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Oil spill hits Chek Jawa, Changi Beach

By Grace Chua

Oil from Tuesday's spill has hit two more parts of Singapore's shores, including the Chek Jawa wetlands on Pulau Ubin – home to unique ecosystems and the last refuge of several plants and animals once common in the country.

The latest oil-slicked areas are north of the spill and the other previously affected parts of East Coast Park, suggesting that tides and winds are pushing the slick towards Singapore's north-east.

A 700m stretch of Changi Beach was also affected, between Carpark 6 and Carpark 7, and is now closed to swimmers.

According to Malaysian press reports yesterday, the oil has also reached Teluk Ramunia on the south-eastern tip of Johor.

The Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) said it was working with its Malaysian and Indonesian counterparts to address the spill, which occurred after the oil tanker MT Bunga Kelana 3, laden with 62,000 tonnes of crude oil, collided with the bulk carrier MV Waily early on Tuesday morning, 13km off Changi East.

Some 2,500 tonnes of oil leaked into the water, causing a 4sq km slick as the tanker moved to anchor in a safe place.

Containment booms and other dispersal measures are helping halt the spread of oil, but these are not foolproof, said National Environment Agency (NEA) chief executive Andrew Tan. "We cannot contain 100 percent of the oil spill out in the open ocean," Mr Tan said.

Despite the National Parks Board (NParks) putting up a 1km containment boom at Chek Jawa when the oil spill first occurred, oil could have gone over or under the boom because of waves and tides, said NParks' director of conservation, Mr Wong Tuan Wah.

There, about 150m of shoreline around the boardwalk is showing patches of oil. About 20 people have been deployed to clean it up, including NParks and NEA staff and contractors. Environmental advocates from several groups, such as the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (ACRES), plan to chip in today.

My Wong explained that the polluted mud has to be cleaned up before the oil seeps in further, suffocating and poisoning wildlife there.

Reports of oil at the new sites emerged at 2pm yesterday; the waters at Changi Beach were still clear at lunchtime.

At East Coast Park, the oil-slicked sand had been largely cleared from the 7,2km of shoreline covered earlier this week. The 19.6 tonnes of contaminated sand that was shovelled up was sent to the Semakau landfill site.

Offshore, the MPA said, the largest oil slicks were dispersed, though smaller patches remain scattered along East Coast Park, moving towards or away from the shore with the tide.

Yesterday, more than 20 ACRES volunteers combed East Coast Park, finding more than 80 oil-slicked creatures dead and alive, including jellyfish, crabs, peanut worms and starfish.

The NEA said it would assess the oil spill's impact on marine life once the clean-up is complete.

"Our main effort is returning life to normalcy so that members of the public can go back to the beaches – the safety of the public is what's most important right now," NEA chief executive Mr Tan said.

He added that most of the clean-up should be over by the weekend.

Events at or near East Coast Park, such as tonight's Sundown Marathon, can continue continue as long as people do not enter the water, NEA said.

At least one event organiser is playing safe: an outdoor movie screening this evening, part of Family Day Out @ South East, is being moved to Sentosa's Palawan Beach instead.