



Browse Island in
Ashmore Reef
Nature Reserve

Photos courtesy of Environment Australia

Customs protecting an environment 'magnifique'

By Karen McCormick

Ashmore Reef—rich in unique biodiversity—provides a majestic backdrop for some of Customs most important and lasting work.

Australia's Ashmore Reef, 600 km north-west of the mainland and about 100 km south of Indonesia, combines visual splendour and high biodiversity to make it one of our most precious natural assets.

For more than 300 years, the shelter, fresh water and fishing provided by the reef has made it a favourite stop-off point for Indonesian fishing vessels. For much longer than that, it has also been extremely important for migratory birds and the passage of rich marine material.

The traditional fisherman set sail from Roti on what is often a perilous journey in small sailing vessels between nine and 12 metres long, navigating by cloud formations, colours and reflection of the shallow water on the clouds. They go in search of trochus (an

exotic spiral shaped shell) sometimes used as a paint additive and in button production; trepang or beche-de-mer (a type of sea slug considered an aphrodisiac); and shark fin (used for soup). These products are sold to the lucrative Chinese markets.

An Australian Customs vessel is on long-term deployment at Ashmore Reef and Customs Bay-class patrol vessels are tasked and deployed as required.

The ACV *Wauri* has been deployed at Ashmore since May last year, and according to Phil Domaschenz, Environment Australia's Manager for the Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve, the extended presence of the Customs vessel has significantly enhanced the opportunity to protect the reef's unique marine environment.

"Under previous arrangements, management vessels were only on location for nine months of the year," he said. "Significant illegal harvesting was thought to have

occurred during the cyclone season while the vessel was absent.

"Customs is now our on-site manager at Ashmore Reef. Environment Australia has had a vessel contracted at Ashmore since 1985, but since we've been using Customs resources, the capacity to have a presence there all year has increased the level of protection."

The reef (approximately 25 km long and 18 km wide) is the centrepiece of the Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve.

Its unique biodiversity includes hundreds of species of fish, dugongs and three species of marine turtle that breed in this area. The reef also has the highest known diversity and density of sea snakes (14 known species). Ashmore Reef contains three small islands (each about 15 hectares) and two lagoons, but access to the majority of the marine reserve is prohibited to visitors.

The islands within the reef are extremely important for migratory birds. According to Mr Domaschenz, there can be up to 100,000 birds on the islands of

Ashmore at any one time. This includes 96 identified species, of which 47 species are listed under international migratory agreements—the Japan-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (JAMBA) and the China-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement (CAMBA).

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Indonesia and Australia that has been in operation since the mid-1970s, allows traditional Indonesian fishermen to access part of the West Island and West Island lagoon for shelter and fresh water.

The MOU allows traditional fishing from non-motorised vessels outside Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve south-west to Scott Island and to Browse island to the south-east, an area covering approximately 17,850 square nautical miles. (1 nm = 1.85 km)

Customs Coastwatch, together with both Navy Fremantle-class patrol boats and Customs Bay-class vessels tasked by Coastwatch to undertake civil and maritime surveillance, closely monitors the passage of suspect illegal entry

vessels and illegal foreign fishing activity within the boundaries of the MOU and the Australian Fishing Zone (an area akin to the Exclusive Economic Zone extending roughly 200 nautical miles from the mainland), which includes Australia's Territorial Sea Zone (12 nm); and the Contiguous Zone (24 nm).

Customs also provides on-site management of the Ashmore Reef and Cartier Island marine reserves in the area, on behalf of Environment Australia.

ACV *Wauri* is moored at West Island lagoon, and carries out regular patrols through the reserves. In addition to looking out for illegal entrants, Customs work can involve picking up rubbish or nets and making wildlife observations such as recording turtle tracks.

Mr Domaschenz says the high biodiversity of Ashmore is only one of the reasons the area is important to Environment Australia.

"The Indonesian Through-Flow is a south-flowing ocean current that transports biological material from



Indonesian fishermen repair a sail on Ashmore Reef's West Island.

the Indonesian reefs," he said. The Ashmore islands act as a stepping-stone for the transfer of that material to reefs located along the Western Australian coast (eg coral).

"Maintaining that process is important for protecting other reefs in the area.

"In addition, one of the aims of Environment Australia is to protect representative samples of various marine bio-regions around Australia and Ashmore is a representative sample."

Management plans are currently in preparation for both the Ashmore Reef and Cartier Island Reserves and will set direction for management of the reserves over the next seven years. It is expected that the plans will be released for public comment soon.

The Director of Operations in Customs National Marine Unit, Athol Gardiner, says *ACV Wauri* has a multi-tasked function at Ashmore Reef beyond responding to suspected illegal entrant vessels or foreign fishing vessel targets detected by Coastwatch.

"Customs took on responsibility for what had been contracted Environment Australia work and there is a Service Level Agreement between the two agencies to carry out this environmental work," he said

"In my view, the work we do on behalf of Environment Australia is some of Customs most lasting work."

Coastwatch aerial surveillance provides an intelligence picture and targets for *ACV Wauri* to respond to in cases of suspect illegal entrant vessel activity or foreign fishing vessels.

"Coastwatch also provides advance indicators of potential illegal activity and then a highly coordinated response is initiated by the National Surveillance Centre in Canberra," he said.

"Introduction of the Customs transporter vessel *Samson Explorer* late last year means less likelihood of having to put people ashore on Ashmore. This reduces the potential damage to the environment and at the same time, frees up patrol vessels to do what they're supposed to do."

Customs also works closely with the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) to enforce legislation under the Fisheries Management Act in and around Ashmore.

This work, which involves taking action against illegal fishing activity in the Australian Fishing Zone and the MOU area, usually involves either a Customs Bay class vessel or a Navy Fremantle class vessel which is tasked by the National Surveillance Centre after a sighting by Coastwatch aircraft. According to Mike Yates of AFMA,

the majority of illegal fishing within the MOU Zone occurs around Browse and Scott Islands.

"We will take action on any fishing occurring outside the MOU area, or on any non-traditional methods—for example using a compressor for diving or carrying an outboard motor on board—occurring within the zone," he said.

"Customs officers can now exercise powers under the Fisheries Management Act 1991 and we have been working closely with Customs to train officers in how to apply these powers."

Research by CSIRO and the Australian Institute of Marine Science indicates that while the natural environment at Ashmore has been affected by illegal fishing, the reef is still in significantly better condition than others in the area.

And there is little doubt among stakeholders that the extended presence of Customs monitoring activity at the reef all year round will further improve the protection of Ashmore's biological resources.



Red footed booby resting in an Argusia bush at Ashmore Reef.