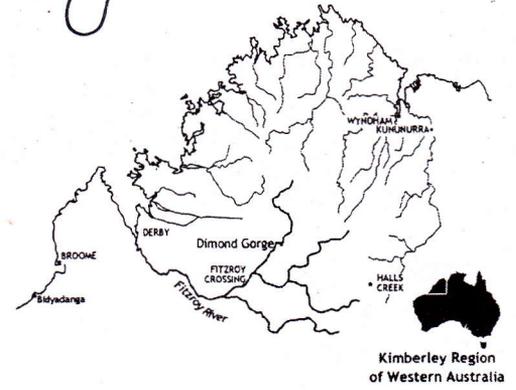


09-09 Oil spill Koobul Bay



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THE DIRT ON THE SPILL

Since 21 August, gas and oil condensate have been gushing into the Timor Sea from the West Atlas rig, about 250km off the Kimberley coast. The Federal Minister for the Environment says that between 300-400 barrels of oil is escaping each day and NASA satellite imagery shows the spill to have spread over 15,000 sq km. Journalists and other observers describe it as a national emergency and one of the largest oil leaks in Australia's history. The spill's contribution to the atmosphere of greenhouse gasses can only be guessed at.

Within days of the disaster occurring, environmental organisations were calling for a judicial inquiry into its causes – the Thai-based owner, PTTEP, has so far been unable to provide any explanation – and the company's rescue plans.

A main concern was that PTTEP, with the approval of the Australian Government, chose to deploy a drill rig that had to be towed from Singapore, rather than a local one, resulting in a three-week wait before efforts could begin to plug the leak. Further delays were caused by towing problems, and PTTEP has announced that it will take at least 4-7 weeks of drilling before the leak can be capped.

Meanwhile, high-grade detergents known as dispersants are being used to 'clean up' parts of the slick, which is moving towards the coastline. These substances are highly toxic, with potentially devastating effects on marine animals and plants.

In recent days, oil industry insiders have contacted EK to say the disaster probably occurred because the West Atlas rig was not equipped with a blow-out protector, which could have prevented the oil slick, and that similar accidents could occur at other wells.

The Australian Government response to the emergency, in particular the lack of clear and reliable information about the size, rate of flow, location and spread of the spill, the response plan, and the extent of environmental monitoring, including the current and likely damage to marine life, has been seriously inadequate.

All of this again raises questions that EK and others have been asking since the 500-litre oil spill off the Broome coast in July 2009.

In that case, the Broome Port Authority was notified of an accident on the afternoon of 17 July but did not respond until the following day, reportedly because it does not have a 24-hour-accident response strategy. By the time action was taken, the spill could not be located, and 12 days later, thick globules of oil were washed up along 7km of beaches from Cable to Reddell.

A clean-up was undertaken by local authorities, businesses and residents. Community members helped to mobilise Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA), which was then contracted by the Port Authority for a morning's work. This is the first time CVA has assisted in such an operation, probably because of the risks. The Port Authority is now seeking reimbursement of \$35,000 from the insurers of the Belgian-owned ship, 'Devon'.

With Woodside's plan to put a rig over Scott Reef, together with the 700% increase in sea traffic along the Kimberley coast over the past two years and the Port Authority's forecast of a doubling again over the next two if the Browse hub proceeds, the Kimberley and wider community have good reasons to worry.

The inquiry into the West Atlas accident, which the Federal Government has now agreed to, could provide a forum for such concerns to be raised.

Both accidents have led to demands for improvements to contingency plans so that spills are responded to more speedily. These plans must be publicly released.

EK and other environment organisations are lobbying for more reliable and detailed information to be made available about responses to accidents and how the effects of spills on marine life are monitored and assessed.

EK supports calls for regulatory reform. At present it is rare for companies to face prosecution if they report accidents, and their insurers are left to cover the costs of the clean-ups. This has not stopped furious commercial fishermen from threatening PTTEP with legal action.

Above all, a moratorium on oil and gas developments must be declared to enable the Kimberley community to be consulted and make informed decisions about the future of the region.

