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**BODY:**

CONSERVATIONISTS never let the grass grow under their feet. While the US National Transportation Safety Board is patiently undertaking a thorough inquiry into the fatal loss of the bulker, Selandang Ayu, on the Aleutians last December, the **Alaska Oceans Program** has published its own report into the incident.

Prepared by Alaskan consultants Parker Associates, the report is critical of almost everyone involved in the disaster and its oil-smeared aftermath.

It might have been prudent for the environmental interests to have awaited the NTSB inquiry, as it is likely to have more hard and fast evidence about the train of events that led to the grounding of the ship.

The report as written lacks the necessary authority. It suggests that the master of the broken-down ship had all the choice in the world about when and where to stop his vessel for necessary engine repairs to be undertaken. This is clearly a gross simplification of the events.

Similarly, perfect hindsight enables the authors of the report to suggest that the master was somehow to blame for not anticipating that the engineers would not be able to restart the engine, after the damaged cylinder had been isolated. These are probably matters best left to the professional investigators.

Where the authors of the report are spot-on is in the long-term failure of the US authorities to put in place adequate emergency towing vessel facilities of the sort of horsepower that could have successfully intervened. The valiant efforts of the only available tug were insufficient to hold the stricken ship up against the wind blowing it onshore.

The failure to provide ETVs might be explained when the volume of traffic transiting through these islands in the north Pacific is considered. Some 2,760 large ships might make this passage each year, while about 300 fishing boats work in the area.

That amounts to some eight large ships every day, which is a small number to justify the deployment of a very powerful emergency towing vessel.

On the other hand, the fragile eco-system of these windswept islands does make them special in this respect and would weight the computation in their favour.

It is nevertheless a big ask to expect 160 tonnes of bollard pull to be tied up somewhere in the Aleutians, waiting for the balloon to go up.

The report tends to ignore the ferocious weather that washed over the wreck site in the weeks after that casualty, inferring that much more oil could have been recovered before it polluted the rock shores, if better equipment and resources had been made available.

This has been angrily denied by those who valiantly strove to empty the wreck of bunkers. We expect that the NTSB report, even if it is no more sympathetic, will recognise the realities of the situation.

**Expert assistance** WITH the amount of highly sophisticated equipment aboard the modern merchant ship, which includes the main engine and auxiliaries, and only a small crew to oversee it in operation, it has seemed strange that more use is not made of contract maintenance.

Shipowners have tended to jib at the cost, preferring to turn the crew to such work and assuming that they have an all-embracing capability to deal with this variety of equipment.

It is interesting to see that car carrier supremo Wallenius has contracted with the access equipment experts MacGregor to provide "total onboard care" to the comprehensive cargo-handling equipment aboard seven of their big car and truck carriers.

When it is considered how utterly dependent these specialist ships are upon their doors and ramps, the strategy makes very good sense.

It is about peace of mind.

Lloyd's List

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