

Fort Jefferson National Monument received an unwelcome visitor around 3 a.m. on Oct. 30, 1989. A 475-foot Yugoslavian freighter ran aground on a coral reef in the northeast corner of the 65,000-acre monument. The freighter was fully loaded with fuel, and carried a cargo of triple phosphate fertilizer. Personnel from Fort Jefferson assisted the U.S. Coast Guard in placing containment booms around the grounded vessel, and a team made up of NPS and Florida Department of Natural Resources divers conducted a detailed assessment of damage to the coral reef. The assessment revealed that about 10,000 square meters of the living coral reef had been destroyed or severely damaged as the ship ran aground.

After a two-day fuel offloading procedure, the ship was pulled from the reef undamaged, with no spillage of cargo or fuel.

The fragile reefs of the Florida Keys have been undergoing a sudden series of assaults from errant vessels. Four days prior to the Fort Jefferson grounding, another freighter ran aground within the Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary. One week after the Fort Jefferson incident, yet another freighter struck the reef near Key Largo. Each of these groundings resulted in significant damage to the living coral.