

Increased coastal regulation likely

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In March 1989, the large American oil tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground in Alaska's King William Sound, creating massive marine pollution. The major cause of the accident was human error. Investigation found that the third mate did not properly manoeuvre the vessel, and that the master failed to provide navigation watch, possibly because he was under the influence of alcohol.

The Exxon Valdez incident became a defining moment in efforts to prevent pollution of the marine environment by ships. It caused a huge public furore in the United States and led to the introduction of the Oil Pollution Act in 1990, placing extensive controls over oil tankers and other vessels in US waters.

Now, almost 20 years to the day since the Exxon Valdez disaster, there is another similar case. While the amount of oil spilt is far less, the consequences may be as far-reaching. As with the Exxon Valdez, the main cause of the latest incident is probably human error - a factor hard to control, much less eliminate.

On March 11, the Hong Kong-flagged container ship Pacific Adventurer, while in heavy seas off the south-east coast of Queensland, lost 31 containers overboard. These were loaded with the chemical fertiliser ammonium nitrate. To make matters worse, the ship apparently rolled on the containers, fracturing the hull and spilling over 200 tonnes of bunker fuel. This created a 60km oil slick, resulting in extensive pollution of the sensitive marine environment of nearby Moreton Island and the popular tourist beaches of Queensland's Sunshine Coast.

Hundreds of workers were engaged in cleaning up these beaches and two mine hunters from the Royal Australian Navy have been searching for the lost containers. They must be recovered: Apart from the problems the ammonium nitrate poses, the area is a rich prawning ground, and trawlers could snag containers, leading to the loss of fishing gear, and possibly even a prawn trawler.

The incident attracted huge public attention in Australia. Australians are addicted to their beaches and are committed to protecting their marine environment. Incidents of marine pollution by ships inevitably lead to calls for new restrictions on vessels in Australian waters, particularly in the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait.

The cause of the disaster is being investigated. While the waters at the time were rough, they were not exceptionally so. The ship was still some distance from the centre of Cyclone Hamish and a well-operated ship should not have lost cargo in that way. The decision of the ship's master not to slow down or alter course may have been due to a wish to get into the sheltered waters of Moreton Bay ahead of the cyclone, as well as the desire to maintain his schedule.

Press reports suggest the ship's officers had instructed the stevedores loading the containers in Newcastle, the ship's previous port of call, to apply normal securing arrangements rather than storm lashings, even though weather forecasts showed the ship was likely to pass near Cyclone Hamish. The Pacific Adventurer is a multi-purpose vessel, not a dedicated container ship, and containers are carried on deck on top of general cargo holds. This can make securing them more difficult.

The disaster is likely to have far-reaching implications. It will almost certainly galvanise the Australian government into reducing the risks of shipping accidents in Australian waters by whatever means possible. For example, we are less likely now to see any softening of its position on compulsory pilotage in the Torres Strait. This was introduced in 2006 because the government thought that unpiloted ships passing through the hazardous waters of Torres Strait posed an unacceptable risk to a very sensitive marine environment. Both the US and Singapore have protested against this arrangement.

Ship owners are caught between the desire to contain costs and the need to operate safe ships. Shipping accidents are caused by badly maintained ships, human error, or both. While regulations and enforcement can reduce the risks of poor maintenance, it is harder to tackle human error, particularly when there is already concern about the professional standards of seafarers and the attractiveness of seafaring as a vocation.

The risks of human error could become greater as the global economic recession deepens, international trade declines, ships are laid up and ship owners seek to cut costs, possibly by employing less experienced and qualified crews.

We can expect restrictions on navigation to continue due to greater international concern for the marine environment. This concern has increased enormously over the last 20 years or so. While major ship-owning nations such as Singapore may oppose new coastal regulations on shipping, the trend towards increased regulation is inevitable. Incidents such as the Pacific Adventurer disaster will only accelerate this trend.

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