

Bulletin

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A Guide on Navigation through the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait

Background

AMSA provides a guide via its official site regarding ships transiting through the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait for the purpose of assisting all the interested parties in the shipping industry to better understand relevant regulations, requirements and obligations. Ship owners, ship operators and ship crew are encouraged to familiarize themselves and conform with these regulations and requirements that are established by AMSA based on national legislation.

This bulletin will describe the regulations that are related to the ships transiting through the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait, and present two recent violation/detention cases, to strengthen your sense of risks and conformity.

Particular Sensitive Sea Areas, PSSA

In 1990, the Great Barrier Reef became the world's first particularly sensitive sea area (PSSA) designated by the International Maritime Organization.

The area was extended to include the Torres Strait in 2005 and extended again to an area of the south-east Coral Sea in 2015 (figure 1).

PSSAs allow additional protection measures such as ship routing systems to be applied to vessels that transit the region.

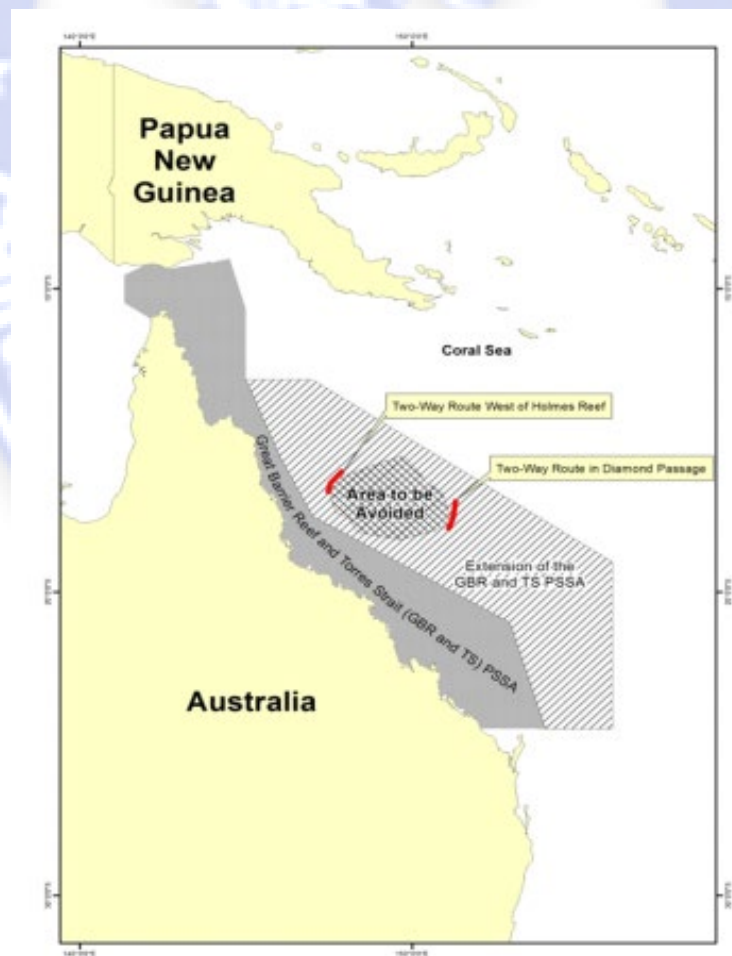


Figure 1

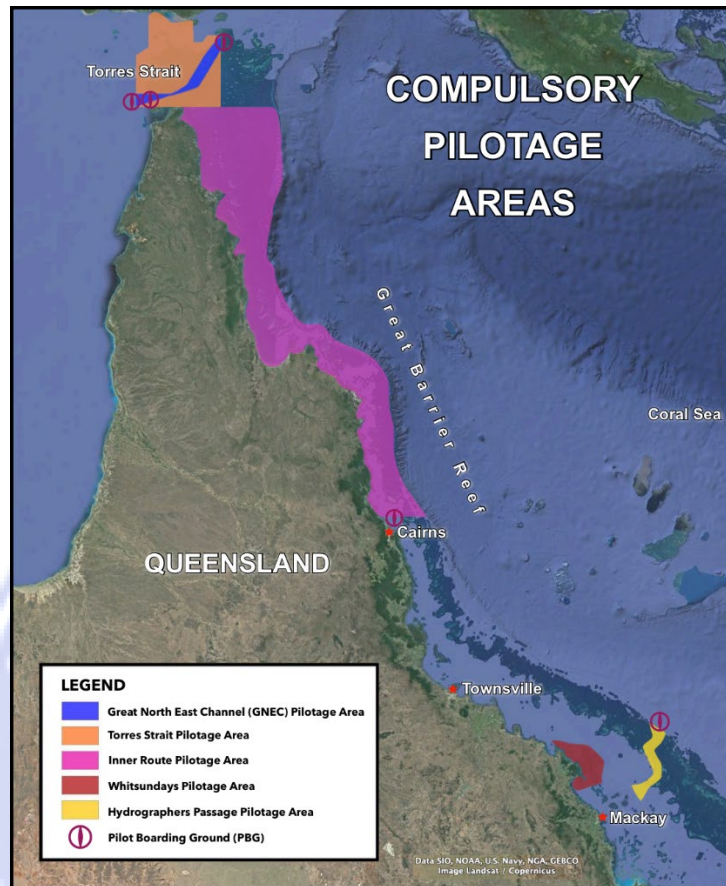


Figure 2

Coastal Pilotage

Vessels with an overall length of 70 meters or more, and all loaded oil tankers, chemical carriers and liquefied gas carriers—irrespective of length—are required to use the services of a licensed coastal pilot in these compulsory coastal pilotage areas (figure 2):

- Inner route (from Cape York to Cairns)
- Great Northeast Channel
- Torres Strait

- Hydrographers Passage
- Whitsundays

Masters are not relieved of overall responsibility for the safe operation of a vessel due to the presence of a pilot onboard.

Read more about [coastal pilotage](#). There are two marine notices for coastal pilotage:

- [06/2022—Coastal pilotage](#) (see attachment 1)
- [07/2022—Under Keel Clearance Management \(UKCM\) in Torres Strait](#)
(see attachment 2)

Queensland Coastal Passage Plan

The Queensland coastal passage plan (QCPP) improves the preparedness of ships transiting the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait pilotage areas by making sure that voyage plans, waypoints setting and other planning have been completed in a standardized manner. Ship crew are encouraged to prepare your voyage plans using the QCPP.

Read more about [the Queensland coastal passage plan](#). (see attachment 3)

Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait Vessel Traffic Service (REEFVTS)

About REEFVTS

The Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait Vessel Traffic Service (REEFVTS or Reef VTS) was established in 2004 as a mechanism to improve the safety and efficiency of vessel movements and to help protect the marine environment. REEFVTS is operated by Maritime Safety Queensland (MSQ) from their VTS Centre in Townsville.

The Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait Vessel Traffic Service (Reef VTS) monitors vessel traffic in the region to prevent collisions or incidents. The area has high environmental significance and is protected by a range of national and international measures.

This region has following characteristics:

- is large and takes a long time to navigate
- has confined waters with limited depths of water
- has strong and variable tidal streams
- is in a monsoon climate with low-visibility during rain squalls
- can have tropical storms and cyclones
- has narrow fairways

- is used by a range of vessel types that have many different flag states and different types of cargo.

Reef VTS is a coastal [vessel traffic service](#) (VTS), whose operations are split into Reef North and Reef South (figure 3). Services are delivered from the VTS centers in Townsville and Gladstone.

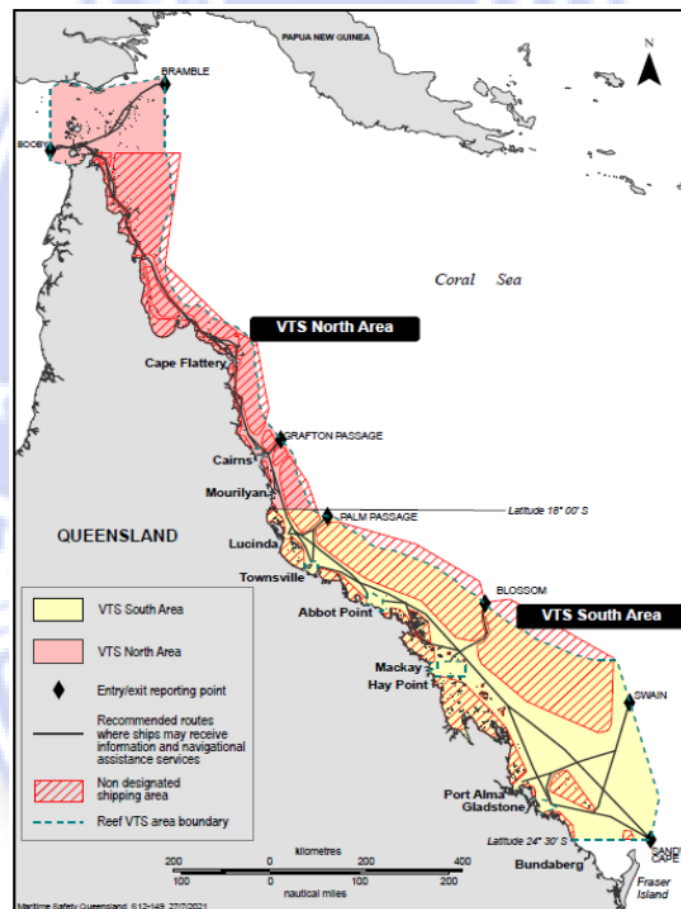


Figure 3

Functions of Reef VTS

Reef VTS monitors and communicates with vessels for safer navigation

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throughout the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait. This is done by maintaining a vessel traffic image of vessels moving through the area.

Reef VTS:

- improves navigational safety in the Torres Strait and inner route of the Great Barrier Reef by giving information to vessels about
 - potential traffic conflicts
 - navigational information
- lowers the risk of maritime incidents in the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait region that may result in
 - ship-sourced pollution
 - damage to the marine environment
- responds quickly if there are any safety or pollution incidents in the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait region.

Requirements for Masters

Masters are required to work with Great Barrier Reef VTS to ensure safe vessel operations in the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait areas. Captains should make full use of the information and services from Reef VTS when making navigational decisions.

Vessels sailing in the Reef VTS area should confirm receipt of information

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from the Reef VTS when questioned and must respond quickly to inquiries from the Reef VTS.

The captain should:

- Comply with Reef VTS reporting requirements
- Respond to all warnings and recommendations from Reef VTS
- The master must contact Reef VTS if he or she becomes aware of a hazardous situation that may affect the safety of navigation of other ships.

The Master is always responsible for the manner in which the vessel is operated and maneuvered, and for safe navigation in all circumstances.

Requirements of Reef VTS on Vessel Reporting System

All the following vessels entering a VTS area are required to report to Reef VTS:

- 50m or more in overall length
- oil tankers, liquefied gas carriers or chemical tankers
- vessels involved in towing or pushing 1 of these vessels.
- vessels involved in a towing or pushing operation when the overall length of the tow is more than 150m (measured from the stern of the towing vessel to the after end of the tow).

Reef VTS Centre Tools

VTS centres monitor vessels in the area using:

- radar
- Automated Identification System (AIS)
- VHF marine radio
- other maritime monitoring equipment.

Ship crew can communicate with a VTS centre in Queensland using VHF radio or Inmarsat C, which allows voice communication between vessels and the shore in the VTS area.

If VHF radio or Inmarsat C can't be used to communicate with the VTS centre, ship crew must give the required information by phone or email.

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Designated Shipping Area

Vessels may only navigate within the designated shipping area (DSA) (figure 4) or the general use zones of the Great Barrier Reef marine park.

To navigate outside of the areas, a permit must be obtained from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA).

1. incidents, including:

- death or serious injury to a person
- collision, grounding or loss of a vessel
- loss of a person from the vessel
- fire, structural failure, flooding or machinery failure on board
- loss of cargo of a vessel

2. dangers to navigation

3. incidents involving failure of ships material handling equipment or injury to any person when engaged in cargo work

4. MARPOL reporting for harmful substances or marine pollutant.

When reporting an incident, you need the following forms:

- Incident alert and reports ([form 18](#) and [form 19](#))
- MARPOL for harmful substances or marine pollutant ([form 196](#) or [form 197](#))

Disposal of Garbage

Discharge of all garbage including cargo residues is prohibited within the Great Barrier Reef and the Torres Strait. This is because the [nearest land boundary](#) extends around the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef and the Torres Strait. Discharges permitted under MARPOL must be measured seaward of this boundary.

Read more about the [disposal of garbage](#). Read more in our [fact sheet about managing solid bulk cargo residues in Australian waters \(PDF 267.07 KB\)](#).

Charts and Publications

Relying on unofficial charts demonstrates inadequate voyage planning under a ship's safety management system. It also indicates that a ship may be in an unfit state for the voyage. AMSA will detain vessels that do not carry adequate and up-to-date nautical charts. This [media release](#) gives you an example of such a detention.

Current and official nautical charts and publications may be obtained from the [Australian Hydrographic Service](#).

North East Shipping Management Plan

With shipping movements in Australia's north east region expected to grow, the North East shipping management plan (NESMP) has been jointly developed by Queensland and other Australian government agencies in conjunction with industry and key interest groups.

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Collision with Cetaceans

Collision with cetaceans (whales, dolphins, and porpoises) is a growing concern. Ship strikes can increase the risk of death and injury to animals, and damage property. Humpback whales are present in the Great Barrier Reef region from May to September.

Under the [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#), all cetaceans are protected in Australian Commonwealth waters (generally between 3 and 200 nautical miles from the coastline). The legislation applies to all vessels.

If a vessel collides with a cetacean in Australia's Commonwealth waters, the person in charge of the vessel is required by law to notify the [Department of the Environment](#).

Ship masters and watch-keeping officers are urged to:

- maintain a good look out
- warn other vessels in the vicinity if whales have been sighted, using all appropriate means of communication
- consider reducing vessel speed in areas where whales have been sighted
- consider modest course alterations away from sightings.

You might find the [IMO's guidance document for minimising the risk of ship strikes with cetaceans \(PDF 147.96 KB\)](#) useful.

Queensland Firefighting Foam Discharge Requirements

International ships arriving in Australian waters are not allowed to use firefighting foams containing persistent compounds in Queensland state waters. Persistent compounds include aqueous film forming foam (AFFF) and fluoro-protein foams.

These requirements were introduced by the Queensland Government to protect safety of life at sea.

Reef VTS Violation/detention Cases

The following is a brief introduction to two recent cases of Reef VTS violations for reference and as a warning to ships coming to Australia.

1. Two distant-water fishing vessels passed through the waters of the Torres Strait in 2023, but did not comply with Reef VTS regulations and requirements to report vessel information and movements. They were identified by VTS and received a warning by AMSA.
2. In 2023, a bulk carrier deviated from the planned route and entered

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the waters of the Great Barrier Reef on its way to discharging port after loading cargo from Gladstone; the crew on duty in the bridge failed to notice multiple alarms from the Reef VTS and failed to respond in time. When returning to Australia to load cargo in the same year, the ship was prosecuted by the Great Barrier Reef authorities at Gladstone. The captain went to court and was fined. At the same time, the ship was detained by AMSA at the Gladstone berth and multiple deficiencies relating to ISM and shipboard operation were issued, including:

- I. Master and company failed to take adequate actions following serious non-conformances
- II. Objective evidence indicates passage plans not always approved as required; next intended passage plan from berth to berth not completed & approved during this inspection
- III. No evidence presented that company' s Navigation Audit findings are actioned as required
- IV. Officers demonstrated lack of familiarity with the regard to extracting sensitive information from ECDIS, ECDIS safety settings, Route-check, De-briefing requirements as required by SMS.

Above deficiencies are objective evidence that the SMS as implemented failed to ensure sea passages are conducted in compliance with SOLAS Chapter V, Regulation 34.

Crews, shipowners and management companies are requested to pay special attention to the above AMSA guidelines for ships sailing in the Great Barrier Reef and Torres Strait, as well as the cases of Reef VTS violations.

CCS Australia Office
January 05, 2024

Announcement:

1. Intention is to assist and ensure owners to understand and well prepared, ensuring all updated requirements from AMSA can be met
2. For more information, please visit AMSA website at www.amsa.gov.au and CCS website at www.ccs.org.cn
3. The information contained does not and cannot supersede any AMSA or related governing parties requirements as well

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