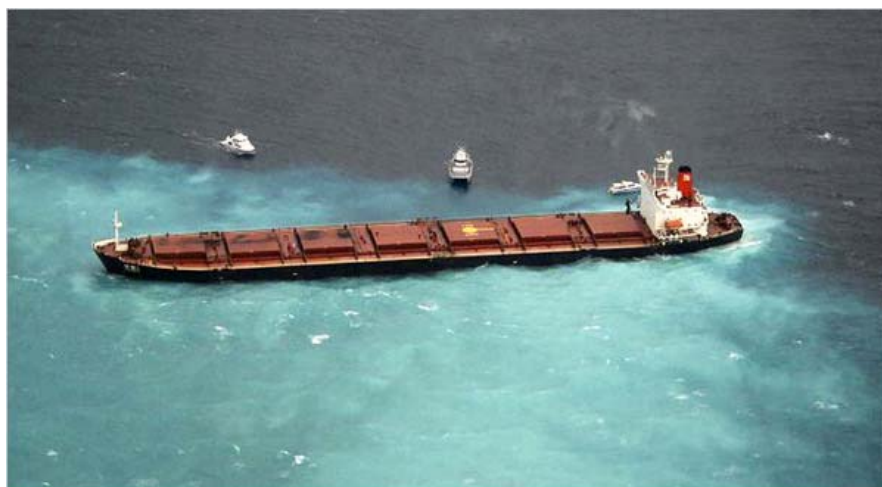


Fuel Leak Threatening Great Barrier Reef



Australian Maritime Safety Authority, via Associated Press

The freighter Shen Neng 1 was loaded with tons of fuel that the authorities feared would leak onto the Great Barrier Reef.

By KEITH BRADSHER
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HONG KONG — Salvage experts and a tugboat crew struggled on Monday to save a large Chinese freighter that slammed into the Great Barrier Reef off [Australia](#) over the weekend, trying to prevent the vessel from breaking apart as some of the 1,075 tons of engine fuel in its tanks began oozing from the hull, threatening the world's largest collection of coral.



The freighter, the Shen Neng 1, crashed into the reef at full speed late Saturday, a few hours after leaving the port of Gladstone, the Australian authorities said. The ship, which was nine miles outside its authorized shipping lane, was hauling 72,000 tons of [coal](#).

Patrick Quirk, general manager of maritime safety for Queensland, the Australian state where the vessel ran aground, said in a statement Monday morning that a hole in the bottom of the ship allowed water into the main engine room. The main engine was damaged and the rudder was seriously damaged, he said. "One of the most worrying aspects is that the ship is still moving on the reef to the action of the seas, which is doing further damage," he said.

Anna Bligh, Queensland's premier, told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio early Monday, "It's possible that this could be one of the most complex and difficult salvage operations we've seen, certainly in Queensland's maritime history and possibly Australia's."

An Australian aircraft dropped chemical dispersants on Sunday on what the authorities

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described as a ribbon of oil two miles long and as wide as the length of a football field.

Ocean swells of 6 to 10 feet prevented the deployment of floating booms to contain the oil slick. The swells also repeatedly lifted the ship and dropped it on the shoal, where it ran aground.

Basil M. Karatzas, a project manager at **Compass Maritime Services**, a ship broker in Fort Lee, N.J., said it was not unusual that the 755-foot Shen Neng 1 would be carrying so much bunker fuel. A ship of that size and design would burn about 35 tons of fuel a day, he said, and would require at least two weeks to travel from eastern Australia to [China](#).

Ships headed to China carry extra fuel to be ready for long delays on arrival. Port delays are common because commodities are pouring into the country to sustain its economic boom. Depending on the fuel's density, the amount carried by the Shen Neng would equate to about 325,000 gallons.

Coal is much less toxic than oil, but could blanket the sea bottom if the ship comes apart, **Mr. Karatzas** said.

China is the world's largest consumer of coal, burning more than the United States, the [European Union](#) and Japan combined.

Relations between China and Australia have frayed since a Chinese court [imposed prison sentences last Monday](#) of 7 to 14 years on four executives of Rio Tinto, an Australian mining company. The executives pleaded guilty to accepting \$13.5 million in bribes to influence their allocation of scarce iron ore to Chinese steelmakers.

Australia's environmental movement is very sensitive to any threat to the Great Barrier Reef, making it rather likely that a full investigation will be conducted into how the Shen Neng 1 strayed so far off course. It ran aground 44 miles east of Great Keppel Island, off eastern Australia about 370 miles north of Brisbane, in an area of the reef that is subject to especially stringent environmental restrictions and that is popular with sport fishermen.

An Australian police boat was nearby to rescue the crew of 23 if the vessel did break up.

Meraiah Foley contributed reporting from Sydney, Australia.

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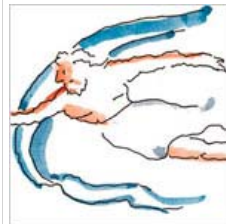
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