

Preventing and Combating Pollution from Maritime Traffic



REGIONAL MARINE POLLUTION EMERGENCY RESPONSE CENTRE FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA

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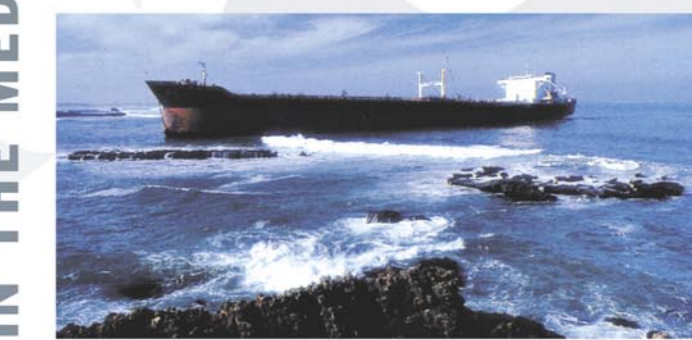
For thousands of years, Mediterranean peoples have been closely associated with shipping. Trading by sea offered advantages over trading by land: goods moved faster, ships could carry more merchandise and transport by sea was cheaper. Shipping still remains the most important, safest, cheapest and, last but not least, the most environmentally friendly way of moving goods over long distances.

ISSUES AT STAKE: DENSITY, ACCIDENTS, DISCHARGES...

The density of maritime traffic in the Mediterranean, which accounts for less than one per cent of the total area of the world's oceans, is particularly high. It is estimated that some 30 % of international sea-borne trade by volume originates in, is directed to Mediterranean ports, or transits the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, some 20-25 % of the approximately 1715 million tonnes of the world's sea-borne oil traffic passes through the Mediterranean.

The Mediterranean is the major route for the transportation of crude oil from the Middle East, North Africa and the Black Sea to Europe and North America. Laden tankers which enter the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal and the Çanakkale Straits, or load their cargoes in Mediterranean oil terminals, are either bound for European ports on the Mediterranean or exit the Mediterranean through the Straits of Gibraltar. The main tanker traffic flows in the East-West direction, with South-North routes occasionally intersecting, joining or branching off from the principal lanes.

Mediterranean ports also handle large volumes and a vast range of hazardous and noxious gaseous, liquid and solid substances, in both bulk and packaged form.



Future sea trade and maritime transport patterns in the Mediterranean are likely to be influenced by the relocation of industries, adjustments in production techniques and distribution processes, efforts to add value at source, the integration of regional markets and increased environmental concerns.



SHIP-GENERATED POLLUTION

The self-cleaning capacity of the sea was for centuries considered sufficient to deal with wastes released from ships. With changing attitudes in the second part of the 20th century, the shipping community reacted promptly, primarily through the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the United Nations specialized agency responsible for dealing with shipping. IMO is instrumental in improving the safety of navigation and protecting the marine environment. Through its numerous international Conventions and other legal instruments, it addresses both operational and accidental pollution.

Operational pollution from ships includes discharges of oil and other substances, resulting from the normal operation of ships, including tankers. It can be reduced and eventually eliminated through the implementation and enforcement of existing regulations.

Accidental pollution is a consequence of incidents affecting ships and their cargoes. It is often related to human error. A combination of efforts in different fields is required to minimize the risk of accidents occurring, limit their consequences and cope efficiently with the resulting spills.

THE RESPONSE: A POLICY DEALING WITH MARINE POLLUTION FROM SHIPS

The basis of international cooperation in the Mediterranean Sea area in the field of prevention, preparedness and response to marine pollution is laid down in the Protocol Concerning Cooperation in Combating Pollution of the Mediterranean Sea by Oil and Other Harmful Substances in Cases of Emergency (the Emergency Protocol) to the Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea against Pollution (the Barcelona Convention) that gave birth to the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP).

The Mediterranean was the third region in the world, after the North and Baltic Seas, in which a regional agreement was adopted on cooperation in combating pollution in cases of emergency, and the first Regional Seas programme under the aegis of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The Emergency Protocol was adopted in 1976 and has been in force since 1978. It sets out the main principles of cooperation in dealing with threats to the marine environment, coasts and related interests of the Contracting Parties arising out of accidental releases or accumulations of small discharges of oil or other harmful substances.

As part of the process of revising the "Barcelona system", the new Protocol concerning Cooperation in Preventing Pollution from Ships and, in Cases of Emergency, Combating Pollution of the Mediterranean Sea, was adopted in Malta on 25 January 2002.

A SEA AT HIGH RISK

The Mediterranean is often cited as one of the world's seas with the highest risk of accidental pollution, due to the very high traffic density, the transportation of large quantities of crude oil, refined petroleum products and chemicals, the existence of narrow, congested and treacherous straits and numerous islands, as well as the large number of ports.

Between 1977 and 2000, REMPEC recorded 311 incidents causing or likely to cause oil pollution of the sea, including 156 incidents resulting in oil spills. A total of 36,476 tonnes of oil were spilled in shipping accidents in the Mediterranean between 1981 and 1990, compared with 21,667 tonnes between 1991 and 2000.

At least 79 shipping incidents recorded in the Mediterranean between 1988 and 1997 involved ships carrying hazardous and noxious substances.



Shipping routes in the Mediterranean (Lavender, 2001).

REMPEC

In order to assist coastal States in implementing the Emergency Protocol, the Regional Oil Combating Centre for the Mediterranean Sea (ROCC) was established in Malta on 11 December 1976, as the first such Regional Centre in the world. Operating on the basis of decisions taken by the Contracting Parties to the Barcelona Convention, the Centre is administered by IMO and financed by the Mediterranean Trust Fund. Its mandate was extended in 1987 to "hazardous substances other than oil", and its name was changed in 1989 to the Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Response Centre for the Mediterranean Sea (REMPEC). The Centre is an example of cooperation and synergy among international bodies: MAP and IMO.

The present objectives of REMPEC are to strengthen the capacities of coastal States and facilitate cooperation between them in case of a major marine pollution incident; assist them in developing their own response capabilities; facilitate technological cooperation and training; and provide a framework for the exchange of relevant information. In addition to the dissemination of information, REMPEC's activities for this purpose include the provision of training and assistance for the development of national and subregional systems of preparedness and response. It promotes cooperation and mutual assistance between the Contracting Parties and provides assistance in cases of emergency.

The adoption of the new Protocol has given REMPEC the necessary legal basis to focus on minimizing and eventually eliminating illegal operational discharges from ships in the Mediterranean Sea. In accordance with the decisions of the Contracting Parties, REMPEC will assist coastal States in promoting and monitoring the effective implementation of relevant international regulations, developing port reception facilities, reducing the environmental risks of maritime traffic, surveying illicit discharges and promoting the prosecution of offenders.



THE "SAFETY CONTINUUM"

The protection of the marine environment can only be achieved through a so-called "safety continuum" encompassing prevention, preparedness and response. While the 1976 Emergency Protocol focused on cooperative action for preparedness and response to marine pollution emergencies, the 2002 Protocol will also enable REMPEC to address the prevention of pollution from ships.

By adding the component of prevention, the Contracting Parties have therefore completed the circle of the "safety continuum". They also recognized that the implementation of the international conventions and resolutions adopted under the auspices of IMO is the underlying principle of cooperation between coastal States, whilst taking into account the contribution of the European Community to the implementation of international standards for maritime safety and the prevention of pollution from ships.

The translation of the new Protocol into practice is expected to significantly reduce pollution from maritime transport activities. The success of these efforts will depend on the strengthening of cooperation and the reinforcement of a regional approach. It will involve solving not only technical and financial problems, but also difficulties related to differences in the priorities set by coastal States, due in part to their economic diversity.



For further information, a detailed publication on Protecting the Mediterranean against Maritime Accidents and Illegal Discharges from Ships is available at REMPEC.



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