

Farce on the Reef

by Walter Starck

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“Ship on the Reef”: A critical review of this season’s rerun

About once in a decade a ship runs aground somewhere on the Great Barrier Reef. Although this has never resulted in other than trivial damage to the reef, a three ring media circus always unfolds. Politicians posture in mock displays of righteous anger or feigned concern. Environmentalists emote predictions of dire consequences. Bureaucrats blather about protocols and procedures. Various “experts” exude impressive displays of ignorance. Sundry “stakeholders” slither forth declaring an interest in something they have never seen, have nothing invested and know nothing about. Although somewhat predictable, this farce remains perennially popular.

A performance cycle usually runs for several weeks ending in a satisfying *finale* when salvage preparations and phase of the moon mandate removal of the main stage prop. As dramatic as the high points seem at the time, the entire performance is quickly forgotten and always seems fresh when it is rerun. The current season is no exception.

Rating: 2 Stars - Predictable and mildly amusing.

Some considerations on scripting for future performances

- Ship pilots require training and experience comparable to those for commercial airlines. The available pool of qualified persons has disappeared with the demise of an Australian coastal shipping industry. Training the number of pilots required for pilotage of all ships in Barrier Reef waters would take years to bring into effect.
- Mandatory pilotage outside the 12 mile limit of sovereign territorial waters would violate the Law of the Sea Treaty to which Australia is signatory.
- Putting pilots aboard incoming vessels and getting them off outward bound vessels outside the reef is a lengthy costly undertaking and is not without risk, especially in bad weather.
- Pilots are not infallible either. They can only reduce an already small risk at great cost. They are not a guarantee against mishaps.
- Even if paid for by shipowners, the cost of pilotage would have to be incorporated into shipping costs and so must ultimately be borne by the Australian economy.
- The total cost of mandatory pilotage for all ships would greatly exceed the occasional salvage cost, which, in fact, mostly becomes income from overseas for Australian salvage companies and shipyards.
- The actual physical damage to reefs from ship groundings is but a tiny fraction of 1% of the tens of thousands of hectares of reef that are reduced to rubble almost every year by tropical cyclones. Recovery in either case is similar and rapid.

- Oil floats, coral doesn't. The damage to reefs from oil spills is minimal and recovery is rapid. Follow-up studies of oil spills have repeatedly found that environmental recovery has invariably been much faster and more complete than predicted with the worst effects being inflicted by clean-up efforts. The use of dispersants, as was done in the current event, is only a PR stunt by government wanting to be seen to be doing something. For the reef, it is the worst thing to do.
- In the First Persian Gulf War in 1991, the largest oil spill ever occurred when 6-8 million tonnes was dumped into an area of shallow water and reefs. With a thousand oil well fires to contend with, no effort was made to do anything about the marine spill. Follow-up studies found that within 4 months most of the oil had been degraded naturally and within 4 years even the most heavily affected areas had largely or completely recovered. This spill was about 10,000 times larger than the total carried by the ship now on the reef.
- The greatest real tragedy in these ship groundings seems to be curiously invisible. For the captain, and perhaps the first officer, this is a genuine human tragedy. A few minutes inattention has probably consigned them and their families to a life of poverty if not worse.
- The idea of huge fines is beyond stupid. The negative consequences of a grounding for both shipping companies and captains are already so great that even a million dollar fine could not be expected to effectively increase deterrence. Regardless of carelessness, imposing such a fine for what is a tragic result of an all too human failure is neither just nor effective. It is only putting a boot in at a cheap opportunity for self-righteousness display. What is beyond stupid is that such fines must only become a part of the risk of doing business with Australia and must be covered by the shipping charges we ourselves have to pay. The ultimate effect is to fine ourselves for being stupid.

Life is a risk. The mortality rate is 100%. Everything we do entails risk. This one is trivial and ephemeral. There are many far more valuable things that could be done with the millions of dollars a mandatory pilotage scheme would cost each year.

Virtually all groundings result from inattention. An effective reminder that extra caution and alertness is needed in reef waters might take the form of a chapter on shipwrecks and their consequences in an attractive coffee table book on the Barrier Reef. This could be presented to every ship captain on entry to ports in the region. Accompanied by a covering note that politely reminds of the disastrous consequences of groundings for the captains involved, such an appeal to self interest seems a far more cost effective remedy than more bureaucracy when we already have more than we can afford.

Also online at:

http://www.bairdmaritime.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6267:ship-on-the-reef-a-critical-review-of-this-seasons-rerun&catid=99:walter-starcks-blog&Itemid=123

With the following added comment posted on 16 April 2010 by the author:

Antifouling on the Reef

Now the reef salvationsts are claiming that the antifouling paint scraped off in the grounding will poison the area for decades. It would be wonderful if we had antifouling that actually remained

effective for even half that time. After 18 months most of it will be supporting a healthy community of diverse organisms.

Next will come an elaborate and expensive clean-up charade. This is guaranteed to be a success as it would be, only sooner, if left to natural processes to bury and degrade the particles of paint. This is repeatedly observed empirical fact, not academic theory.

A "clean-up" will require months to dredge, transport and bury the "toxic" sediment and only serve to delay the natural recovery, which would otherwise already be well underway. It will also needlessly add a million dollars or more to the cost to the shipping company. The only thing possibly useful being achieved is sheltered workshop activity for some otherwise useless academics and bureaucrats.

This whole thing has become as obscene as it is absurd.

Walter Starck