



## IMO

MARINE ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION  
COMMITTEE - 30th session  
Agenda item 19

### IDENTIFICATION OF PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE AREAS, INCLUDING DEVELOPMENT OF GUIDELINES FOR DESIGNATING SPECIAL AREAS UNDER ANNEXES I, II and IV

#### Identification of the Great Barrier Reef as a particularly sensitive area

Submitted by Australia

#### Introduction

The Australian Government seeks the support of the International Maritime Organisation, through the Marine Environment Protection Committee, for the identification of the Great Barrier Reef as a "Particularly Sensitive Area". It is an environmental asset of international importance, worthy of maximum protection. To maximise this protection, consistent with international law, the Australian Government seeks IMO endorsement of a proposal to impose compulsory pilotage for all ships over 70 metres in length, bound to or from an Australian port, navigating the inner route of the Great Barrier Reef, between latitude 10 degrees 40 minutes South and latitude 16 degrees 40 minutes South, to minimise the probability of a ship sourced pollution incident from navigational error.

#### The Great Barrier Reef (GBR)

The Great Barrier Reef is an area of unique biological diversity, and the whole of the region, including the islands, has been placed on the World Heritage List. (see MEPC 30/19/1 for further details). It is a region requiring the highest possible level of environmental protection. This protection is, in part, provided by Australian domestic legislation. However, further measures are necessary to counter risks posed by ships transiting the waters of the reef.

The maritime area of the GBR consists of internal waters within the territorial sea base lines, waters of the three mile territorial sea and waters of the Australian Fishing Zone. The greater part of the inner route through the Great Barrier Reef is within the Australian internal waters as created by base lines proclaimed in 1983, with other smaller areas, lying within the territorial sea. Australia recognises that within both the internal waters and the territorial sea all vessels enjoy the right of innocent passage.

#### Volume of Traffic

Some 2000 ships per year use the inner route of the Great Barrier Reef, averaging 6 ships per day. The present route, covered by Resolution A.619(15), is some 500 miles in length and offers passage in relatively calm but intricate and narrow waters. Within the route there are also areas of intense fishing activity which reach a peak in the trawling season from April to October. Between October and April the area is subject to heavy rain which reduced visibility and the effectiveness of some navigation aids.

The maximum draught recommended for the passage is 12.2 metres. At this draught, passage timing and speed is subject to tidal conditions. In 1980 some 26 ships transited the inner route and Torres Strait with draughts deeper than 11.5 metres, while by 1989 this figure had increased to 260.

Various options for reducing the risk to the Great Barrier Reef have been examined. Thus the possibility of traffic separation schemes was considered. The width of the inner route varies, and given the restraints caused by draught restrictions it is not practical to introduce a general separation of traffic. Such schemes are generally applied only to limited sectors of shipping routes, not to entire regions. The problem is not one which could be completely solved by separating shipping within the Great Barrier Reef, as the primary problem is the inherent risk of navigating in a hazardous and environmentally sensitive area, not the separation of traffic within that region. There exist no reasonable alternative routes or lanes to the current inner route which would increase safety of navigation.

#### Casualties

Since 1983 Australia has adopted a policy of publishing all preliminary and formal investigations in casualty occurring in its waters. Of the twenty six reports published since August 1983, around the 12,000 miles of Australian coast, twelve have occurred in the Great Barrier Reef Area. In addition, a number of significant incidents have been referred to flag States for appropriate action. Since 1985 nine incidents of groundings have occurred and four incidents of collisions between relatively large trading ships and fishing vessels (attachment).

While there has been no major pollution incident since 1970, it should be noted that at least two of the incidents of grounding resulted in limited pollution. In all the incidents favourable sea conditions prevented major oil pollution. Given Australian and overseas experience, Australia is anxious to minimise the possibility of such an incident and has demonstrated its commitment to conserving this unique and essential area in order to minimise the risk wherever possible.

#### Voluntary Pilotage

IMO Resolution A.619(15) recommends that all ships of 100 metres in length and over, all oil tankers, chemical carriers and gas carriers irrespective of size, should engage the services of the Queensland Coast and Torres Strait Pilot Service when navigating Torres Strait, the Great North East Channel, the Inner Route and Hydrographers' Passage.

Australia acknowledges the partial success of this scheme. Before the recommendation was adopted by the Assembly some 75% of vessels engaged a pilot. The level of compliance has now risen to approximately 90% of vessels and has stabilised at this level. This leaves a significant number, some 200 per year, which currently ignore Resolution A 619(15).

These vessels include tankers and large container ships carrying significant volumes of bunker oil.

In February of this year Australia intensively lobbied the governments of those countries whose ships are not currently availing themselves of the voluntary system, urging them to ensure that ships operating under their flag comply with IMO Resolution A.619(15). Despite these efforts there has not been a noticeable increase in compliance. As a consequence the risk an accident remains unacceptably high.

#### Compulsory Pilotage

In the light of these circumstances, Australia now proposes a scheme of compulsory pilotage for merchant ships navigating the inner route of the Great Barrier Reef between the northern boundary of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and 16 degrees 40 minutes S. (see attached map).

The Great Barrier Reef is an area with specific restraints on navigation relating to the depth of water, width of channel and certain limitations in weather conditions, where safety of navigation and protection of the unique environment of the Great Barrier Reef would be enhanced by the carriage of a qualified pilot.

In view of the history of shipping incidents overseas and the eleven incidents that have occurred within the Great Barrier Reef since 1985, the Australian Government cannot justify delaying the implementation of practical measures to protect an area so vital to Australia's national interest and that of the international community as a whole.

Australia proposes introducing compulsory pilotage for the inner route of the Great Barrier Reef and Hydrographers' Passage under existing domestic legislation, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act, which regulates activities in the Park, and is specific to the area of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Australia seeks MEPC endorsement of this proposal.

A draft recommendation to give effect to this proposal is contained in document MEPC 30/19/4/Add.1.

ATTACHMENT

CASUALTIES TO SHIPS WITHIN AREA COVERED BY IMO RESOLUTION A.619(15)  
TORRES STRAIT AND INNER GBR

Groundings

08/85	MARITIME GARDENIA*	Alert Patches
07/86	MOBIL ENDEAVOUR	Alert Patches
09/86	ALAM INDAH	Chapman Is. Reef
04/87	RUCA CHALLENGE (1)*	Piper Reef
05/87	RIVER EMBLEY	Alert Patches
12/87	LEICHHARDT (2)	Endeavour Strait
08/88	PACIFIC ACE (1)	Waterwitch Reef
06/89	ADELE (1)	Heath Reef
04/90	CARAKAJAYANIAGA III-3(1)	South Warden Reef

Collisions

06/85	RIVER BOYNE/F.V. BABIRUSA	Barrow Island
07/85	IRON CUMBERLAND/F.V. SALTFIORD	Princess Charlotte Bay
01/89	SPARTAN II/F.V. Unknown	Eel Reef
08/90	PIONEER TWEEN/F.V. ELIZABETH J	Unison Reef

- 
- (1) Ships between 70 m and 100 m in length  
(2) Ships less than 70 m  
\* Oil pollution resulted.

