

Ship groundings smashing holes in Lauderdale coral reefs

by Dan Fleshler
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When the freighter Eastwind smashed part of a coral reef off Fort Lauderdale last month, it was the latest in a series of ship groundings that have hammered the reefs north of Port Everglades.

Since 1998 at least five freighters have grounded on the reefs, dislodging coral and shearing off sponges, in delicate ecosystems that could take decades -- or centuries -- to recover.

The freighters had been idling near the beach at two federally designated anchorages, where ships park to avoid dock fees, await instructions or allow time for the arrival of cargo at the port. Because the anchorages are so close to the reefs, Port Everglades has the worst record of reef groundings of any port in Florida, said Walt Jaap, a scientist who investigates groundings for the Florida Marine Research Institute, a branch of state government. And he said that area could still face the real horror of a spill of oil or hazardous chemicals.

"We feel that something needs to be done out there," he said. "They've just had too many incidents out there, and it's damaging the resource."

Fort Lauderdale city commissioners, angry about the latest grounding, have told their staff to find out what the city can do to move or restrict the anchorages.

"We feel we have a right to protect our reefs and our beaches," Mayor Jim Naugle said. "We feel there's not enough margin for error. They need a more suitable place, away from our beaches, away from our reefs."

The Eastwind, a Greek-flagged freighter carrying bauxite and oil, ran aground March 26, destroying a zone of reef that state officials say encompasses thousands of square feet. Divers also found the crushed remains of a loggerhead sea turtle, a federally protected species. The damage assessment hasn't been completed.

In the same area:

The Pacific Mako, a 428-foot freighter owned by a Cayman Islands company, was caught in the anchorage in a powerful storm Feb. 2, 1998, that dragged it and its two anchors over the reefs toward shore off Las Olas Boulevard. The grounding dislodged corals and destroyed part of the underlying limestone structure of the reef.

The Hind, a 348-foot Panamanian freighter, was parked in the anchorage on March 18, 1998, when heavy winds and high seas pushed it toward shore and caused it to drag its anchor. The grounding scraped clean parts of one reef, grinding the coral to rubble. The owner was fined \$232,784.

The Alam Senang, a 585-foot Malaysian cement carrier, on June 26, 2003, ran up on the second reef from shore, just off the Yankee Clipper hotel. The accident dislodged hundreds of hard corals, as well as soft corals and sponges. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is in settlement negotiations with the

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Aside from their biological value, the reefs are vital to the region's economy, attracting thousands of people for fishing, diving and snorkeling. While Fort Lauderdale would like to take steps to prevent groundings, it's unclear what authority the city has over what takes place offshore.

The Coast Guard, which designated the anchorages, doesn't want to move them. Petty Officer Ryan Doss, spokesman for the Coast Guard, said "it hasn't been determined that there's a need." He said changing anchorages would be a cumbersome process that would require the approval of various entities, including the city of Fort Lauderdale and the Army Corps of Engineers.

"It's really difficult to remove or change an anchorage," he said. "To do that requires a change to the Code of Federal Regulations. It has to be signed off by the district commander. Have to work with state and local officials. It's a long process."

Jaap, the scientist for the Florida Marine Research Institute, said this sort of talk simply indicates that the Coast Guard wasn't interested in making the effort to change things.

"We've heard that before," he said. "The status quo is so easy for them that they would rather do it that way than take positive action."

Port Everglades says the anchorages are necessary for the shipping industry. Port Director Ken Krauter said ships use the anchorages to wait until cargo arrives, deal with mechanical problems, or wait for orders or a new charter. Even Navy vessels use them.

"Pretty well every port has anchorages," he said. "You need to have anchorages where ships will go and drop their hook and wait for instructions. It's important that ports have those options; otherwise, ships would have to anchor outside another port, and that would mean additional steaming and costs."

After a grounding, the state requires the ship's owners to hire divers to reattach as many corals as possible. But not all the damage can be repaired.

"The impact includes physical damage, where the ship gouges and scrapes the reef's surface," said Richard Dodge, executive director of the National Coral Reef Institute at Nova Southeastern University. "It can also make dents and remove whole sections of reef."

And coral recovers slowly, particularly since it's already under stress from algae blooms, pollution and other threats.

"Reefs do have the ability to recover themselves, but it's a slow process," Dodge said. "It takes on the order of tens or hundreds of years, depending on the level of injury and the growth rate of constituent organisms."

The continued pounding of the reefs north of Port Everglades suggests the anchorage should be moved or restricted, Dodge said. "I think you probably let history speak for itself, given the number of ships that have pulled out of that anchorage and ended up on the reef or on shore," he said. "That sort of suggests something should be done to restrict where ships anchor in that area and how they anchor."

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