

Oil pollutes pristine coastline

By **FLIP PRIOR AND BIANCA THAIR**

ABOUT 12km of pristine sand from north of the rocks at Cable Beach to Reddell Beach was polluted last week when thousands of globules of heavy fuel oil from an unknown commercial vessel washed up on the high tide line.

Conservation groups called on the community to pitch in and help clean up at the weekend after blobs of the oil became lodged in sandstone formations.

Conservation Volunteers spokesman Michael Andrews said there were rocky areas which had been difficult for Port of Broome staff to clear up effectively.

Last week, teams from the port, Department of Environment and Conservation and Department for Planning and Infrastructure spent days raking about 500 litres of fuel off the beaches.

"We were approached by the Port and a few other organisations around town as an organisation that might be capable of coordinating a volunteer effort," Mr Andrews said.

Last week, Environs Kimberley director Martin Pritchard expressed fears about the future safety of wildlife in the area should the proposed LNG plant at James Price Point go ahead with a correlating increase in shipping traffic.

"The State Government and oil and gas companies like Woodside, Shell and BP should rethink their plans for developing a gas hub on

the Kimberley coast – it would be a disaster for wildlife and a disaster for tourism," he said.

He said he was made aware of the spill by concerned friends who stepped on the residue while walking along the beaches.

"They basically had a really hard time trying to wash it off their feet – it was disgusting," he said. "It's really sticky, tarry, and stinks of diesel – it's pretty horrible stuff."

Broome Port chief executive Captain Vic Justice said he had personally been involved in the clean-up effort since he heard about the incident on June 29.

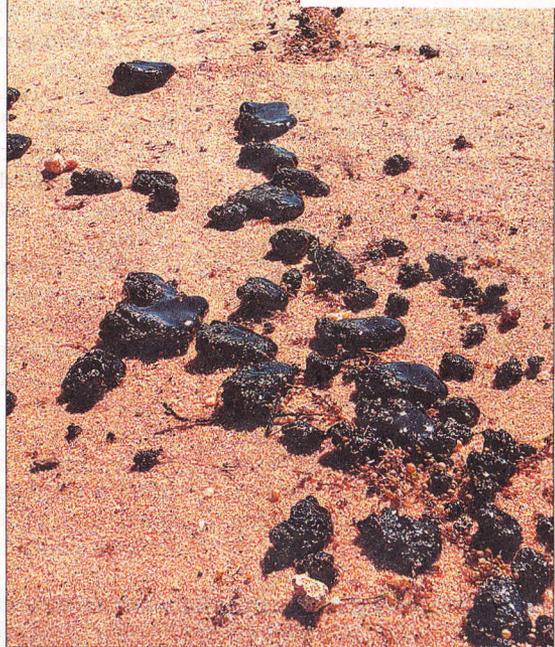
He said it was the first time he'd heard of oil washing onto the beach in Broome and described the incident as "an affront" but a "cosmetic problem".

"There's been no sign of anything happening to the wildlife and I don't believe there's going to be any long-lasting effects," he said.

Samples have been sent to the State Government laboratory for analysis and the incident has been reported to the Australian Maritime Safety Authority. Offenders would face "huge fines" if caught, Capt. Justice said.

"It's very, very hard to identify which ship did it – unless you actually see the ship releasing it and you get photographic evidence," he said.

He dismissed claims a traffic increase would increase the risk of future spills. "Many, many thousands of vessels go past this section of coast – the fact that there are no other incidents indicates that 99.99 per cent of ships are operated responsibly and safely," he said.



Thousands of globules of oil polluted a 7km stretch of Broome's beaches last week.

Main photo: Rod Hartvigen.