Sail Transport Community

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Culture Change Letter #153 -
[Editor's note: This is by design a work in progress, starting from conversations between Paul Flowers and Jan Lundberg in St. Marys, Georgia, February 2007, on the schooner Wanderer. Dmitry Orlov and John Baker follow with their contributions.]

Sail Transport Network needs port facilities tailored to non-petroleum or pre-petroleum techniques and materials. Rather than getting them from separate business sources, these techniques and materials will be better offered within the reliable network of a devoted community. In this endeavor a post-petroleum culture will be nurtured.

A supportive place with services, goods and expertise for sailboats and sailors will develop with strong bonds within and reaching out to any potential members of the community. A sailboat and its crew may be far away, but will still be able to rely on the sail transport community for information, communication, advice, and eventual work performed with ordered materials and products.

Comprising the sail transport community would be traditional artisans and craftspeople as well as small industries that make sails (out of hemp ultimately), haul out boats on rails with horses for power, handle freight to and from the boats' holds, and manufacture items of fine woodworking.

No power boats or recreational jet skis would be allowed in the marina. Besides the pollution and safety issues, we know we will all become virtually petroleum-free anyway. This could happen soon, so we must start learning and resurrecting traditional ways immediately.

Informal arrangements of barter and hire would naturally flourish, offering employment. Family boating and onshore activities would be encouraged. Pedal powered services would provide taxi service as well as trucking. Bike carts and work-bikes carry amazingly large loads, as seen in places such as India today. One rider can move hundreds of pounds with ease.

Toxic petrochemicals and lead-based paints and other products would be minimized on the boats and in the community -– assuming they were still available. This implies fiberglass/epoxy boats would be discouraged or phased out, while these expensive products are still available prior to petrocollapse.

Wooden boats would be the only kind constructed in the boat yards. Engineless craft would be the usual design, even before the loss of petroleum fuels. (Biodiesel and ethanol may be available but are not expected to be in huge quantity or at low prices.) During the remaining days of motor fuels, propulsion for harbor maneuverability can be met, for example, via yawl boats which are skiffs outfitted with outboard motors. Oars would be common for small craft as well as larger ones. Small craft can also be made of skins on frames or of birch bark, for example.

A school for seamanship (or seapersonship!) and boat-building as well as other supportive activities would be part of the sail transport community. Certification for navigation, piloting, command and defense would be offered.

Population size of the sail transport community could be from 100 people living at the harbor or bay, to thousands when post-petroleum living draws more participation from survivors of petrocollapse brought on by global peak oil. There is no way to anticipate survival rates or population sizes upon dramatic effects of climate distortion which has begun (even before famine from the demise of petro-agriculture).

Philosophy and particulars

The Sail Transport Network seems to attract people who aren't only in love with the sea and who take steps to live their dream, they are independent-minded folk who have discovered the "American Dream" to be a hoax.

The beginning stages of this concept should be an intentional community built around a harbor facility with an eye to self-sufficiency.

To begin this project, it ought to be independent of other people's influential money, such as from self-interested corporations and many foundations; hence, a reason for profitable sail freight business.

Fishing communities were always close knit anywhere in the world. The entire community was centered around the harbor. Everything needed came from the sea, such as fish and imported grain from afar sometimes.

For some larger ports, luxuries were brought as well, including tea and alcoholic beverages. Sailboats have been used for worse, such as piracy. We hope there will be no return to the worst practices that have characterized our destructive Western Civilization.

Ship building communities must be strong and quickly constructed, such as of scrap wood. Captains' wooden houses of yesteryear were well made. Cobb houses are too heavy for a sand-based soil, causing settling and wall cracking. Ants can dwell in such walls. Stone requires deep foundation and are not so insulatable, and are heavy on the sand. But stilt frame houses not only are insusceptible to flooding, but are also above the level of mosquitoes and no-see-ums. Fifteen feet up means cooler temperature in the summer, and is above tidal surges.
A stilt framed house will last for one's grandchildren; not so with a cobb house if near the ocean.

The need for wood for housing and ships means protecting old growth trees. The sail transport community will teach appropriate living with one's environment. Although telephone polls may be requisitioned for masts and booms, this is not ideal, and old-growth logs are important also for making dug-out canoes.

Warehouse buildings can be made of wood as well, especially realistic when of resused and reuseable wood. Sail-making lofts need to be made from wood and be high up, in a wide area for work. Such warehouses are needed for making rigging as well.

Aside from obtaining whatever food fit to eat from the sea, everyone in the community should be gardening, and all available land should be used for this. The skills need to be learned and followed. Many more people need to start doing it instead of talking or dreaming about it.

Today, some back-to-the-landers have lived in what may be called squalor rather than voluntary peasantry. One reason for this is the difficulty of surviving and thriving outside the dominant socioeconomic system. In future, perhaps soon, the community will come together to improve unpleasant and dysfunctional situations that prevent full development for success and sustainability. Even before the sailing community is built, much work is needed so that buildings, boats and orchards are not neglected and wasted.

A sail transport network is all well and good, but the on-shore infrastructure has got to have chandlers, bakers, blacksmiths, wood workers, bookstores, pubs, and more, to cater as a community to the resurgent Sail World.

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From Dmitry Orlov:

1. Location: there are already many physical niches along the coast that STN (Sail Transport Network)

can occupy, either now or in the near future, such as:

- fishing villages,depopulated by the collapse of fisheries;

- resorts, depopulated due to the collapse of tourism, killed by high jet fuel prices

- urban river fronts and canal fronts, unused because the cities and towns shifted their focus to railroads and then to highways many decades ago

- uninhabited islands, which can be used in a number of ways, including establishing permaculture plantations that are less likely to be disturbed than on the mainland

2. Types of craft: well-founded sailing vessels are of many types, but other craft can come into play as well:

- Makeshift rafts: these can be built out of all sorts of recycled materials, with hulls that are designed to be swamped the entire time, and buoyancy provided by plastic debris (foam insulation, mostly). [Coconut palm timber and planks are good for craft designed to get wet and even partially submerge. - ed.] A large raft can serve as a platform for a makeshift shantytown, to carry people and supplies down rivers and even across oceans by riding the trade winds (it's been done quite recently by the Floating Neutrinos, who are now moored in France).

- Sea kayaks, skin boats: as the Russians quickly discovered while colonizing Alaska, skin boats are much safer than large ships. After losing a number of large sailing vessels, the Russians "went native" (a typical Russian trick, by the way, and something West Europeans have always sucked at) and used skin boats to cross the Bering Strait from Siberia.

- Repurposed industrial junk: There is already a lot of industrial junk to be repurposed, and the inventory is going to become completely overwhelming. Why kill trees when you can rip I-beams and steel pipe out of unused buildings, "borrow" steel plate from the now nonexistent highway departments, and run the cement works a little bit longer to pour a set of ferrocement hulls?

3. Type of social arrangement. STN can "absorb" various groups of people:
- Sailors, obviously. Although a lot of modern skill sets are not particularly applicable, some maritime experience is usually better than none at all.

- Displaced persons: We should expect large numbers of people for whom it will become pointless to try to earn a wage, because their debt burden is staggering (credit cards, medical bills, what have you). A large percentage of Americans have been busy planning a future of indentured servitude for themselves, without realizing that that's what they have been doing. At some point some of them will realize this, but it will be too late. Their alternative will be to drop out of the mainstream economy, and STN can offer such an alternative. A person signs up as "crew" in exchange for room and board and a bit of pocket money during shore leave. An implicit part of the informal contract is that, under normal circumstances, one remains a crew member for life, whether on the water or on shore. To start with, you just have to be able-bodied and have a valid passport.

- People who have some sort of control or access to resources that are becoming economically useless within the mainstream economy, but that can be of use to STN: these individuals should be considered for a leadership role within STN.

- Children: runaways, ones in need of foster care, children born to STN members. Normally, the local Human Services department tries to intervene and impose its idiotic standards for child care, or take the children away and into custody. This is where a migratory, nomadic lifestyle is key, because it defies the definition of "local". Wherever you are, you can always give some other place as your "permanent" address, which happens to be in a different jurisdiction. This should allow STN children to escape the predicament forced on most children in the US, and actually have a normal childhood.

- Animals: Ideally, STN would develop its own ecosystem of sorts, where animals don't belong to specific people; they just belong. The dogs should be reasonable guard dogs and take well to water; mutts, ideally, and certainly not any of the overbred, sickly purebred varieties, some of which can't even give birth without a caesarean. Cats are straightforward, and seem to just happen on boats. Of draft animals, big horses are not so easy to have on board, but donkeys and ponies (Shackleton took Siberian ponies with him, which his crew eventually ate) seem a bit more reasonable.

-Dmitry

From Paul Flowers:

I'd like to add that the idea of culture change is just that...CULTURE CHANGE...I think the best way to do that would be to put our efforts into existing coastal communities, rather than acquiring "our own land" and starting an "intentioanl community." There are many coastal communities who are suffering the ignominious death of the waterfront community.

St. Marys, here in Georgia,
has all the facilities for everything discussed in this draft, and a large, unemployed workforce. The economy is still functioning, but people cannot be expected to completely pull themselves out of something that they don't fully understand is collapsing at the drop of a hat. The best way, I think, to accomplish a sail transport community is to work towards revitalising existing communities and teaching people skills that they need to support a wooden- (and even steel-hulled...those boats still exist and will for a long time...work with what you've got and don't reinvent the wheel) boat and shipping-based community, and it will inure the STN into the hearts and minds of people who would not have even considered it to begin with. It also will doing things in a completely different manner than the failed intentional communities who ended up spending thirty years talking about how cool it would be to accomplish something while never actualy doing so.

Also, doing things in this manner opens us up to numerous resources such as local community development organizations (CDO); the CDO here in St. Marys isn't nearly as evil as the ones in bigger cities elsewhere... they actualy are struggling to keep St. Marys waterfront undeveloped and historic. Other such resources that can help this vision take shape and sail. True community is working with real people, some of whom may not agree with you 100% in your politics, but they like what you're doing....some of the people here in St. Marys are a perfect example of that....that's community.

A utopian society
where everybody agrees with each other all the time is far too much to ask for... pie in the sky... for now at least... and St. Marys is dying and starved for jobs. How amazing would it be if the STN could be the anti-Wal Mart -- instead of coming into a town and destroying it, we come in and empower it to be self-sufficient by teaching skills ranging from ship and boat wrighting skills to gardening and other forms of self sufficiency. Leading by example out in front where everybody can see us, for both people who are online, and people who are not, will mean that everyone wins.

- Capt. P.W. Flowers, Master

Schooner Wanderer

Port Canaveral, FL/Jekyll Island, GA

WYJ3357/KD4UQC

From John Baker:

1) Some of us *very much desire* to give up the risks and expenses and hassles of car ownership and operation, but have very few desirable alternatives. Consider this: An STN based community is first and foremost a **localized** community which also possesss the profound *benefits* of regional and long distance transportation which
provides access to a *limited* set of products (wine, oil, cocao) and services (advanced medical treatment, ship restoration). Furthermore, these benefits are available via a scalable, low impact, and very efficient and proven system.

We have to be careful not propose STN as Globalization By Other Means, but simply communicate the notion that a STN-oriented sustainable community does not have to be cut off and isolated after petroleum fails. On the contrary, it can flourish.

2) I'm glad you captured the notion of "non-sailor" participation in this community. So much about modern (non-sustainable) sailing today is geared toward "the sailor" and ignores the vast, vast infrastructure required to support it. Personally, I am keenly interested in receiving grain from the sailboat and turning it into bread and pastry and beer and selling it out my front door to the community. And this goal only reinforces my desire to participate in STN, since I understand the unsustainable process by which grain is sown, dried, harvested, distributed and processed today. Northern Virginia doesn't grow much grain.

3) Life's activities flourish at boundaries - between sea and sky, land and water, soil and air, buyer and seller, producer and creator, speaker and audience. STN proposes
a means to live sustainably along richer boundaries.

4) The notion to ban motorboats, and yet to rely on yawl boats seems contradictory. Let us propose learning to **really** sail (and thus learn which days *not* to sail), and avoid the issue of ancillary propulsion entirely.

5) I like the "get busy and do it" advice. The problem for most folks is knowing how to start and what useful and valuable activities they can contribute. An STN oriented community can give them a practical reference point.

6) Pedal power is great. I think there is a place for animal traction as well. Horse-based transport, with and without wagon, will work well as our public roadways degrade from lack of repair. Global climate change will require some parts of the coastal communities to build at high elevation, and grass-fed horses and mules excel at hauling heavy loads up steep grades.

Let's find some coastal land and found an STN community!!! I'm ready sell my McMansion and three cars and move yesterday. (I'll convert my tractor to biofuel and donate it to the cause.) I imagine we'd get international attention, participation and perhaps some serious donations if we came up with a sensible plan and started tasking real estate buyers' agents. Unfortunately I don't have experience in urban planning and founding ecovillages, nor do I have the millions of dollars required to purchase outrageously priced coastal land. But collectively we might attact the resources, talent and experience that matters. One rule I would strongly support: Keep Corporate interests and influence out of STN.

Consider what other groups have proposed for a desirable, realistic

and actionable plan for escaping suburbia. STN could be the first and best so far.

Poem from a socioeconomic democracy activist:

TALL SHIPS

What could be more majestic?

Those sturdy masts, reaching half way to heaven,

Graced with yards, booms, gaffs and furled or filled sail.

That intricate web of rope,

Efficiently dedicated to the integrity and ingenious usefulness

Of all those proud spars and eager sails.

Tall Ships!

Graceful and swift birds of the sea,

Delicately balanced at that magical interface between wind and water,

Capturing power from the one to drive through the other.

Magnificent spars -- slender, considering their assigned duty --

Colluding with the canvas to capture the lightest zephyr

Or withstand the strongest gale.

Running rigging -- running everywhere!

Keeps one reminded, if needed, that this is a Tall Sailing Ship!

Anchored in harbor, tied up at wharf,

Plying the coast or plowing the ocean,

Becalmed in the horse latitudes.

With her symphony of creaking timbers, stretching hemp and rhythmic waves,

A Tall Ship -- a many-splendored love affair.

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Sail and pedal links:

This webpage is part of
sailtransportnetwork.org,

sailtransportnetwork.com, and culturechange.org. See these websites for more on sail transport and community. Included are articles by Dmitry Orlov, Paul Flowers and Jan Lundberg.

Pedal Power Produce:

http://www.culturechange.org/pedalpowerproduce.html

Rob George's website:

www.centersds.com

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