

China spots four oil slicks from sunken tanker

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A Chinese ship works to clean up a massive and expanding oil spill after an Iranian tanker sank off China, raising fears of devastating damage to marine life

The spill from a sunken Iranian tanker off China's east coast has spawned four oil slicks as authorities prepared to send robots to the

wreckage to assess the environmental damage.

The Sanchi, which was carrying 136,000 tonnes of light crude oil from Iran, sank in a ball of flames in the East China Sea on Sunday, a week after colliding with Hong Kong-registered bulk freighter the CF Crystal.

The bodies of only three of 30 Iranian and two Bangladeshi crew members have been found.

The State Oceanic Administration of China said late Wednesday that it was monitoring four slicks with a total area of almost 101 square kilometres (39 square miles), roughly the same size as Paris.

The office is attempting to "control the spread of the oil spill and is carrying out work to estimate its impact on the marine ecological environment", it said on its website.

On Tuesday, the agency had reported two slicks measuring about 69 square kilometres and an additional 40-square-kilometre area of "scattered" oil.

The transport ministry said late Wednesday the vessel lay at a depth of around 115 metres (50 feet) and that robots would be deployed to explore the shipwreck.

The type of condensate oil carried by the Sanchi does not form a traditional surface slick when spilt, but is nonetheless highly toxic to marine life and much harder to separate from water.

The area where the ship went down is an important spawning ground for species like the swordtip squid and wintering ground for species like the yellow croaker fish and blue crab, among many others, according to Greenpeace.

It is also on the migratory pathway of numerous marine mammals, such as humpback and gray whales.

In addition to the light crude oil, the Sanchi also carried a fuel tank able to accommodate some 1,000 tonnes of heavy diesel.

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