

Chinese ship leaks oil in Great Barrier Reef zone

April 4 2010



Oil leaks from the Chinese coal carrier the Shen Neng 1 after the vessel ran aground near Australia's Great Barrier Reef late on April 3. The carrier is stuck on a shoal 70 kilometres (43 miles) east of Great Keppel Island off the Queensland coast.

A Chinese coal carrier leaking oil in Australia's environmentally sensitive Great Barrier Reef Marine Park after running aground, could be in danger of breaking up, authorities warned Sunday.

The Shen Neng 1 became stranded on a shoal 70 kilometres (43 miles) east of Great Keppel Island off the Queensland coast late Saturday after veering 15 kilometres outside the shipping lane.

"She is completely damaged on the port side," said Patrick Quirk, general manager of Maritime Safety Queensland.

"It is in danger of actually breaking a number of its main structures and breaking into a number of parts."

Quirk said while the situation was stabilising hour by hour "we are still very concerned about the ship".

The accident occurred within the southern zone of the [Great Barrier Reef](#) Marine Park and the government is investigating why the ship strayed so far outside the shipping channel, Queensland Premier Anna Bligh said.

"The vessel is in a restricted zone of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park -- these are zones that are off limits to shipping," she told reporters.

The government said initial air and sea assessments of the bulk coal carrier showed a small number of [oil](#) patches about two nautical miles south-east from the ship. To date there has been no major loss of oil from the ship, it said.

Authorities are expected to spray chemical dispersant on the slick later Sunday if weather conditions are favourable.

Environment Minister Peter Garrett said it was too early to say whether the spill would have a lasting impact on the World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef -- one of Australia's biggest tourist attractions.

"We don't have advice at present as to whether the oil is going to threaten any part of the ecology of the reef," Garrett told ABC Radio.

"That's why we want to use a dispersant quickly by trialing to assess its effectiveness. Once we've evaluated its effectiveness, then it might be available for further use."

The 230-metre carrier, loaded with about 65,000 tonnes of coal and 950 tonnes of oil on board, is not expected to be moved without salvage assistance. Its crew remains on board.

The incident follows a large oil spill from the container carrier Pacific Adventurer in March 2009, which polluted Moreton Island and Sunshine Coast beaches, and conservationists warned there will be more spills to come.

"We can be certain that this is a sign of things to come," said Capricorn Conservation Council spokesman Ian Herbert. "A year ago, Moreton Island, yesterday Great Keppel Island, next year -- who knows where?"

Queensland's ports will be the exit points for billions of dollars in coal and Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) exports over the coming decade, as new resources projects designed to meet Asia's energy needs are developed.

The Great Barrier Reef, which covers 345,000 square kilometres (133,000 square miles) along Australia's northeast coast and is celebrated as the world's largest living organism, is already facing the twin threats of climate change and toxic farm chemicals.

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