Sail Transport Network Hauls Food Across the Sea

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change Letter #225 - David Reid is an engineer from Scotland living in Seattle who became active in the peak oil awareness movement. The more he learned about the implications of dwindling energy capability for industrial society and the consumer economy, the more he might have despaired or continue to talk and talk about the crisis until there was nothing more to say.
At least that's the way it usually works: one monitors the deteriorating world situation and tries to anticipate the future, and -- for the adventurous or the paranoid -- maybe relocate. One tries to be hopeful.

But Dave believed in an adventurous, positive future, so he took the bull by the horns. He bought a sailboat and followed up on a promising-sounding idea: a network for sail transport for the post petroleum world. In September, after attending the Wooden Boat Festival in Port Townsend on the Olympic Peninsula, he sailed with some friends to Seattle on his sloop the Whisper. It was laden with the organic-farm produce from a farm on the peninsula. With no engine's noisy growl or spewing of pollutants or greenhouse gases, the food was delivered in a timely manner to waiting customers across the Puget Sound.

Thus occurred the first practical, "official" and historic voyage for the Sail Transport Network (STN). After its inception in 2000, when oil prices were so low almost no one cared about alternatives to motorized trade, STN could not get beyond the initial organizing stage. In succeeding years there were a couple more false starts for the project. Such as, we put our energy and fundraising behind an old fishing schooner in Georgia, to no avail. We then spent a lot of energy trying to create a new organization and explore new approaches, over a year ago. We got caught in the doldrums and had to wait for a breakthrough. Meanwhile, people were steadily responding to our website SailTransportNetwork.org, emailing their ideas and questions from places as far away as New Zealand, Texas, and the British Isles.

The main breakthrough had been in 2006 when Boston-based author Dmitry Orlov wrote to Culture Change and offered a manuscript, "The New Age of Sail." The original ideas therein that we published constituted a breakthrough. We've been sailing along on a higher level ever since. In addition to Dave's voyages flying the STN burgee, we have software being written for a matchmaking web-based system for hooking up captains with passengers/crew and vice versa.

Orlov's brainchild, the system will enable people to participate far and wide and as simply as possible. Sail transport can be for just travel or for moving limited freight. You can be a wooden-boat purist and use natural sail fibers, or be a pragmatist and grab the nearest fiberglass boat. Anything goes. But as Dave says, true Sail Transport Network shipping ought not to involve cheating via auxiliary engines so as to minimize depending on the wind, just to save some time in order to compete with petroleum traders.

Dave's a man after my own heart: after doing Pedal Power Produce for several years, and seeing interest die down around the country after our peak in the late 1990s, I was getting used to disappointment and failure on that most worthy project. Now, a new role has emerged we had not thought of in Humboldt County: linking up the sailboats to farms and consumers via bike carts! As it happens, Portland, Oregon will see this combination in a few months for City Repair's annual Village Building Convergence. We'll be scrounging up some folding bicycles and folding bike carts to fit on our little sailboats for the linkages. And Dave has already successfully organized this in the Puget Sound!

The next trial run for Sail Transport Network in the Puget Sound is scheduled for a January 4 delivery in Seattle. People want their STN-brought produce, grains and honey. Dave is on the high seas as I write this -- if I didn't have bilge problems in Portland I'd be crewing with him now! When he returns he will submit to an interview on his voyages and share the considerable body of knowledge he has developed. He'll have more pictures for you, and he'll tell us about his many collaborators such as Sustainable Ballard and SCALLOPS (Sustainable Communities All Over Puget Sound).

Dave has already proven that goods moved by sail are less expensively transported than by truck going around the Sound. Now he is factoring in the labor cost, for he knows that there must be compensation for crew if they are not signing up just for the benefit of passage.

Until you read the upcoming interview "Sail Transport Network's history maker: David Reid" early in the new year, Culture Change is proud to share with you here and now some initial excitement over Dave's STN voyages, from two Seattle websites, with some pictures Dave sent us from his slide show.

Is it time for you to get behind the future of non-petroleum shipping and the restoration of connections for coastal and island communities via renewable-energy travel, trade and cultural exchange? You don't have to have a big boat. Even a canoe fits right in. If research on the state of the oceans and other waterways is your bag, a sailboat is just right: consider the Alguita, the catamaran sailed by Captain Charles Moore on his forays into the "synthetic sea": he discovered the plastic soup in the middle of the northern Pacific Ocean. Samples that he and his crew took showed that there's six times as much plastic as zooplankton in the "Eastern Garbage Patch" -- an area twice the size of Texas.

Or, if you want to move some coffee or chocolate from the tropics to the temperate, caffein-addicted zone, by all means: let the chic designations "shade grown" and "fair trade" be joined by "sail transported" to redefine "organic."

STN begins anew with successful freight

"Buy organic produce delivered by sailboat" December 15th, 2008 · 36 Comments

You can’t get much more green than this: organic, local and delivered by sailboat. On January 4th, a sailboat will deliver fresh organic produce from three local farms right to Shilshole Bay Marina’s public dock. The Sail Transport Network has teamed up with Sustainable Ballard to visit two farms in Sequim and another from the Kitsap Peninsula for a delivery of potatoes, grains, beets, green cabbage, carrots, some brassicas, kale and honey.

You can buy a full tote of produce for $40 (20 lbs.), a half tote for $20 and big jars of honey for $15. You can learn more about the program right here, and make sure to get your order in before December 27th to make the shipment. (Photo from Nash’s Organic Produce in Sequim).
(to read the original article and comments, see
myballard.com

"It's not a bird, or a plane, but a boat! The Sail Transport Network brings oil-free, organic food to the Ballard community!"

- from CookLocal.com, by Patricia, December 23, 2008:
It's no secret that I love my CSA and my local farmers markets. I'm not alone. The local food movement is gaining CIMG2749 popularity almost everywhere. The National Restaurant Association just released their "What's Hot" Chef's Survey and the #1 item on their hot list? Local produce! I feel fortunate to live in the Pacific Northwest where this movement is going strong. Not only are we Buying Local, but we're making a conscious choice to support local farmers and increasingly, to reduce the amount of fossil fuel used in the beloved organic foods we grow and eat. This isn't an easy process. No matter how sustainable your farming or home gardening practices are, or how much you try to work back into the land, unless you happen to live right down the road from a very diverse farm, or grow all of your own vegetables, you'll still incur some fossil fuel costs when your produce is transported from the farm to you (whether or not that produce finds its way to a farmers market or a grocery store first).

An item's Food Mile value is the number of miles that your food travels using oil- dependent methods such as truck, train, or airplane. The smallest number of food miles of any farm I've been able to find at my primary farmers' markets (Ballard, the University District, and West Seattle) has been 11 miles -- courtesy and bragging rights of Sea Breeze Farms on Vashon Island. Along with a few other Vashon farms, such as Sister Sage Herbs, their products travel the shortest distance here in the Seattle city limits.

Note: The Bainbridge Island and Vashon Island farmers markets have a variety of farms with a smaller number of food miles. The majority of the farms that attend these markets are located on the same island as the market, so the Food Mile budget is significantly less. If you are lucky enough to live on one of these islands, I hope that you make it a habit to Buy Local at your farmers markets.

I thought my 11 Food Mile milk, pork, and cream were pretty darn good (and they are, really), but then I met Dave Reid of the Sail Transport Network... [read remainder of story at
cooklocal.com]

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Read the interview of David Reid:

culturechange.org

Read past stories on Sail Transport Network:

SailTransportNetwork.org

If you are interested in participating or being supportive of STN in any way, please contact Culture Change/STN at info "at" culturechange "dot" org or David Reid at sailtransportcompany "at" gmail "dot" com.

Documentary "Our Synthetic Sea" featuring Capt. Charles Moore:

algalita.org