

# Experts fear for rare species

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and REBECCA TRIGGER

Marine biologists fear yesterday's spill from the MV Tycoon could be disastrous for the environment on Christmas Island, which is often referred to as the Galapagos of the Indian Ocean because of its unique wildlife.

The accident comes at a vital moment in the population cycle of a threatened species of land crab that spawns in the sea.

The Christmas Island red crab migration has been described by Sir David Attenborough as one of the planet's greatest wildlife spectacles and attracts tourists from around the world.

Millions of red land crabs move from the rainforest to the water's edge to release their eggs after the December rains.

The eggs hatch in the water and the young then return to the land about a month later, climbing up on to rocks and beaches.

"Now the homeward migration of millions of baby red crabs is going to involve swimming through diesel, oil and phosphate," University of WA marine biologist Jean-Paul Hobbs said.

"The disaster is obviously going to affect the crabs and flow on to the rest of the environment, marine and terrestrial, that relies on the crab larvae for food."

Whale shark expert Brad Norman said Christmas Island was a critical habitat for whale sharks at this time of year, with the animals feeding on the juvenile crabs.

He said the oil spill could have a major impact on migration and feeding patterns.

Professor Jessica Meeuwig, director of the Centre for Marine Futures at the University of WA, said Christmas Island's isolation meant affected species would take a long time to rejuvenate.

Conservation Council of WA environmental scientist Nic Dunlop said the heavy motor oil leaking from the ship would have a devastating impact on threatened seabirds and the coral band that rings the island.

He said most at risk were the seabird populations that bred on the island such as the brown booby, brown noddy, Abbott's booby and frigatebird.

The rare Abbott's booby does not breed anywhere else in the world,



Pounded: A huge wave crashes against the MV Tycoon that split in two yesterday.

Picture: Rhiannon Bird

Dr Dunlop said. About 1000 to 2000 of these threatened species are on the island. "If the birds become covered in oil, they will be unable to fly and will drown," he said.

Phosphate dust could also smother sensitive coral, Dr Dunlop said.

Dr Hobbs, who has spent 10 years studying species unique to Flying Fish Cove, said rare reef fish hybrids could be affected.

"There are more reef fish hybrids in Flying Fish Cove than anywhere else in the world," he said.

"This is a tragedy."



Clean up: Helper. Picture: Tanja Schonewald



Rescue mission: The navy goes to the aid of the crew of the ship.

> ALSTON 16

## UNDER THREAT FROM THE SPILL

### MV TYCOON

Built: 1983, Japan

Length: 84.6m

Beam: 14.5m

Draft: 6.83m



### FLYING FISH COVE



Red crab



Robber crab



Blue crab



Abbott's booby



Christmas Island frigatebird



Whale shark

## Disaster zone as oil slick threatens wildlife

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damaged the only crane on the island. With only a small amount of cargo coming by air, Christmas Island relies on the port for its food and other supplies.

The damaged crane will be decommissioned and its foundations checked.

"The consequences will be dire. We could be without a port for three months," Mr Richardson said.

"I'm very angry but unfortunately I don't know who to be angry at."

Island administrator Brian Lacy said a shipping delivery scheduled for January 12 had been cancelled and a team was looking at contingency plans to supply the island by air for the next month.

Mr Richardson said a tug being sent from Singapore could take up to two days to reach Christmas Island.

An AMSA spokeswoman said two officers had been sent to the island to assess the damage, but the

authority did not know yesterday how the MV Tycoon would be removed.

The Greens called for an inquiry into the accident and oil spill, questioning why the ship was left on moorings at the loading dock when a strong swell was forecast.

Greens Senator Rachel Siewert said there was little hope of remediation.

"Given the nature of the conditions it is unlikely that the heavy bunker oil, diesel and phosphate currently flowing into the marine environment will be contained or cleaned up," she said.

A spokesman for Immigration Minister Chris Bowen said it was "business as usual" for the island's immigration detention centre, and it was too early to know if the damage to the dock would affect the supply of fresh food.

Christmas Island Tourism Association president Lisa Preston said the island's tourism industry could be crippled because the main swimming area had been polluted.