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Can Alang change its ways?

A rich history in ship scrapping is being put to the test as India's scrapyards scramble to comply with international regulations

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INDIA INVESTED \$1.5M IN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY TRAINING IN ALANG IN 2016-2017.

DRIVING roughly an hour to the west of Bhavnagar — the sprawling industrial centre where most of India's ship scrapping offices are located — you come upon the sunbaked road leading to Alang.

The journey through the dusty villages and fields ends at a huge gate welcoming you to Alang-Sosiya recycling yards.

Once you enter the area, the entire landscape changes. As far as the eye can see in either direction along the beach, there are hulking hulls of ships of all sizes — some towering high, waiting to meet their fate, while others are superstructures cut into different pieces.

Ship breaking in Alang began in 1983, using tidal motion combined with geographical and coastal conditions for berthing.

Over the past 35 years, Alang's yards have scrapped approximately 6,500 ships at an average of around 185 ships per year, according to Gujarat Maritime board.

Activities are conducted primarily in four zones: ship cabins and interior, inter-tidal, and the primary and secondary zones.

The intertidal zone is the damp area between the high and low tide lines.

Vessels are routinely beached during high tide and then dismantled systematically, slice by slice.

The sections are cut away and separated from the ship in the intertidal zone during low tide.

Previously the majority of these tasks were performed on bare earth, contaminating the coastal soil and sea water environment through the discharge of ozone-depleting substances, oil spillage, floatable grease balls, metal rust and various other disposable refuse materials.

But the picture looks quite different today. The yards that are Hong Kong Convention-compliant and those in the process of gaining compliance have cemented the primary and secondary cutting zones, using a geomembrane liner so the oil does not seep into the sand or ocean.

Drainage systems

Steam jets are used for cleaning, while proper drainage systems have been installed and the handling of hazardous materials has improved drastically.

Specialised workers also clean up the different segments and methodically separate waste, packing items for recycling and storing them in designated temporary storage areas rooms.

The major yard owners now have a backyard where cleaned slices are moved using cranes and the workers — geared up with personal protective equipment and gas masks — torch the blocks on an impervious floor.

“Most of the yards nowadays work and manage each recycling project according to a tailored ship specific recycling plan for a safe and environmentally friendly dismantling,” Leela Green Ship Recycling director Vishaal Raj Soni told Lloyd's List on a visit to Alang.

Mr Soni, who spent 12 years in the construction industry in India before joining the ship recycling sector, praised the level of emergency training for shipyard workers in Alang.

Yard owners also analyse sea water, soil and air samples periodically as a requirement under the HKC, he said.

The reports are monitored and also shared with the shipowners whose vessels are being scrapped. The yards also practise downstream waste management, Mr Soni said.

The collected asbestos and asbestos-containing materials from the ships are safely disposed at the common hazardous waste treatment storage disposal facility operated by Gujarat Environment Protection and Infrastructure via a “solidification and stabilisation” process.

Glass wool disposal cells are made at the facility, with double-layered geo membrane liners preventing seepage of any liquid waste to the subsoil.

A leachate collection and treatment facility is available, in addition to an incinerator and water treatment facility.

There is also mandatory 12-day training for workers to get a licence to operate in any scrapyard in Alang, said 29-year-old Vipul Dhabhi, a worker in Sarvag Shipping Services whose father was also in the same profession.

“It is difficult to work with gloves and boots under the blistering heat... my father never did that,” he said.

“But now, there is a continuous push by the safety officers in the yard to wear the safety equipment, even if we are not doing any hazardous work,” he added.

Under its flagship Sagarmala programme, the Indian government provided \$1.5m in funding for occupational health and safety training in Alang in 2016-2017.

The programme has provided basic health and safety training to 4,036 workers since February 2017.