

Numerous agencies join X-Press Pearl probe as Sri Lanka battles ecological impact

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The X-Press Pearl cargo ship on fire last week (Photo: IANS).

Environmentalists and authorities in Sri Lanka are on tenterhooks about how much of an environmental disaster the cargo ship X-Press Pearl will eventually cause.

Authorities fear that hundreds of metric tonnes of fuel oil in the ship's tank could leak. There have been fears over the leak but the Sri Lankan Navy has not found any oil leaks as yet.

The fire and the sinking of the ship has already caused bodies of marine animals to wash up on Sri Lankan beaches.

#SriLanka witnessing the worst #MarinePollution in history. Even though there's no oil spill from X-press Pearl, the amount of pallets which was released to the sea along with chemicals will create massive damage to the marine ecosystem all the way from Southern to Western coast pic.twitter.com/FCnf6EDkoa

— LEOPCON Sri Lanka (@leopocon) May 31, 2021

For the moment, the government has involved other agencies to help in mitigating the disaster. Sri Lanka has sought the help of an intergovernmental organisation, South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP) to monitor the situation. Even the International Maritime Organisation is now involved in the process.

Sri Lanka is pursuing the shipping company for compensation and insurance money. It is also looking at retrieving costs incurred in firefighting as well as damage caused to the environment. It has restrained the captain and the crew from leaving the country.

Environment and conservation news organisation *Mongabay*, says that the owners of the ship, X-Press Feeders have appointed a UK-based company, Oil Spill Response Limited (OSRL) to monitor the condition of the ship and keep an eye on possible oil leaks.

Grain-sized plastic pellets have been floating around the Sri Lankan coastline, thousands of bags of which have already been cleaned-up. Research shared by Dr Asha de Vos from Sri Lanka organisation Oceanswell, in collaboration with Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, says these plastic pellets, called nurdles, are melted down and used in the manufacture of a wide range of end-products.

Currently, these nurdles are causing concern. The report says that though the nurdles are not directly toxic, these "can adsorb toxic chemicals from the marine environment that could be released when the plastics are ingested by marine organisms or humans. In addition, plastics can break down over time into smaller microplastics and nanoplastics, which may be more likely to be taken up by an organism and cause toxicity", says the research.

The local communities are already feeling the pinch of the disaster caused by the ship as the government has banned them from going near the shore where the debris from the sunken keep coming up. Sri Lanka has extended the fishing ban upto 80 kms in the affected area.

The Singapore-flagged vessel was sailing from India to Sri Lanka with 1,486 containers with 25 tonnes of nitric acid, several chemicals and cosmetics when it caught fire off the Colombo port. Investigators have retrieved the ship's voyage data recorder which contains all the communication between the ship and its handling company.

Sri Lanka had sought India's help in fire-fighting and curtailing the impending disaster. India had rushed two coast guard vessels as well as a specialised anti-pollution vessel.