

Marine Traffic Reporting System and Smartphone Application

Ever wondered where the rest of the game fishing fleet is? Ever wondered if that other boat really is where he just reported his position after his third marlin of the day? Ever wondered if there's a huge bulk carrier in the middle of that rainstorm you just motored into out on the edge of the shelf? Ever wondered what that passenger liner steaming past a few miles away is, where it's been, where it's going, and exactly what wind and temperature it reported a few minutes ago?

You can have all these answers from MarineTraffic.com. It's almost like having a radar on your boat, and all it requires is a download of a new app (for the princely sum of \$4.49!) to your smart phone or tablet computer, and then some time spent filling out details on a website. Once all this is done, you simply activate a start button on the app as you leave Coffs in the morning, and your boat pops up on the AIS screen of every other game fleet skipper's smart phone, and every vessel and marine operations room in the world that's looking at, or sailing along, our coast.

Even if you're not going to sea, you can still open the app anytime you like just to see who or what's out there, what the weather is out on the shelf, or even what your mate's boat is doing over in Exmouth.

This is a really useful system, and once you've registered and activated your vessel, you will appear on a virtual radar screen on every vessel out there that uses AIS, which includes almost every large seagoing ship in the world, and more and more recreational boats.

If all the boats in the SIGFC fleet sign up and activate this app, then they will all be monitored and visible to every other vessel sailing up and down the coast. The safety benefits alone are huge, not to mention the ability to look beyond the horizon or on the other side of that rain squall and see what's there.

And just think of how it would also make the sked boat skipper's job easier if he could see the entire fleet on the screen of his smart phone – very handy when someone's radio is playing up, or they need a tow. Also, if you're sitting in your office on a gorgeous day when there's a hot bite and you'd much rather be fishing, you can pick up your phone, look at the screen, and see if any of your mates are taking a sickie!

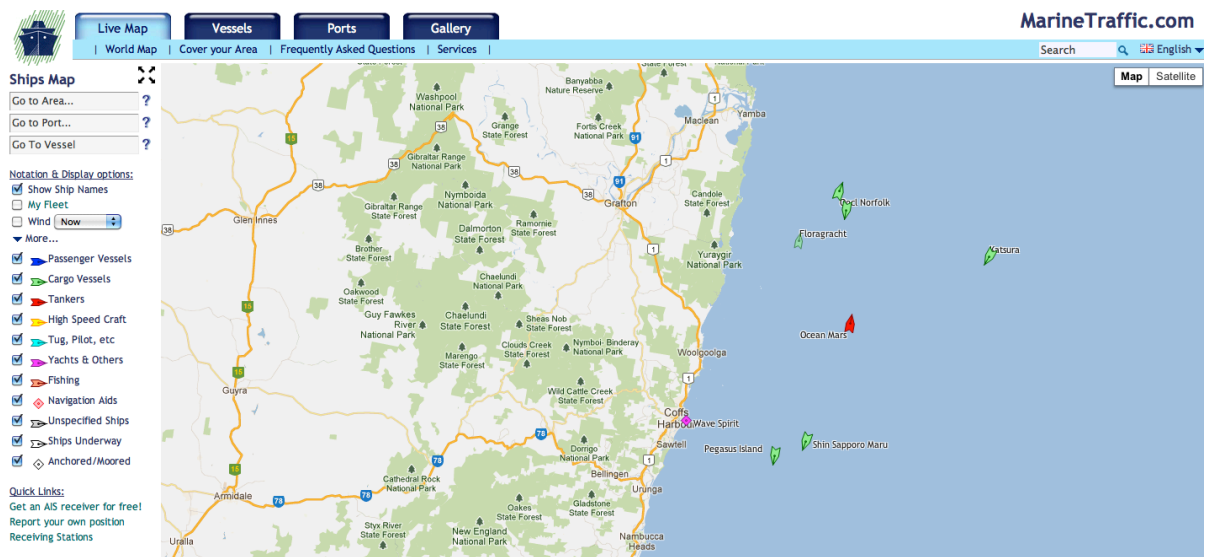
Of course, the benefits are obvious in the case of an emergency call, or just a simple "How about a tow...?" transmission from any boat using the system... one look at the smart phone app, and you can see where that boat in trouble is, and who's closest to go help.

If you want to see what the display looks like in real time right on your home computer now, go to...

<http://www.marinetraffic.com/ais/default.aspx?level0=100#>.

...and you'll see something like this screen shot below. You can set up to view any oceanic or inland waterway system in the world, but this example is set up centred on Coffs.

When you open this app on your smart phone, all you have to do is tap on any ship symbol and it will display all the info that the ship transmitted within the last minute or two, plus all the ship data on file in the AIS servers, including pictures of the ship, all its basic operating data, and current voyage details.



Most of the ship positions on the map are updated by satellite every minute or so, or when you have an iPhone app, automatically from your own phone as long as you have a phone signal.

If you're heading out from the harbour, before you leave, you can check which of the big ocean-going vessels are straight off Coffs, and because they all have automated weather reporting included in the AIS data signals, you can see what the wind and air temperature is exactly where every ship is located – all in real time. This is pretty reassuring, because if the wind at the harbour is pretty strong and you're having second thoughts about going out, a quick look at the weather reported within the last couple of minutes by the ships out on the shelf will give you an immediate feel for whether conditions are better or worse out where you're thinking of going.

The same can be said for those days where a southerly is forecast to roll in during the day. If you keep an eye on what wind the ships between here and Port Macquarie are reporting in real time, you can pretty much track the progress of a southerly squall front moving up the coast and decide when to get the lines in and hightail it for home.

There are two actual apps associated with this system, the one you pay for is the AIS MarineTraffic.com system that displays all this info superimposed on a Google map, and then there's the free companion app that allows you to upload and register your vessel with the mAIS system.

The only time-consuming part of the process is filling out all the boat and personal info and even an optional photo in the registration section of the mAIS. They need to know all the basic details about your boat, and they also want to know your MMSI number. This is the number assigned to your registered 406 EPIRB (you did register it, didn't you...?). It will be printed on the sticker you were sent after registration of your EPIRB was completed.

This MMSI number is a unique vessel registration number that puts you into several worldwide databases. Once you have that info in the mAIS system, they will send you another unique IMO number which is assigned to your boat in the mAIS database, and along with your MMSI number, provides unique identification that allows you to switch your boat on and off at the beginning and end of each voyage.

By the time you've got all the info in the system and the app loaded on your phone, you'll have a page on the phone that allows you to simply press a single button to start a voyage and have the boat show up on all the screens of ships transiting the area. When you get back to port, you just press one more button and that tells the system you've arrived in port and takes you off the active map display. If you forget to send the stop message, the system recognises that you've arrived and sends you an email that prompts you to turn off your active voyage. If you've moored for the night and not returned to port, you can just check the "anchored" box, and the system leaves you active on the database, and shows your boat with an anchored symbol instead of underway.

So... If all the boats in the club fleet register, the website allows you to group them all into a "My Fleet" classification that will tell you at any time how many off the club vessels are at sea and where they are. You can even add other boats belonging to mates who fish off the Gold Coast, or game boats in Cairns for the heavy tackle season that you want to follow anywhere in Australia or even the other side of the world to the "My Fleet" group.

Once you're at sea and cruising around, your phone sends a message every 1-5 minutes updating your position, course, speed and so forth. But here's the rub... while you're at sea and this app is active, the phone consumes power at a prodigious rate because it's constantly running the GPS receiver in the phone, as well as sending position and speed data in short bursts every few minutes. It doesn't eat into your data allowance much at all, but it sure chews battery power like it's going out of fashion, and will flatten your phone or iPad battery in a few hours unless you've got a 12-volt power outlet on the bridge of your boat that you can plug a phone charger into. BCF has an excellent BLA

stainless steel 12-volt outlet that's easy to install on your boat for \$12.95, after which any power problems this app creates for you will be a thing of the past.

If all the boats in the SIGFC fleet eventually end up registered with mAIS, you can simply open the app while at sea, and it will bring up a local map showing you the real time positions of all the club boats out on that day. This makes available data that is within a couple of minutes of being accurate, and is better than radar in some respects in that you can read vessel names, speeds, and other data straight off the screen as you look at the position of the boats around you.

No more telling whoppers about your position on the 2-hourly sked either, because everyone can see you on their phone!

Also, if you're one of the skippers who occasionally go out solo for a fish, think of the additional safety factor if you're out there on the shelf and your wife or mate is able to keep an eye on you simply by switching on the mAIS app on their phone back here on shore.

This is basically a very sophisticated application for smart phones and tablets that comes with numerous benefits, particularly enhanced safety out on the water. It's based on an industry standard ship tracking system used throughout the world, and by dialling yourself into it, you're joining a worldwide database and will appear on the screens of all big ships plying up and down our coastline.

All this for the price of one schooner... it's a no-brainer!