

Australia's remotest, busiest ports

By Ben Hickey



Where the Indian Ocean meets the mining railways of the Outback, there are two amazing shipping ports firmly linked into Customs network of remote-area offices.

Just a country mile or two apart on the Great Northern Highway, the ports of Dampier and Port Hedland in Western Australia move the mineral wealth of the Pilbara and North-West Shelf to Australian and overseas markets.

The scale of marine activity is amazing. Each year, more than 1100 bulk ships or tankers make Dampier their first port of call for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), iron ore and salt. Each year, another 600 bulk ships arrive

at Port Hedland for salt, iron ore and manganese; oil rigs come and go in search of offshore petroleum.

While the ports are remote from suburbia, being 1500km north of Perth, they consistently welcome more direct-arrival ships than many capital city ports.

This means they are in the frontline of Australian trade, and explains why Customs has built up such a strong presence in both areas to ensure the same scrutiny of people and cargo as in any capital city.

Clearing ships' crew and cargo is a key part of Customs work.

Says David Thoms, District Manager at Port Hedland: "The port here is like a

top: Toy cars? The size of the Panamanian-registered NSS Dynamic dwarfs cars on the Port Hedland wharf.

inset: At Port Hedland are Clare Shaw and Chris Jeremieczyk, pictured at work during clearance of the iron ore bulk carrier Leopardi.

taxi rank - there's always a ship coming or going. We have five wharves that are usually filled, and there's more waiting at anchor.

"The ships that use our ports are described as Cape-sized. That means they are too large to use the Suez Canal or Panama Canal, and therefore must round the Cape of Good Hope.

"These are the biggest ships in the world, up to 350m long, and mostly carry bulk cargo rather than containers.

"There are 72 million tonnes of ore being shipped from Port Hedland a year, and 95 million tonnes from Dampier. If you consider that a three-trailer road train can carry 100 tonnes, then you would need more than 1.5

million road trains to carry the amount of ore that fewer than 1000 ships are carrying.

"Customs has a high-profile role with the movement of ships. We speak with captains and crews, and we ensure procedures and documentation are followed. We risk assess crews for compliance with laws, and we carry out operational taskings on selected vessels.

"We conduct our own operational taskings of selected ships and use an array of technology including search techniques, ionscan, and the Customs network of closed-circuit television which monitors the wharves to assist our surveillance. Where necessary, we task the Customs Detector Dog Unit.

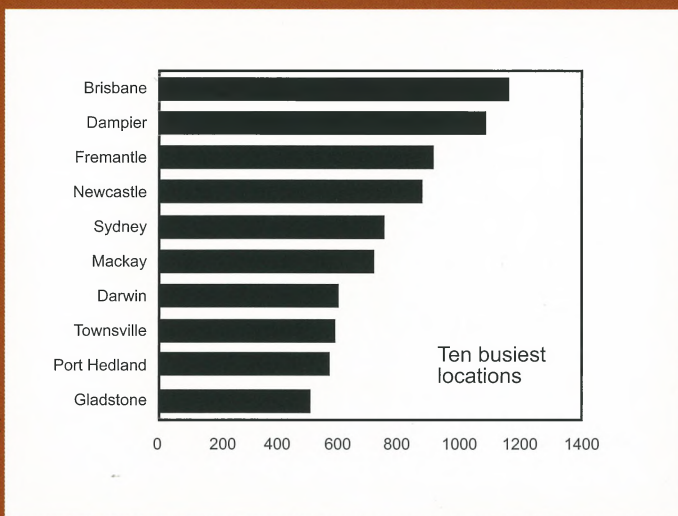
"In addition to undertaking Customs checks on these ships, we work closely with other government agencies such as Quarantine, Australian Maritime Safety Authority, Immigration, Australian Federal Police and WA Police."

Says Rod O'Donnell, District Manager at Dampier: "It's the sheer volume of shipping that is amazing. We have a ship arriving or departing every 3.5 hours at one of the ports in our region.

"We expect 1450 ships this year, of

which 1150 will be direct arrivals from overseas. If you combine the Port Hedland and Dampier shipping arrivals, then the Pilbara is the busiest international shipping area in the country."

While the Pilbara is best known for



its shipping exports, the area's huge coastline and inland areas is of strategic importance to Customs which undertakes regular land-based border patrols. For example, the Dampier area of operations covers 600km of coastline, numerous islands in the Dampier archipelago, airstrips, isolated station areas and remote communities.



above: Tonnes of salt, bound for export markets, await loading at Port Hedland. Pictures by Craig Gathercole.

top: This graph shows Australia's busiest ports for ships that arrive direct from overseas, and therefore require Customs clearance. While the shipping numbers for Dampier and Port Hedland are enormous in their own right, when combined under the Pilbara umbrella, they become the busiest region in Australia for direct-arrival ships

Rod O'Donnell says his officers have an established remote-area program for land and sea patrols using 4WD vehicles, all-terrain motorcycles and rapid response vessels.

"While Customs has good resources at a local level, no patrolling in an area that stretches from the ocean to the Northern Territory border can exist without the cooperation of the local community," he said.

"We have an established community participation program that involves regular visits by our staff to outback communities to promote our community participation program. We also work with local industry to identify unusual activity that warrants further investigation."

Rod says the remote area patrols often focus on wildlife smuggling, and protecting snakes, lizards and birds from smuggling.

"We've had cases where we've helped track the movement of people believed to be involved with wildlife smuggling, and have worked with local communities and wildlife authorities to detect smuggling," he said.

"While much of our focus is on

shipping, our remote area patrols are comprehensive and help add to the versatility of our staff. Like many district offices, our people are involved in every area of Customs activity, and develop great versatility as a result.

"One day they could be clearing crew on an oil rig, the next they could be patrolling isolated islands, and the next talking with isolated communities in the Pilbara. It's a tough climate but there's plenty of diversity for the staff."

The patrolling tasks are assisted by regular Customs Coastwatch flights which occur off the full length of the Western Australian coast, and of patrols by Customs vessels from the Customs National Marine Unit. These patrols aim to detect any illegal activity such as fishing, coastal landings of unauthorised entrants or suspicious vessels.

From time to time, both towns play host to international charter or cargo flights which require full Customs clearance.

The history and rapid growth of these towns is phenomenal. The port of Dampier has effectively been operating since 1965 when established as a port for Mt Tom Price and Paraburdoo, and as a town for the employees of those mines. Dampier Salt began shipping salt in 1971, Robe River started exports of iron ore from Port Walcott in 1972, the North West Shelf oil and gas project began in 1986, and Onslow Salt began exporting salt in 2001. In 1969, building of Dampier's sister town, Karratha, began.

Port Hedland was founded in 1857 as a small port serving local pastoralists, and grew to be involved in the export of manganese and other minerals from mines such as Marble Bar. By 1954, it was receiving 70 ships a year; its population then was just 600 but it was about to undergo rapid growth.

It eventually became the export port for iron ore from Mt Goldsworthy and Mt Newman and, in more recent years, the export of salt. Today its population is more than 11,000 and its ports handle vessels of up to 150,000 tonnes.

David Thoms, who worked in



Huge loading yards, such as this iron ore storage, keep the Pilbara ports busy day and night.

Sydney before becoming District Manager at Port Hedland, describes the Pilbara as a fabulous place for work.

"We are within one days travel of some of the best scenery in Australia," he says. "Places such as Kijinia National Park, Millstream Chichester National Park, Ningaloo Reef and Exmouth are superb. Many Australians don't see these places until they retire and hook up the caravan. For us, they are our backyard.

"The pace of life is more comfortable than in capital cities. We don't have to travel hours to work, we are one minute from the beach, and there's a good social life."

Much of the Pilbara's growth stems from a controversial decision by the Australian Government more than 40 years ago. Until the 1960s, the export of iron ore had been banned but there was strong commercial pressure to lift the ban.

The Department of Customs and Excise annual report of 1960-61 reported the decision thus:

"The total prohibition upon the exportation of iron ores was removed ... This action was taken to implement the Government's decision to permit exportation of quantities of iron ores which are considered surplus to Australian requirements."

The decision taken by the Menzies Government was controversial at the time. But it provided the initial impetus for the iron ore industry, and associated developments.

With the recent signing of a 25-year agreement between Australia and China for liquefied natural gas (LNG) sales, the growth will continue. Starting from 2005-06, Australia will supply three million tonnes of LNG a year to Guangdong Province. The contract will be worth \$20-\$25 billion in export income, and will be Australia's biggest single export deal.

At the same time, iron ore exports are expected to increase, as is petrochemical, gas-to-liquids processing and many other mining industries.

Customs Regional Director Western Australia Paul O'Connor, said: "We can expect long-term growth in mining operations in this area, which will require Customs to maintain strong attention to shipping intervention rates, community participation programs and remote area patrolling.

"These two offices are part of a strong network of Customs district offices in Western Australia which stretches from Esperance on the south coast to Broome on the north coast. They play a crucial role in achieving our corporate objective of effective border management by enhancing the flexibility of our response capability.

"These offices, and importantly the staff who work there, provide Customs with the capability to respond quickly to situations of interest in remote locality, and where necessary to contain situations pending the arrival of additional staff from other district offices or Fremantle."