While countless eyes focussed on the happenings of the Kiani Satu cargo ship that went aground in the Goukamma Nature Reserve and Marine Protected Area this past month, the people of the Greater Knysna Area and the Garden Route have once again showed how things should be done.

According to reliable sources, history was made in mid-August for the quickest successful removal of a cargo-laden vessel from the South African coast. While locals were warned that such an operation usually took about 30 days, this crew did it in nine days.

The joint efforts of more than 20 different entities and some 350 people have been lauded across the world, with special mention of the extraordinary efforts that were made to rescue crew, keep salvagers safe and save the environment.

The 164-metre bulk cargo ship Kiani Satu reported mechanical problems outside Buffalo Bay in the early hours of Thursday, 8 August. The Knysna and Wilderness NSRI teams responded immediately and alerted the Knysna Municipality. By first light, an extensive team was already on hand at Goukamma Nature Reserve. Considering increasingly rough seas, a call was made to rescue the 19 crew members off the ship.

After providing some warmth, sustenance and some first aid for light injuries, the crew was taken to Mossel Bay for visa processing.

The vessel, which was carrying 15 tonnes of rice and 330 tonnes of oil, eventually ran aground inside the Marine Protected Area of the CapeNature-protected Goukamma Nature Reserve on 9 August. By that evening a fully-representative Joint Operations Centre (JOC) was established and specialists from across the country had driven and flown in to manage the different aspects of the operation.
At the head of the sea-based operations was the South African Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA) who assured the land-based JOC that the German ship owners had taken responsibility for the incident. The insurers would pay for salvage operations, clean-up and environmental implications, now and in the future.

The vessel went aground about 4km west of the Goukamma River where only specialised 4X4 vehicles could get relatively close to an access point to the beach.

The exact impact on the marine protected area is not yet evident and studies in this regard will be ongoing. The Department of Environmental Affairs will continue to monitor the environmental impacts and related operations as long as it remains necessary.

The Goukamma Nature Reserve and Protected Area opened to the public and for accommodation bookings on 21 August. CapeNature has requested that the public be aware of the clean-up still happening inside the reserve and to respect any possible restrictions of movement that it may imply.

Please note that dead or oil affected birds washing out on the beach is not an indication on its own that there is still oil in the water, but rather that the birds had come into contact with oil some time in the past. Birds can in fact wash out for up to a month after they have been exposed to oil.

An estimated 50 tonnes of oil leaked into the ocean, which mainly impacted on the beach directly in front of the ship. Due to stormy conditions, most of the oil was broken up by wave action and carried away from the coast, ensuring that neither Knsyra nor Swartvlei estuaries were contaminated. Aerial reports confirmed no oil in the water since Wednesday 14 August.

Heavy seas tore the boom in the Goukamma River – before the sand bags and berms could be completed – causing pollution in the bottom section of the river mouth. Once the area was successfully closed off, clean-up started in this section and will continue until completed. The sand berm remains in place until such time.

Ongoing rough seas also cleaned most of Goukamma beach. In places where patches of ‘tar crumbs’ remained behind, it will be swept up, placed into bags and removed for disposal.

Roleplayers included the South Africa Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA), national Department Environmental Affairs (DEA) Oceans and Coast, Knysna Municipality, Eden District Municipality, CapeNature, SANParks, National Sea Rescue Institute (NSRI), Knysna and Wilderness, Southern Cape Fire Protection Association (SCFPA), SARS Customs, SAPS Sea Border Unit, NMMU (research unit), Western Cape Provincial Traffic Department, Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB), several specialised service providers and many volunteers.

- A sea bird and animal rescue team, assisted by volunteers on the Western and Eastern Cape coast, remains on standby.
- By Wednesday 21 August 53 oiled penguins, 89 gannets and 4 cormorants have been rescued, cleaned and sent to Cape St Francis for rehabilitation.
- Mortalities: 8 penguins, 14 cormorants and three dead seals. In context these mortalities are not extremely high considering the applicable area from Port Elizabeth to Mossel Bay, as well as prevailing stormy conditions and other natural factors.
- Oil affected animals and birds can still be reported to 082 326 4143 or 072 670 5108 or 083 454 2284.
The Eden District Municipality Department of Health Services has placed notice boards from Buffalo Bay (wild side) to Platbank in the Goukamma Nature Reserve warning fishermen that the consumption of any marine food source in the area may pose a serious health risk for the foreseeable future.

Knysna Municipal Manager Lauren Waring: “Please be assured that it is not a case of ‘out of sight out of mind’ now that the ship has gone. Several key environmental and governmental roleplayers remain an active part of monitoring and clean-up. We are relieved that the ship is gone, but will continue to work towards the very best outcome for our coast, our environment and our people.”

All members of the public for the co-operation and support that they have given to all efforts and people on the ground.

Hundreds of volunteers and sponsors who helped, and who offered help, over this time period. There are too many people, organisations and businesses to thank individually, but please accept our sincerest appreciation and gratitude for all the big and the little things you have done.

The owners of the Kiani Satu for unconditionally accepting responsibility and mobilising their insurance immediately and without question.

The Knysna Municipality and Joint Operations Centre Incident Coordinator Richard Meyer thanks:

- All members of this joint operation for their commitment, efficiency and brilliant attitude. The successful removal of this ship, under very strenuous circumstances, has saved our coastline from impacts beyond the obvious. This region’s economy is hugely dependent on its environment and related tourism, and in effect the joint efforts of this team have not only saved the environment but also our economy.

Not out of sight out of mind