

Patrolling the Great Australian Bight

Australian Customs, responsible for Australia's civil maritime surveillance program, is conducting air and sea patrols of the Great Australian Bight for illegal activities placing particular emphasis on environmental protection of the region.

Customs National Marine Unit and Coastwatch are tasked on behalf of Commonwealth government departments, agencies and authorities such as Environment Australia or the Australian Fisheries Management Authority to assist in their missions.

Each operation in the Bight by Customs vessels or Customs Coastwatch aircraft is multi-tasked and assists a wide range of clients. However, the primary focus during a patrol can change, depending on the region. In one area, the focus might be on illegal fishing and in another area it might be on protecting calving whales.

Coastwatch concentrates on environment-protection flights in winter. This is when protection of calving whales is vital. A marine mammal protection zone has been set up next to the coast, protecting calving whales from interference from vessels. Entry into this area is closed to all vessels from 1 May to 31 October each year.

The State Manager of the Great Australian Bight marine protected areas, Ross Belcher, recently joined a Coastwatch patrol, flying from Esperance, Western Australia, to Adelaide, South Australia, as part of a planned surveillance operation.

"These whales have to be protected from being accidentally run over by vessels, caught in nets or hurt by floating debris," he said.

"Coastwatch helps us by reporting any vessel in the prohibited areas or reporting any natural events such as the locations of whales, large schools of fish or sharks.

"Customs also assists in the protection of the commercial species of fish in these waters, and helps to preserve the seabed from damage by trawling. Vessels can traverse in the trawling zone at any time but it is closed to all bottom trawling throughout the year."

Coastwatch and the RAAF will be regularly patrolling the area closed to all bottom trawling to ensure compliance with the prohibition on trawling.

"We don't have a lot of information about the occurrences in these waters, so we will be using any information Customs can provide," Mr Belcher said.

The Coastwatch Dash 8s are equipped with sophisticated electronic technology to conduct coastal and maritime surveillance. Infra-red sensors and high-definition cameras slaved to the radar allow for taskings to be conducted at times when fishing at night in prohibited areas is considered a significant risk to the marine park.

Commonwealth and/or State governments manage the Bight's marine protected areas. It is these areas that Coastwatch plans to provide regular surveillance throughout the year.