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The risk of being a fish in Australian waters.

On March 16, when cyclone *Hamish* was blowing off the Queensland coast, the not-so-good ship MV Pacific Adventurer was in progress from Newcastle to Brisbane, with a load of, amongst other things, 31 containers of ammonium nitrate fertiliser. As happens so often nowadays, the containers were not properly secured on deck and broke loose. Loose containers and a heavily rolling ship are not a good mixture. The containers took off and most of them are currently floating in the ocean around Brisbane and, if they are breached, are fertilising it. The ones that didn't fall off the deck – and perhaps some that did – created damage to the ship, punching a couple of holes in the hull. This breached the fuel tanks leading to a fuel oil spill. This spill was initially assessed as being minor; but a belated good look discovered that it was actually ten times larger than originally assessed. The damage happened near two islands, Moreton and Bribie, which finished up heavily oiled. So was about 60km of coastline in one of Australia's prime tourist areas. What animals were found to be affected were cleaned, and returned to the wild. We can guess what happened to those that were not found. This was after a state of emergency had been declared by Premier Anna Bligh who faces election shortly.

Amongst ships sent to the rescue was a navy mine-clearing vessel. For those unfamiliar with mining, explosives and terrorism, a mixture of fuel oil and ammonium nitrate just happens to be the most used commercial explosive. Media were very coy about this unholy mixture. The navy is still looking for the containers. They don't have to look for the oil which is only too evident. The ship's captain who, according to the crew, is largely to blame for the disaster, is currently holidaying in Brisbane minus his pass-port. The maximum fine which could be imposed on the Hong Kong registered ship and its captain is in the order of A\$ 250 million. Even if we discount the explosive danger, the fertilising of the ocean with ammonium nitrate is about the worst environmental disaster which could befall the Great Barrier Reef to the north of the disaster zone. If the containers are not found and their contents emptied, this latter effect is almost a certainty. At the moment the containers may yet be intact – we hope. Of course, in the days before containerisation fertiliser used to be in bags and stowed by wharfies, which is short for wharf labourers. These were not, as the name would suggest, unskilled workers. To stow a cargo of bags so they wouldn't move in a heavy swell not only required brawn but expertise. To stow containerised deck cargo is nowhere near as skilful, but the lone crane operator who does this is not likely to be possessed by pride like the old wharfies were. More likely he is paid by crane rates, a measure with which wharf companies seem to be obsessed.

The damages, if it comes to assessing them, will be determined on the loss of cargo, the damage done to ship and containers, and the fines inflicted, if any. The damage done to the environment is not only hard to assess but impossible to rectify. For instance, it is generally agreed that the beach can never be cleaned perfectly, because the very act of cleaning will force some of the oil into the sand.

This is only one of numerous instances of pollution of the beaches of the world by fuel oil and, much worse, crude oil. Few of these are due what could be called unavoidable accidents. As in this instance, we are generally looking at penny pinching practices and sheer neglect, as shipowners go for inexperienced crews, pay them badly or not at all, buy up rust buckets and neglect maintenance.

So far – and the episode has not yet ended because the containers have not been retrieved – even though a state of emergency had to be declared, the people of Queensland have been lucky. Things could have been a lot worse. In fact, things were a lot worse on July 21 1991 when the Greek tanker Kirki approached the West Australian coast. She was on her way to Kwinana refinery from Jebel Dhanna in the Persian Gulf; the weather was lousy with the wind blowing at 35 knots and there was a gale warning.

The Kirki was built in 1969 in Spain and was registered in Liberia. She was chartered to BP Australia. Although not a super tanker by to-day's standards, she was still carrying some 82,650 tons of light crude, a full cargo load.. Problems with her hull were noticed a couple of days earlier, and the forepeak ballast tank was found to be filled with water. Attempts to pump the water out failed. On July 21 the Kirki lost its entire bow section. The contents of the No 1 cargo tank escaped to the sea and the first of many fires broke out, possibly due to sparking from exposed electrical cables.

The skipper, understandably, ordered the entire crew of 32 to be taken off by helicopter. The ship was left to the mercy of the ocean. Later it was decided that it was salvageable and 2 of the original crew were landed on the deck and left in charge of the ship. The saga, however, didn't end there. When they raised steam in a boiler supplying one of the pumps, the pressure in the boiler rose to double the rated figure because the pressure relief valve stuck. It was freed by the heroic action of crew members who manually levered the valve open, thereby avoiding a catastrophic steam explosion. The ship was towed to Singapore where it was scrapped after unloading the remaining cargo. Some 20,000 tons of oil was originally estimated to have been lost.

So far, I have not mentioned the question of oil spill. The effort was great. The local Environmental Protection Agency was mobilised, and BP ordered a massive amount of gear to be brought to the site, including equipment from the eastern states. Six fishing vessels were ordered to churn the spill to help it breaking up. Large amounts of dispersant were sprayed on the spill.

I think that what mainly saved the situation from becoming catastrophic was the rough weather which broke up the spill, and the fact that the damage to the ship occurred far out to sea. There was an enquiry which included a further inspection. There had been a regular regime of inspections which had discovered nothing amiss. This latter one found that the ship had been literally falling to pieces. Great rusted areas had been covered up with tarpaulins. The captain was found to be blameless except that he shouldn't have taken all the crew off. In my humble opinion he should never have let them on in the first place, given the ship's condition.

This is a situation which is duplicated all over the world, and has been happening for centuries, regardless of whether the ships were sail, steam or diesel.. Greedy shipowners, rotten ships, registration in countries interested only in collecting fees. What is scary is the size of ship; to-day's super tankers are hundreds of metres long and sailors have to traverse them on bikes. Such ships take kilometres to stop, as was shown in the Exxon Valdez disaster. Even if the oil spilled from them ultimately finishes up in clumps on the sea floor, who knows what damage it does once it gets there? Luckily, none of these monstrous ships have yet been subject to a major disaster. As they get older, and maintenance gets even worse given the economic crisis, such disasters will be inevitable. Who would want to be a fish, nowadays? It is bad enough being a human!