

Media Release

SENATOR THE HON. IAN CAMPBELL
Minister for Environment and Heritage

SENATOR THE HON. CHRIS ELLISON
Minister for Justice and Customs

21/12/06

NEW CUSTOMS VESSEL TO STRENGTHEN MARITIME ENFORCEMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

The Australian Government will charter a new Customs vessel to increase protection of Australia's environmentally sensitive Ashmore Reef and Cartier Island Marine Reserves, located off Australia's remote north-west coast.

Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Senator Ian Campbell and Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Chris Ellison, today announced details of plans to strengthen the Government's maritime enforcement presence in the area.

Senator Campbell said the Ashmore and Cartier Reserves were internationally significant coral ecosystems that were under increasing threat from illegal foreign fishing.

"The Government recognises there is a need for a dedicated vessel to strengthen surveillance and enforcement, and ensure the long-term ecological health of these marine reserves," Senator Campbell said.

"The illegal targeting of certain key species is damaging these coral reefs, which, thanks to their protected status, contain attractive stocks of important species such as trepang, trochus, shark and turtle.

"While traditional Indonesian fishermen are allowed in the area under a Memorandum of Understanding between Australia and Indonesia, they are not allowed to fish in the Reserves themselves, which contain a diversity of marine life that we are committed to protect."

Senator Ellison said the dedicated patrol vessel would boost Australia's border protection capabilities and reflected the Howard Government's strong commitment to securing our borders.

The vessel based at Ashmore will operate as a command centre for Customs and Environment officers involved in patrol activities. It will be equipped with two high-speed tenders for patrols of the marine reserves and associated island and reef ecosystems.

Senator Ellison said the presence of the vessel in the Ashmore and Cartier Reserves would free up existing Customs and Royal Australian Navy patrol boats to carry out other border protection duties around our coastline.

"Since 2000, the Customs Bay-Class patrol fleet has been largely responsible for protecting these areas, providing an effective deterrent to both illegal fishermen and people smuggling ventures."

“These boats can now be released to undertake the wide-ranging, high-speed operations they were designed for,” Senator Ellison said.

The Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve and nearby Cartier Island Marine Reserve are located in the Indian Ocean, approximately 320 km off Australia’s coast, but only 150 kilometres south of the Indonesian island of Roti. They were declared as Commonwealth Marine Reserves in 1983 and 2000 respectively. Australia assumed responsibility for the Islands in 1933 from Britain.

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