Interview with David Reid, Sail Transport Network's history maker

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change Letter #226 I met David Reid in Seattle in October 2007 when he invited me to speak at the Seattle Peak Oil Awareness monthly meeting. By the time I was giving my talk, taking on questions such as whether there's validity to the techno-fix, Dave's main interest had already zeroed in: "Excuse me everyone, but we've discussed these peak oil questions enough in our meetings. Let's hear about the Sail Transport Network."

For the meeting's remainder and in the following year I came to see how serious Dave is about sailing with a purpose.

In the development of Sail Transport Network there have been many expressions of interest, debates, and doubts. There have been false starts since 2000, and most of our progress has been just in cyberspace. So David Reid has distinguished himself by actually getting his own sailboat and succeeded in making trial voyages to demonstrate the feasibility of sail power for passage and freight. In September of 2008 Dave sailed with friends from the Olympic Peninsula, Washington, to Seattle, with a load of organic produce. Flying the Sail Transport Network burgee and documenting the costs, time and other aspects of the voyage, the first STN tangible project came about.

Sail power had never gone away, of course. It is thousands of years old, and with any luck for our planetary home and the human species, we'll be sailing for hundreds of thousands of years more. But the way our modern society's abuse of the ecosystem has grown in the last several decades, with population growth out of control, and as the very composition of the oceans has altered for the worse -- with the plastic plague and acidification that will remain with us for perhaps thousands of years -- we can only hope that humans will be around to sail on. It is in light of our plight, and because the historic advent of peak oil means society must begin alternatives to oil-based transport now, that a sail transport network has been proposed and begun.

Who knows what Dave will do next -- perhaps bring Kona coffee from Hawaii to the caffeine addicts of Seattle, affording the savvy green consumer with a way to feel great about consuming a product that's truly organic, unlike the fair-trade shade-grown, organic stuff brought to the north via polluting transport today? Someone will do it, no doubt. But the first steps for conscious sail transport had to be made modestly and with visionary purpose. In Dave's story below perhaps we'll discover he's a chocolate addict looking to secure his supply in a post-petroleum world!

Up until now only a few folks in the peak oil and sailing communities know who David Reid is. A few more have heard there have been actual Sail Transport Network voyages in the Puget Sound, and a very few have seen the PowerPoint presentation Dave created [excerpts here as photos]. So it is my pleasure to present his work and his thoughts for the future for Culture Change readers now. - Jan Lundberg, flying the STN burgee in Portland, Oregon

Culture Change: You have made four voyages in recent months that methodically demonstrate the feasibility of traveling and transporting farm produce on your sailboat. Before you tell us the details of your experiences and future plans, what would you say is the basic reason for your activities? Is your philosophy to begin "living the future now" or are you more of a humanitarian attempting to build "life boats" for the post-petroleum world just around the bend?

David Reid: Three main influences are to reduce our dependence on fossil fuel as this feedstock becomes less affordable/reliable, provide a local transportation system that can give our young people hope for the future, and to provide a more natural transportation system.

CC: What kind of a boat or kinds of boats have you used so far? Does one need one of those big clipper ships of olden days to make sail transport viable in today's world?

DR: Geography matters. The clipper ships were the backbone of globalization of their day. On a more local level every coastline will have its own solutions. Sail Transport on the Inter-Coastal Waterway will look completely different from the Puget Sound. It even depends on the individual routes. I use a 27ft cruiser/racer hull to manage light air conditions in the Puget Sound. Right now we are visiting farms near Sequim on a Catalina 34, more suited to the longer distance and heavier winter air. If I was going to move fair trade coffee from Hawaii maybe a clipper wouldn’t be a bad idea.

CC:Tell us about the voyages: from where to where, carrying what cargo, what connections were made at the origin and destination for the food, and what help or participation you had.

DR: I've had an enormous amount of help from many directions. From friends, sailors, sustainability groups like Seattle Peak Oil Awareness (SPOA), Sustainable Ballard, and Vic Opperman's SCALLOPS program. The trial voyages so far have mostly been to some of the closest small organic farms to Seattle by sea. The loads have been organic produce. The Farmers are very small independent organic operations. These farmers are too small to afford LTL trucking costs or the ferry and time commitment to make the farmers markets in the city. At the same time their local markets cannot guarantee them a living. They didn’t take us seriously until we kept showing up. Now they are going to send us their growing plan for next year.

CC: What findings did you arrive at for the economic feasibility of sail powered transport compared to trucking? Did this lead you to believe we do not have to wait for petrocollapse to establish a sail transport network?

DR: I was surprised when the operational costs started to look like this was close to even possible. I had assumed we were 10 years out. I believe we are in the zone where the Sail Transport business model will improve year over year. If we don’t get it right next year the economics will only get better; not many businesses have those kind of long term fundamentals to help them. Petrocollapse? That’s not in my business plan, petrocollapse could mean there may be short periods where we might be the only transportation running. In that case... well we’ll probably call the city and ask them how we can help out.

CC: Tell us about pedal power and electric bicycles, and how this non-trucking, non-warehousing, non-refrigeration approach can work to provide local food supply for coastal and island communities.

DR: I'll defer to the opinion of my local Trike supplier, Segue Fischlin. She has been building prototype pedal/electric cargo vehicles to be used in the Seattle are for years. Again geography matters. In Seattle we have a lot of very steep hills making straight pedal power for loads problematic. Using a very small amount of electricity we can overcome these issues. We are about to use some of the most efficient ev's [electric vehicles] ever built and we can do this by building ev's that aren't trying to pretend they are automobiles. I'm an engineer by trade and I am very impressed by Segue's ability to solve engineering problems without adding a whole lot of unnecessary paraphernalia.

As for non-refrigerated. Well, if you transport food that's just been picked and get it to market in a day in the hull of a boat that's sitting in 45 degree water you don't need refrigeration. If you transport produce in steel containers thousands of miles overland in baking heat, well of course you need refrigeration. What we are doing is more comparable to farmers markets which transport relatively short distances in all weather, hot and cold, unrefrigerated, and it works fine. Our hull temperatures are very stable and definitely on the cool side.

CC: Who are all your collaborators on board and on land? In 2007 Culture Change covered SCALLOPS and Sustainable Ballard. Besides drawing upon them in addition to your peak oil group, how about beyond this movement to involve "regular individuals"?

DR: Yes to all of that. In addition to SPOA, Vic Opperman and Fulvio Casali from Sustainable Ballard and SCALLOPS (Sustainable Communities All Over Puget Sound) are dedicated to seeing this project succeed and are fully "on board." A small but dedicated group of sailors from Jay Fitzgerald's "Oar Club" are providing a great resource for sailors who have already been working on pure sail navigation. There are people from the sail racing community interested and a great deal of just regular people.

CC: You are very open and inclusive about sail transport activities. Any advice for people to get started? The Puget Sound and the islands to the north of it were served by kayaks and canoes for thousands of years. Can you encourage a return to such reliance?

DR: Get out and do it. We are in uncharted territory. Sail transport has never happened in an age where we have the most manoeuverable and efficient sailing vessels in history at the same time as we have radio communications (not to mention cellular and GPS). I can't imagine what serious designers will come up with once they take this seriously. We will likely see sailing vessels unlike anything we have ever seen before and I'm not talking about electronics; I'm talking about hull and sail plans.

CC: What is the realistic prospect for Seattle and other such cities to feed themselves when the petroleum-fueled, petrochemical mode of farming and distribution fails us due to oil depletion or global supply crisis? Did not the sustainable days of native cultures up and down the Pacific Northwest offer plentiful, healthy aquatic species for ready food needs, and use huge logs for canoes, and animal-skin kayaks?

DR: Yeah!, there were a lot less people and a lot more food to eat in those days. Turning the most fertile lowlands into condos was a poor choice. I'm working on a piece of the puzzle. There are others which have nothing to do with sail. Some social and some technical. Nothing will substitute for a reduction in required inputs.

CC: We have heard of the French wine ships plying the English Channel of late, carrying precious drink with the power of the wind. There are some South Seas services using sailboats for transportation, freight and communication. They have not to our knowledge been doing this for the sake of a sail transport network per se, but they are part of a trend we hope. Do you all see these activities somehow fitting together, at least in the public's mind some day?

DR: There is a huge amount of romanticism that is attached to transportation by sail. Maybe even more than there is with organic farming. I've participated in both during my lifetime. Both are very hard work, people working in these activities are not doing it because it's a joyride, we believe it in more than we sometimes believe in our own comfort. If there is one thing holding these efforts together maybe it's the selfless vision that working with our human ingenuity, integrity and pure muscle power we can make way without the destructive practices the petroleum age has made possible. So if we go to bed tired after a long cold crossing in less than ideal conditions with tide getting us up at 2:40 AM, you know what, we sleep pretty good.

CC: Your practice is to avoid the use of engines that cheat by making for a quicker sailing voyage. We know that almost every sailboat in U.S. and Canadian waters has an auxiliary engine, but also that many smaller boats that could have supplemental oars do not have oars or paddles. Would you say that tomorrow's engineless environment will satisfy a newly defined demand -- assuming some techno-fix like algae fuel does not come along tomorrow to allow the corporations to perpetuate world trade by substituting for bunker fuel, diesel and gasoline?

DR: Biofuel substitute for bunker fuel is mathematically ridiculous. It took the oil age to really replace sail globally. Coal alone might not have done it. The existence of sail-powered coal carriers is interesting evidence. There are a number of very good reasons to aim at engine avoidance at this stage. First we have to develop those skills before we need to. Engineless passagemaking is also very rewarding and enhances seamanship skills greatly. Most good sailboats sail and manoeuver better and faster without prop drag. Other than a demasting, engines are probably the number one cause of catastrophic system failure on any boat.

CC: You have announced you are quitting your job to do sail transport networking full time. When do you start, and what are your immediate goals?

DR: January 2009. My goal is to set up a small sail powered CSA for 2009.

CC: What do you think of Dmitry Orlov's concepts, i.e., the New Age of Sail, and his brain child, the world-wide-web system under development now to link crew and passengers with captains making their boats available?

DR: It’s a great idea, there are some cruising sites use something like it. I think this will work best once skippers and their boats are out there actually transporting.

CC: Are you having a fun time on the water and visualizing a new life in service to people and the planet? What are your expectations or goals for the next couple of years perhaps?

DR: I’m having a blast. My goal for this year is to build an experimental Sail Powered CSA and to work on developing routes, boats, crews and connections. At the end of 2009 if this is successful we should know where this will go.

CC: Thank you. I believe you might become at least an historic footnote in the annals of transportation and trade history in the modern world, if the dreams we share can find support and growing participation.

DR: Maybe it’s a bit early for the annals of anything, but if enough people in Ballard want their food delivered this way, that will do great for now.

CC: Thank you, Dave.

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See SailTransportNetwork.org for articles and links. For Part One of this story, go to

"Sail Transport Network Hauls Food Across the Sea"

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.

Sustainable Ballard and STN January 4th festivities: