

The West Australian

DARING OR DUMB? WA'S WHALE CAPTIVES

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Wreckage: Tonnes of oil, fuel and chemicals seep into Flying Fish Cove after the MV Tycoon was ripped in two by rough seas.

Picture: Amy Rossbach

Oil spill threatens island wildlife as ship splits in two

REBECCA TRIGGER, MICHELLE RIDLEY and ANGELA POWNALL

Christmas Island is bracing for an environmental and economic crisis after a stricken cargo ship broke up and leaked tonnes of pollutants into its pristine waters.

Islanders watched helplessly as the Panama-flagged MV Tycoon split in two at Flying Fish Cove yesterday afternoon after it was ripped from its berth by a big swell.

Experts warned that the spill was a potential disaster for the ecologically important area, with crabs, birds and coral all threatened.

The Australian Maritime Safety Authority said rough seas preventing it salvaging the vessel or stop-

ping more oil being spilt for at least 24 hours.

The 15-strong crew abandoned the ship on Sunday after it broke its moorings in the island's only port, next to the township.

John Richardson, commander of Christmas Island's Volunteer Marine Rescue, said 20 to 60 tonnes of pollutants had leached into the sea.

"The current situation is pretty awful," he said. "The ship has broken in two and has been discharging a lot of diesel and oil into Flying Fish Cove."

The MV Tycoon was half-loaded with phosphate dust from the island's mine when the loading had stopped at knock-off time on Satur-

day. The next day, the mooring rope snapped. The crew jumped overboard into rough seas and were picked up by waiting navy vessels.

The ship held 102 tonnes of heavy motor oil, 11,000 litres of lubricant, 32 tonnes of diesel and 260 tonnes of phosphate.

Conservation Council environmental scientist Nic Dunlop warned that the highly damaging heavy motor oil leaking from the ship would have a disastrous environmental impact on threatened seabirds and the coral band that rings the island.

"Only a few tonnes of heavy motor oil would have a major, disastrous impact on the environment," he said.

Islanders went to the settlement's beach yesterday to try to clean up the diesel and oil from the beach and save wildlife.

Mr Richardson said they were stopped by police and the AMSA officials because they were not properly equipped or trained.

Volunteers will be equipped and trained today to help with the clean-up.

"There is absolutely nothing we can do, apart from look on and get very angry and frustrated," Mr Richardson said.

Rhiannon Bird, a student staying on her native Christmas Island during the university break, said she got up on Sunday morning and watched the disaster unfold.

Miss Bird, 18, photographed crew members jumping for their lives.

"It was very frightening," she said. "It was pouring with rain and very windy. There is no let-up at the moment."

She and others watched the oil slick spread as birds swooped into the polluted waters.

"The ship was just bashing against the cliff. It got worse and was just spilling all this oil into the cove. There's not much we can do. It's horrible," she said.

Mr Richardson said the incident would have great commercial impact on Christmas Island because the stricken ship had

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