



Coral reefs off Fort Lauderdale better protected from cargo ships

No groundings since Coast Guard moved anchoring area farther out to sea

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The freighter Clipper Lasco was coming in too fast. As the 645-foot ship approached the anchoring area just north of Port Everglades, loaded with 30,000 tons of aluminum ore, the Coast Guard radioed the captain over an emergency circuit to slow down.

The ship plowed forward and ran aground on a coral reef, lurching to a halt about three quarters of a mile from the hotels and sunbathers of Fort Lauderdale's beach.

No one was hurt and the ship was refloated a week later, but the accident shattered about 1,900 square feet of reef, one of more than a dozen such incidents on the biologically rich coral ridges north of the port.



The Sept. 14, 2006, grounding also was the last.

After the Clipper Lasco accident, the Coast Guard began the lengthy administrative process to ban ships from anchoring so near the reefs, eliminating the shallow anchorage in early 2008 and establishing an area farther off shore for them to await instructions or a berth at the port.

The decision to move the anchorage, which took years and the involvement of scientists, environmental officials and harbor pilots, is — so far — an environmental success story.

Of the 4,251 ships that called on Port Everglades in 2009, none ran aground on the reefs, and there have been no incidents this year, according to the Coast Guard. Although no one will rule out the possibility of another grounding, environmental and maritime officials say the risk has been sharply reduced.

"It's definitely been a success," said Eric Myers, deputy director of the Broward County Department of Environmental Protection and Growth Management. "I think everybody on the environmental side is declaring victory."

For years ships were allowed to essentially park at two anchorage areas, avoiding the expense of steaming endlessly at sea when they had no immediate place to go. The shallow anchorage, used by the largest number of ships, was sandwiched between two reefs in 60 to 70 feet of water, a precarious place for ships, particularly in bad weather.

From 1994 to 2006 there were 17 incidents of groundings or dragged anchors, with the number of accidents accelerating toward the end.

In 2003 the Alam Senang, a 585-foot Malaysian cement carrier, ran up on the second reef from shore. In 2004 the freighters Eastwind and Federal Pescadores struck the reefs, bulldozing thousands of square feet of coral. In 2006 two ships dragged anchors on the reefs and two ran aground, including the Clipper Lasco.

The damage from these incidents is highly localized compared with the more widespread harm caused by pollution,

overfishing and global warming. "But within that small footprint they caused almost complete devastation," said Brian Walker, research scientist at Nova Southeastern University's National Coral Reef Institute. "When a ship strikes a reef, it levels what took thousands of years to build."

The reefs off Fort Lauderdale are part of the largest coral reef system in the continental United States, limestone ridges and coral structures that run from the Keys through Martin County, supporting a vast range of marine life and serving as one of the region's major attractions for fishing, diving and snorkeling.

As the groundings picked up from 2003 to 2006, environmental officials and coral reef scientists called on the Coast Guard to move the anchorages. At first the Coast Guard resisted eliminating the shallow anchorage, but after a change of command at Port Everglades and additional groundings, the Coast Guard agreed to do away with it.

"The reconfigured anchorage area should greatly reduce the potential for future commercial ship groundings by eliminating the former anchorage area," then-Coast Guard Capt. Karl Schultz said at the time. Schultz, now a rear admiral, was credited with taking the problem seriously and trying to solve it.

"It seems to be working very well," said Lt. Paul Steiner, chief of waterways management for the Coast Guard sector that covers Port Everglades.

Mike Young, operations manager for Hyde Shipping, which operates freighters between Port Everglades and the Caribbean, said the change has "absolutely not" caused any problems. "If it helps the environment and saves the reef, then we don't need to be anchoring that close," he said.

Like old-growth forests, coral reefs operate on a larger-than-human time scale, often taking thousands of years to build skeletons and ridges of calcium carbonate. When a reef is damaged, recovery takes a long time if it takes place at all.

David Gilliam, assistant professor at Nova Southeastern University's Oceanographic Center, is studying recovery of ship grounding sites off Fort Lauderdale from 2003 to 2006 for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. So far, he said, tentative signs of regrowth have shown up, including the appearance of small stony corals from larvae settling on the ocean floor, as well as soft corals such as sea fans and sea whips.

"They are showing some signs of recovery, but it's very, very slow," he said. "These grounding sites all look very flat. There's lots of rubble. You can still tell something big and flat landed on them. It's just going to take a long time."
