

OCEANIC VIKING

ARMED VESSEL TO CRACK DOWN ON FISH POACHERS

A new Customs and Fisheries armed patrol vessel, *Oceanic Viking*, is ready for deployment to protect Australia's sovereign interests in the Southern Ocean.

The vessel underwent sea trials in Fremantle in November after an extensive fit out in preparation for its role in protecting the valuable Patagonian toothfish stocks and Australia's borders.

Modifications to the vessel include the mounting of two .50 calibre machine guns on its upper decks and the installation of high-speed boarding craft.

The *Oceanic Viking* is fitted with specialised navigation and communications equipment and a fully equipped medical facility. The Australian Antarctic Division's (AAD) Polar Medicine Unit will provide medical equipment for the vessel and an AAD-contracted doctor with experience in Antarctic conditions will be contracted for each patrol.

The armed vessel will help Customs and Fisheries officers better protect Australia's sovereign interests and valuable Southern Ocean fisheries and conduct year-round armed patrols of Australian waters surrounding the remote Heard Island and McDonald Islands. The area has received increased attention from illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing vessels in recent years.

The 105m *Oceanic Viking* will be used by Customs and Fisheries officers for all future patrols in the region, replacing the polar ships *Aurora Australis* and *Southern Supporter*.

The *Southern Supporter* was responsible for the marathon pursuit and apprehension of the alleged illegal fishing vessel, Uruguayan-flagged *Viarsa I*, in 2003.

The speed and endurance of the *Oceanic Viking* will boost the capability of Customs and Fisheries to respond to and apprehend any vessels illegally targeting the valuable Patagonian toothfish.

In recent months, Customs officers have been engaged in highly specialised training to undertake Southern Ocean operations on board the *Oceanic Viking*.

It will also operate throughout Australia's exclusive economic zone. When not required for Southern Ocean patrols, the vessel will carry out other border protection tasks around mainland Australia and in our tropical northern waters.

The Government announced the two-year armed patrol program in December 2003. Funding of \$47.8m in 2004-05 and \$41.4m in 2005-06 was confirmed in the Federal Budget.

P&O Maritime Services was selected to provide the *Oceanic Viking* after a competitive tender process conducted by Customs.

The vessel will not have a permanent home port as Customs and Fisheries operations require the flexibility to deploy from various locations around the Australian coastline.

