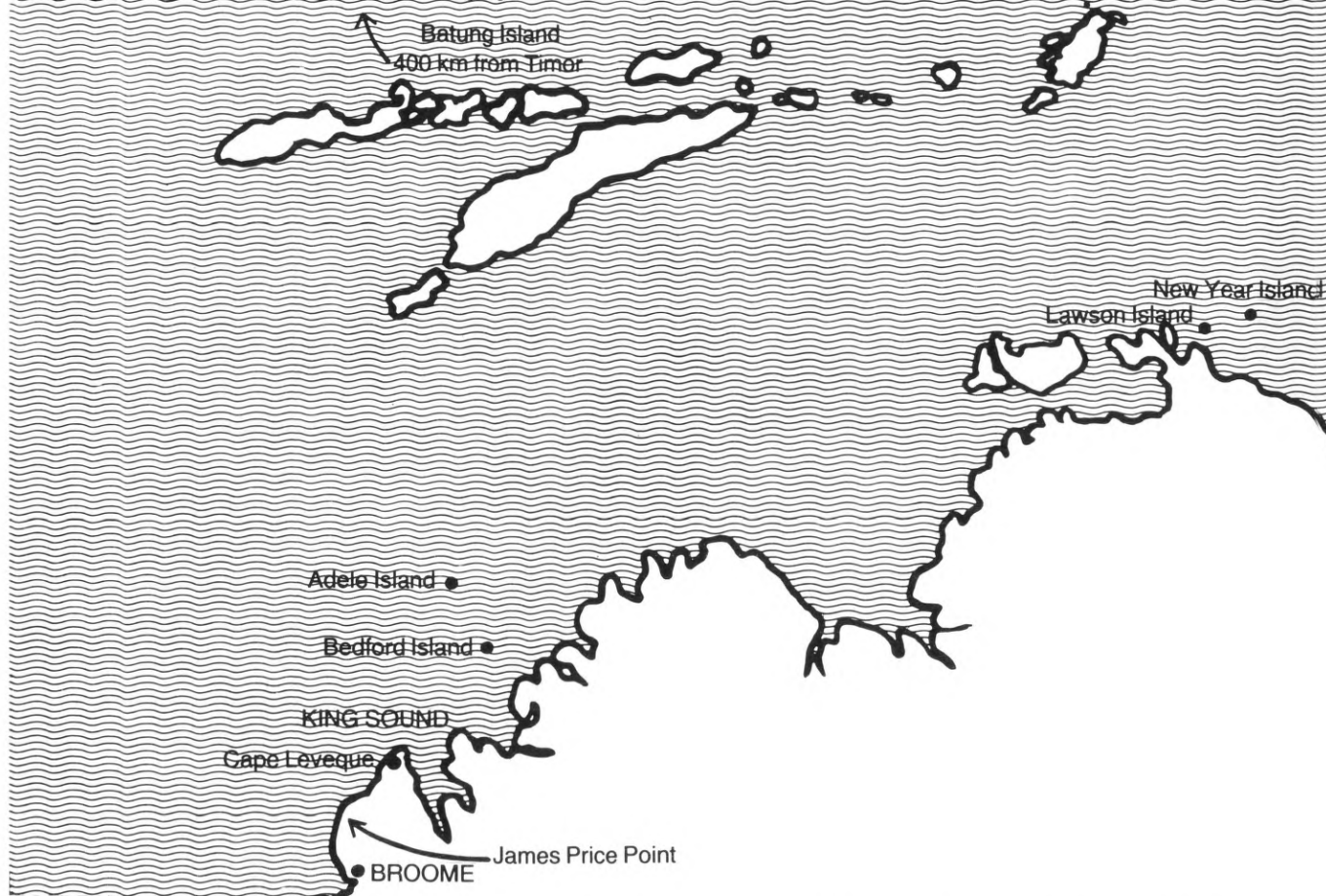


COASTWATCH ALERT



FFEDERAL Police Coastwatch officers believe a recent influx of Indonesian fishing boats to Australia's north may have been part of an organised venture to exploit the trochus shell beds along our coastline.

Quarantine breaches are a constant threat to Australia's agricultural and pastoral industries. Irene Hartsuyker of the Coastal Protection Unit prepared this report.

Australians have been reminded that the Indonesian coastline is less than 400 kilometres away by a dramatic increase in visits by Indonesian fishermen. While the APF's Coastal Protection Unit (CPU) which co-ordinates the Coastwatch program, had only two reports in late 1987 of sightings of Indonesian vessels close to the mainland, there was a sudden spate of reports at the end of January and into February and March. This is especially unusual because of the cyclone season.

Australia and Indonesia signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 1974 so Indonesian traditional subsistence fisherman could fish certain Australian offshore islands and reefs as they have been doing for decades. Recently the Indonesians have been fishing in prohibited areas and using vessels which cannot be classified as 'traditional', because of their size and the use of motors. Another unusual feature has been the larger sizes of the crews. Several vessels seized had more than 17 people on board,

with one having more than 20. The CPU has noted that previously crews have numbered fewer than 10 on most vessels.

In October 1987, a Northern Territory Police aircraft flying over Lawson Island, north east of Darwin, saw a vessel flying the Indonesian flag and anchored close inshore. A Coastwatch aircraft was immediately despatched and the Australian Customs Service vessel 'Jabiru' was sent from Darwin to intercept the Indonesian vessel and make contact with the master.

The vessel left Darwin with Senior Constable Terry Smith from the CPU among the crew and tracked the Indonesian boat to New Year Island where it was boarded. The vessel, identified as the 'Bunga Rampi' with a crew of 15 Indonesians, was towed by 'Jabiru' to Darwin.

The master of the 'Bunga Rampi' pleaded guilty to landing at Lawson and New Year Islands and to allowing members of his crew to go ashore on each island. He was placed on a \$1,000 good behaviour bond for twelve months. The

vessel was confiscated and the crew all returned to Indonesia.

The 'Bunga Rampi' was later sold at auction in Darwin for \$500.

Six weeks later, a Coastwatch aircraft sighted three Indonesian boats near Cape Leveque, north of Broome. A Navy patrol boat, HMAS 'Warrnambool' intercepted a boat, the 'Sumber Laut' — a 13 metre fishing vessel carrying 23 Indonesians — at Adele Island. The master and crew were detained under the Customs Act and the boat taken to Broome.

On 26 November 1987, the master pleaded guilty and he was placed on a \$500 good behaviour bond for five years. The 'Sumber Laut' was escorted out of Broome by a Customs launch. One Indonesian remained behind because of illness.

A Coastwatch aircraft spotted an Indonesian fishing vessel hidden in mangrove swamps on 27 January 1988 on Bedford Island (at the entrance to King Sound). A 'Beaver' float plane flew to the Island with CPU officers, Sergeant Keith



The Indonesian motor vessel 'Bunga Rampi'.

Martin and Senior Constable David Wilson and Customs Officer Phillip Watt. Sergeant Martin escorted the owner and the master of the vessel to Broome for questioning while the other two officers remained to guard the vessel and the rest of the crew — mainly 12 to 14 year old children.

The vessel, the 'Rahmat Ilahi', was confiscated and the master and owner were each placed on a \$1,000 good behaviour bond for five years conditional on them not entering Australian territorial waters for the period of the bond.

In February this year there were another six cases of illegal fishing by Indonesians. All the vessels sighted were detained except for one, which eluded a Customs vessel near James Price Point during a storm on February 5.

Freshly gathered trochus shell was found on some of the vessels. It is believed the high prices paid for the shell in Indonesia, where it is made into jewellery, caused the fishermen to travel the 1,000 kilometres from their hometown of Baubau on the south western coast of Butung Island, in Sulawesi Province. (In the King Sound area, north of Broome, where most of these vessels have been sighted, the reefs are rich with trochus shell, and the fishermen, who usually have to dive for the shells, can pick them up from the reefs at low tide.)

The Coastwatch observers were commended for their work in spotting the vessels which were very well camouflaged and difficult to see from the air. Another sighting was first made by a member of an Aboriginal community near Cape Leveque.

On March 3, HMAS 'Gawler' escorted two Indonesian vessels into Broome.

The boats had been seen at High Island in King Sound.

On March 10 the master of the 'Kota Balikpapan' pleaded guilty and the vessel and catch were forfeited.

The master was placed on good behaviour bonds totalling \$3000.

Among the conditions of his release was that he not enter Australian waters for five years.

The master of the other vessel, the 'Cahaya Baru', pleaded not guilty and the case was going through the court as this issue of 'Platypus' went to press.

Two common factors in most of the recent incidents suggest that it may have been an organised expedition for trochus shell: The large number of people involved who all came from the same area in Sulawesi. The court decisions to confiscate vessels is a severe penalty for the Indonesians, because such boats are the fishermen's livelihood. It is believed the confiscations will be a strong deterrent for others contemplating a similar expedition to Australian waters.

On February 16, 1988, court proceedings involving the Indonesian fishermen were concluded in Broome. All masters had pleaded guilty. All vessels were confiscated and all masters were placed on good behaviour bonds for up to five years, conditional on not entering Australian waters for the period of the bond.

All crew members from the vessels, 103 in all, (except for one who was too ill to travel) were flown back to Indonesia by chartered aircraft on February 26.



A traditional Indonesian fishing boat.