

# Taking Care of the Sea

The sea was once only a highway for vessels and trade but this is now only one aspect of a spectrum of activities including the protection of maritime assets. While there is universal updated hydrographic data coverage and there are changes in trade routes, types of cargo and vessels, there is a need for even greater co-operation by all involved in ‘Taking Care of the Sea’™.

The Continental and Island State of the Western Indian Ocean region recognised the need to improve the safety of navigation through their regional waters and to try to enforce regulations intended to protect their environment and marine resources. The World Bank/GEF WIOMHDCMPP project was intended to help governments achieve these objectives by surveying the route most used by the international oil trade through the Mozambique Channel. In addition, aids to navigation were made fully operational, so that ports and approaches to critical ports along the route were adequately surveyed and charted. Maritime safety information in the region was improved and as many technical personnel as possible were trained. This project will end on 31 December 2012.

Over 5,000 tanker voyages per year, carrying 30% of all crude oil, take place in the sensitive coastal waters of the Western Indian Ocean. Most of this international trade passed the coast of East Africa in close proximity to the World Heritage site of Aldabra Atoll (Seychelles) and the important maritime resources of these coastal States. Many of the vessels carry approximately 300,000 metric tonnes of crude oil each. A study found that accidents involving very large vessels carrying crude oil through the region would likely overwhelm the ability of the coastal States to combat an oil spill of that magnitude and this could have a devastating impact on the environment of the region. Such a spill could also severely harm the economies of these developing States.

High winds and seas are common in the region, raising the risk that ships could accidentally spill oil, chemicals, noxious liquid wastes, and other hazardous substances. Currently, slicks brought in from spills in the open ocean by coastal currents frequently mar beaches and damage coral reefs.

A 1000 nautical mile track through the Mozambique Channel, most used by the VLCCs (very large crude carriers), has been surveyed together with certain adjacent ports and approaches and the data included in the appropriate nautical charting. Aids to navigation along the route have been repaired or replaced, and search and rescue and maritime safety information services improved. GMDSS (global maritime distress safety system) equipment has been provided where necessary. In addition, oil-spill planning and response training has been undertaken. Training has also been provided in hydrographic surveying, maintenance of aids to navigation and port state control in the region. A recent event involving the vessel *Angel I* in Mauritius demonstrated amply, that capacity at country level to prevent accidents and to contain the effects is most important to deal with an impending catastrophe. In addition, in August 2009 the shipwreck of *Gulser Ana* led to badly oiled beaches in Madagascar.

The escalation of pirate activity in the area has forced vessels to be diverted from their normal surveyed and safe routes through the Western Indian Ocean. The actual routes now followed by the VLCCs are often not known as this information is considered confidential in this uncertain maritime safety situation.

Perhaps it is appropriate for all concerned to co-operate more closely in ‘Taking Care of the Sea.’