonishing success in charting a safe passage through its treacherous waters, mainly by the expedient of sending small boats ahead to sound the depths, Flinders himself was later stranded on it while heading home for England in 1803.

For nearly 250 years, the Great Barrier Reef has been a hazard to shipping.

It is the world's largest reef system, made up of more than 2,900 coral reefs and 900 islands scattered over 344,400km<sup>2</sup> off the coast of Queensland in

northeast Australia. It is also a priceless and unimaginably fragile World Heritage site, home to 30 species of whales, dolphins and porpoises; six species of sea turtles; 125 species of shark, stingray and skate; 5,000 species of mollusk; nine species of sea horse; 215 species of birds; 17 species of sea snake; 2,195 known plant species and more than 1,500 species of fish.

And it is still a hazard to shipping.

In recent years, its pristine waters, in theory protected by the statutes of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, have become known as the "coal highway," a busy thoroughfare for foreign-owned bulk carriers bound for Asia. Laden with coal and fuel oil from Australia, thousands of ships, such as the Chinese-owned *Shen Neng 1*, which ran aground off the country's eastern seaboard on Saturday, continue to jeopardize the largest marine conservation site in the world. Tuesday night, as salvage teams worked to prevent what would be the biggest environmental disaster in Australian history, environmentalists were not slow to accuse the government of turning a blind eye to the problem.

"This is the US\$60 billion-a-year, largely foreign-owned coal industry that is making a coal highway out of the Great Barrier Reef," said Bob Brown, leader of the Australian Greens party. "There needs to be a radical overview of this huge coal export industry, whether these ships need to use the reef at all, and what



the alternatives are," he said. Local fishermen have dubbed it the "reef rat run," saying ships routinely take shortcuts to save time and money on their voyage to China.

It was this so-called shortcut, near the Douglas Shoal, off Rockhampton, that is believed to have caused last weekend's accident. According to reports, the 230m-long ship, carrying 975 tonnes of heavy fuel oil and 65,000 tonnes of coal, was traveling at full speed when it hit a sandbank, in a protected part of the Great Barrier Reef.

Its fuel tank ruptured, causing a 3km-long oil slick. Authorities stemmed the spill, but have warned that the salvage operation could take weeks, as moving the vessel will be "a very delicate" operation that risks sending hundreds of tonnes of oil on to the reef. Salvage teams are now being flown in to begin pumping the 950 tonnes of oil fuel off the vessel and on to another ship before an attempt can be made to move her.

The Queensland premier, Anna Bligh, has said the ship's owner, Shenzhen Energy — a subsidiary of the Chinese shipping giant Cosco, which has allegedly been involved in three major international incidents in four years — could face a fine of up to US\$925,000 for straying from a shipping lane that is currently used by some 6,000 cargo vessels each year.

The stricken ship was traveling to China from Gladstone, a port playing a growing role in the booming export trade of Australia's natural resources to Asia. The incident follows a similar accident in March last year when 60km of Queensland's southeast coast were declared a disaster area after 42 tonnes of oil spilled into the ocean from the *MV Pacific Adventurer* during a cyclone.

Conservationists say the fact there is no legal requirement to have marine pilots on board ships in the area, to guide them safely through the reef system, puts it in grave danger.

"The current lack of safeguards around shipping in the Great Barrier Reef is akin to playing Russian roulette with one of the world's most treasured natural icons," says Gilly Llewellyn, the conservation director of WWF-Australia, who called for ships to be piloted. She also wants improved monitoring systems so authorities know where large vessels are situated on the reef at all times.

The Australasian Marine Pilots Institute, the organizing body for Australia's marine pilots, says the grounding of the *Shen Neng 1* should focus attention on the lack of protection Australia's maritime regulations afford the reef. An Australian maritime law expert, Peter Glover, says public opinion and government legislative reaction to marine pollution by commercial shipping in the Great Barrier Reef have got noticeably tougher since 1996, when the Panamanian vessel *Peacock*, en route from Singapore

to New Zealand via the inner route of the Great Barrier Reef, ran aground on Piper Reef. The ship was carrying approximately 605 tonnes of bunker heavy fuel oil, and its owners were not even prosecuted.

Following the grounding of the 22,000-tonne Malaysian-flagged container vessel *Bunga Teratai Satu* on Sudbury Reef in 2001, legislative changes were introduced to allow both state and Commonwealth authorities to prosecute those who pollute in the waters surrounding the reef.

Those changes were put to the test almost immediately in the wake of another potentially catastrophic grounding the following year, of the Greek-flagged bulk carrier *Doric Chariot*. But Peter Glover believes it still "remains to be seen ... how effective legislative changes are in addressing the prosecution of individuals responsible for causing damage" in the reef.

Inspecting the scene from the air yesterday, Australia's prime minister, Kevin Rudd, expressed concern that the *Shen Neng 1*, balancing precariously in the crystal-clear waters, had strayed so far from official shipping lanes. "From where I see it, it is outrageous that any vessel could find itself 12km off course, it seems, in the Great Barrier Reef," Rudd told reporters in tropical Queensland, where the reef park is a major tourist draw. He pledged an overhaul of measures to protect the Great Barrier Reef from any future environmental disasters. "There is no greater natural asset for Australia than the Great Barrier Reef," he said.

But maritime traffic through the Great Barrier Reef is only projected to increase, with contracts reportedly signed for the export of US\$60 billion worth of liquefied natural gas from coal seams as shrinking resources spur energy companies to turn to unconventional gas reserves to feed Asian demand. Work is under way to expand the port of Gladstone in Queensland to lift capacity by up to 25 million tonnes a year, driven by surging demand from Japan, South Korea, India and China.



Top: Environmentalists have warned that the fragile Great Barrier Reef has become a "coal highway" for ships carrying the cargo from Australia to Asia.

Left: A tourist feeds a parrot in Great Keppel Island at the Great Barrier Reef on Wednesday. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd pledged to review shipping laws after Chinese carrier *Shen Neng 1* ran aground on the Great Barrier Reef.

Above: The *Shen Neng 1* lies stricken on Sunday in a sandbank in the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef.

PHOTOS: AGENCIES