



Australian Coral Reef Society Inc.

A society promoting scientific study of Australian Coral Reefs

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9th September 2009

The Honourable Mr Kevin Rudd
Prime Minister of Australia
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT

Dear Prime Minister

Australian Coral Reef Society Comment on recent oil spills in the vicinity of Australian coral reefs and coastline.

Australia is a world leader in the call for the conservation of coral reefs and demonstrates role model management of The Great Barrier Reef (GBR). The GBR is one of the largest protected areas in the world, and was protected in its first instance when faced with the potentially high environmental risks of oil and gas exploration. With worldwide reef systems 40% destroyed or degraded to unrecognizable, Australia must continue as a world leader in protecting our less degraded reef systems and coastlines from threats such as this.

Despite the high standard of Health Safety and Environment policies promoted in the oil and gas industry, 2009 has witnessed two recent oil spills of significant threat to the marine environment.

The first in March when the Pacific Adventurer lost containers of ammonium nitrate and 270 tones of fuel oil offshore of Cape Moreton where as detailed by the Australian Marine Safety Authority (AMSA) :*“The oil impacted significant portions of the south-east Queensland coast, in particular the eastern and northern beaches and headlands of Moreton Island (a National Park), the eastern beaches of Bribie Island (north of Brisbane), the beaches and foreshores of the Sunshine Coast (north of Brisbane) and small areas of the Brisbane River.”*

(AMSA:www.amsa.gov.au/Marine_Environment_Protection/Major_Oil_Spills_in_Australia/Pacific_Adventurer/index.asp)

The second spill started on the 21st of August 2009, when a leak developed in an oil well of the Montara oil field in the Timor Sea, close to world significant biodiversity hotspots (<http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/mpa/ashmore/index.html>): Cartier Reef (a National Marine Reserve), 150km from the Ashmore complex a National Nature

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Reserve; and 250km from the Kimberley coast. This is currently releasing a conservatively estimated 3000 barrels of oil or approximately 470,000 litres a day of sweet light crude, gas (including the greenhouse gas methane) and is expected not to be stopped for at least 7 weeks. In the first three days it was reported that at least 10,000 litres of dispersant, which is also toxic to the environment, were used to contain the resulting slick. These estimates are based on the information available to the public and it is also of concern that there has not been more transparency in this process. One of the learning experiences from the Pacific Adventurer disaster was that the scale of the spill was underestimated and the more rapid action commensurate with the scale of the spill was delayed.

Records show that the Montara oil field spill follows six major oil spills in Western Australia since 1975 and given the well recognized fragility of the coast and offshore reefs in this region, this history of accidents is of concern. Even more alarming is the fact that both chemicals and a new drill rig have had to be shipped from great distance to deal with the current event. This clearly foreseeable delay in treatment, demonstrates that exploitation of natural resources for short term gain is placed above our natural heritage in federal and state government priorities.
(www.amsa.gov.au/Marine_Environment_Protection/Major_Oil_Spills_in_Australia/).

Coral reefs are currently declining worldwide as a result of human interaction and climate change. The remote reefs of Northern Australia will not escape the resultant threats of coral bleaching, ocean acidification and over fishing (<http://royalsociety.org/page.asp?id=3093>). Added to this, the potential compounding threats of pollution from oil and gas operations must be taken more seriously than they currently are. An ever increasing suite of pressures and impacts will undermine reef resilience to the point where they will not recover (www.australiancoralreefsociety.org/ and <http://www.coralcoe.org.au/>).

It should be the clear duty of all nations to pass on the environment to subsequent generations in a responsible fashion. It is a responsibility of stakeholders, engaging in activities with the potential to impact the environment, to be able to contain and minimize impacts. The ways in which this will be done, should be clearly documented for the public and it is a Federal Government responsibility to ensure this sort of insurance against disaster both occurs and is taken seriously.

The Australian Coral Reef Society would therefore like to call upon the state and federal government agencies, oil and gas industry and general public, to exercise extreme caution in the ongoing developments which, although intrinsically linked to Australia's economy, should not put the Australian environment at great risk.

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We call for tighter approval processes for developments on the doorstep of internationally significant wonders such as The Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area, Cartier Island Marine Reserve, the Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve, Hibernia Reef, Scott Reef, Rowley Shoals and the Kimberley and Pilbara coastlines. This process should include the review of major projects by independent scientific bodies and greater transparency in environmental assessments.

The Australian Coral Reef Society: 1) supports calls for an inquiry into the recent events in the Timor Sea, including the adequacy of Australia's oil spill response to major offshore oil spills; and 2) calls for increased investment and effort into understanding and protecting our coastal and offshore coral reefs in both North Eastern and North Western Australia. These ecosystems hold a wealth of biodiversity which is increasingly scarce worldwide.

Of particular concern to The Australian Coral Reef Society is that the recently green-lighted Gorgon Project in WA is Australia's largest energy resource project. Firstly, the required safety measures to deal with the spills and leaks that will occur here do not seem sufficiently advanced. Secondly, we now know that a future with 450ppm CO₂ is a future most likely containing coral reef degradation on a massive scale. We refer you in particular to Figure 5.2 in the recent "Great Barrier Reef Outlook Report 2009 In Brief", from The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and to the findings of this report. We urge the federal and state government to accelerate measures that will bring us well under this currently aimed for threshold by moving away from large scale CO₂ releasing energy projects.

The Australian Coral Reef Society would value a reply to these concerns and an outline of the new actions to be implemented in the future to prevent oil spills on or near our coastlines.

Yours sincerely

Professor Justin Marshall
President of The Australian Coral Reef Society

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The Australian Coral Reef Society (ACRS) is the peak professional body representing coral reef scientists in Australia. It is the oldest coral reef organisation in the world, and its membership includes many of the world's leading experts in coral reef sciences. Since its key role in establishing the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park in 1975, the ACRS has maintained a tradition of highly regarded, science-based contributions to issues relating to Australian coral reefs. As scientists with extensive knowledge of coral reefs and the health of reef organisms, members of the Society have become increasingly concerned about the fate of these precious ecosystems in the face of current and future pressures. Australian coral reefs are critically important to Australia economically and culturally and the ACRS believes we have an international responsibility to lead the way.

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