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## As Oil Enriches Australia, Spill Is Seen as a Warning

By MERAIAH FOLEY

SYDNEY, [Australia](#) — Visitors hoping to peek at Australia's exotic marine life usually head straight for the Great Barrier Reef. But conservationists say that an equally remarkable, but lesser known, marine environment is under threat from the booming oil and gas exploration taking place among the reefs and atolls off Australia's northwest coast.

A damaged oil well in the region has been spewing thousands of gallons of crude oil into the Timor Sea since Aug. 21, when a blowout forced the evacuation of all 69 workers on the platform. Emergency crews have been working overtime to contain the spill, but officials say it could take about three more weeks to plug the leak.

The platform is above the Montara oil field, about 155 miles northwest of Mungallalu Truscott Airbase in the remote Kimberley region of Australia. The leaking well head is owned by Thailand's national petroleum company, [PTT Exploration and Production](#), one of many energy companies that have set up operations in western Australia to feed Asia's growing appetite for oil and gas.

In the first half of this year, more than 50 wells were drilled in the tropical waters off western Australia, adding to hundreds of other recent projects. Last month, the government gave Chevron the green light to expand its exploration of the huge Gorgon gas field, a \$40 billion project that was opposed by conservationists because of its potential environmental impact.

Economists credit the booming trade in petroleum and other mineral resources for helping Australia escape the brunt of the global economic downturn, but environmentalists say this prosperity comes at a price. They say the Montara oil spill is merely a sign of things to come unless greater protections are extended to vast stretches of tropical reefs off northwestern Australia.

"It's a classic conflict between development and the ecological values of the region," said John Carey, manager of the Kimberley Conservation Program with the Pew Environment Group. "We need to get the balance right. But the balance at the moment is that less than 1 percent of this globally significant area is under any form of protection."

The Thai oil company said it was still investigating what had caused the blowout. To stop the spill, the company has hired a specialist rig to drill 1.6 miles below the seabed and flood the area with heavy mud.

But such highly specialized equipment is not easy to come by. It took three weeks to tow the rig from Singapore.

The company has declined to estimate how much oil has spilled into the sea, saying it is too dangerous to

take accurate measurements from the damaged rig. The company and Australian maritime officials, who are helping to clean up the spill, say that the slick is around 25 miles wide and 85 miles long, but that the leakage appears to be slowing.

The federal environment minister, Peter Garrett, said this month that the government believed that 300 to 400 barrels of oil were leaking into the sea each day. That amounts to more than 450,000 gallons of oil, and unknown quantities of gas and condensate, since the blowout began. By that count, the Montara leak is relatively small. The [Exxon Valdez](#), by comparison, dumped around 11 million gallons when it ran aground off the Alaskan coast in 1989.

The oil slick has not reached any coastlines, thanks in part to mild weather conditions and efforts by the Australian government to break up the slick by spraying it with chemical dispersant. But conservationists worry that the spill could take a heavy toll on marine animals that feed and travel on or close to the ocean's surface.

"We need to shatter the myth that an oil spill is only a problem when it washes up on beaches," said Gilly Llewellyn, the manager of conservation programs with [WWF-Australia](#).

PTT, the Thai company, has said it is committed to helping clean up the spill and plans to conduct environmental monitoring of the region to assess the damage. Australia's energy minister, Martin Ferguson, has announced plans for a thorough investigation into the cause.

Mr. Ferguson and the [Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association](#), which represents 98 percent of oil and gas operators in the country, have defended the industry's record, saying the Montara well head leak is the first offshore blowout since 1984.

Marine researchers and conservation groups say they are realistic about the economic drive to continue developing the region, but want the government to designate more marine sanctuaries and to enact stronger environmental regulations in western Australia. The government is expected to release a strategy for the region next year.

"You can't stop production; this is a huge area of future exploration," said Nic Bax, the principal investigator of the [Marine Biodiversity Research Hub](#). "We need to make sure we're working cooperatively with industry to work out what is the best and safest way to do this."

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