Sail Transport Network is Unfurling

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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A sail transport revival is afoot and afloat around the world. As the cheap, easy crude oil has mostly been extracted from the Earth and spewed into the sky and water, the desirability and economics of sail power get stronger.

Sail Transport Network (STN) is an open project for almost anyone to participate in. Most of the inhabited world is coastal or on rivers. STN was put forward originally by Culture Change in 1999. We sail-transport activists envision linking coastal communities, islands, and river communities together sustainably -- without the extreme petroleum dependency we have known.

Post-petroleum travel and shipment of goods are about communication and exchange that we might have a hard time doing without. Long distances may be bridged only by sail in the fairly near future. However necessary this might be, sail power will allow any local surpluses to be traded. This helps specialized areas gain diverse sources of needed products, skills, heirloom seeds, etc.

A few years ago sail transport was thought to be off on the distant horizon and impractical in the "real world." This is changing rapidly.

Without the continuity of affordable oil supplies -- a toxic and planet-warming commodity whose use has greatly afflicted the world's ecosystems and peoples -- arrangements to go oil-free need to be made immediately. For in today's post-peak oil world, millions of people may soon need sail power, along with pedal power transport, for local self-reliance.

Our STN website does not yet tell of the rapidly developing planning for sail transport that excites my colleagues, fellow sailors and me. This report is our latest thinking for you to consider. It is the result of our investigations into opportunities for truly sustainable, renewable wind power and human power for certain products as well as for benefits such as sharing information and enabling education. A look at SailTransportNetwork.com presently features the Dutch concern Fair Transport, a sail transport group whose schooner recently took a cargo of rum from the Caribbean to Holland. Please check the website's other projects, news, positive press on STN, and join our listserve for active communication online.

In this report I lay out the ideas and initiatives brewing on Sail Transport Network. They may earn your optimism, as they offer humanity a realistic way to reduce carbon emissions immediately. Let us take a big step toward emancipating ourselves from horrific oil dependence. A study in the UK found that 16 cargo vessels spew the equivalent of the world's entire "fleet" of cars' air pollution. We cannot just throw up our hands and wait until "they" think of something. The time is now to act and reclaim our future.

Lest one imagine that sail power is premature or just idealistic, let economic reality speak: cargo container ships have slowed down to an average of 15 knots, the speed of the clipper sailing ships of 150 years ago. This historic development saves on increased oil costs.

Global greenhouse-gas emissions are at an all time high. How smart is society's vaunted economic growth and job generation, when global corporate trade based on strategic, dwindling supplies of oil threatens life as we know it? How will people cope when the "energy slave" known as crude oil and refined petroleum are suddenly unavailable? The energy power of a single barrel of oil equals all the power a bicyclist can generate in several year's time.

Before you despair too much, know that there are things we can still do about the climate trend and petrocollapse. And, fear not ye denizens of northern nations, for coffee, cacao and cigars may be extended for your pleasurable habits and benign addictions, thanks to sail voyages from the tropics.

The reason for revealing the following projects' announcements -- some projects are merely on the drawing board -- is that we wish to spread the word now instead of waiting and sitting on a good thing that should be shared. The more the merrier! Join with sailfolk hoisting halyards and fonding tillers, and with "foodies" who pedal local produce. We of many diverse skills and interests are getting together for a measure of food security, passenger service, and transporting goods. Our efforts may not serve more than an extremely modest portion of the present economy. But the bioregional economies of tomorrow will rely on sail power for a crucial amount of trade and travel.

The questions of profit margins, economic efficiency, break-even points, and subsidies all come up when we brainstorm to assess what is doable now for sail transport. The main uncertainty is the up-and-down price of oil. Subsidies for oil have been massive, so what about subsidies now for sail transport? Will sail transport have to wait to be on a large scale only when oil-based freight cost is much, much higher in price? No. We can shape the future now.

A few examples of new local initiatives:

• Sail-ferry service between Monterey and Santa Cruz, California can enjoy a niche advantage today. Note that it can take less time to sail across the Monterey Bay than to take the public bus system. Such a sail transport service can easily extend north to include the San Francisco Bay. Already, wine is sailed from Petaluma to the SF Peninsula.

• Speaking of other fun liquids, a brewery downstream of Portland, Oregon will be receiving malted grain by sailboat and enabling beer-keg distribution by sail and pedal power.

Across oceans:

• China has great potential to dive into sail transport as a fast growing sector. As the nation is the top solar panel maker in the world, and plastic bag waste has been consciously and hugely cut back, we should think of China as forward-thinking. China is fortunately still heavily bicycle friendly, which will aid sail transport by connecting people and products pedaled to and from the docks. Peak oil and climate protection are major concerns in China. A top financial and political newspaper, the Shanghai Oriental Morning Post, ran an extensive interview of me on May 6, and in it I spoke of our mutual concerns and dreams that may help lay groundwork for a sail revival in the western Pacific and beyond.

• The entire Pacific Rim, with its currents called gyres, and the helpful trade winds, is a once and future sail transport environment of major importance. An international sail transport conference needs to be held in the near future, perhaps in Hawaii as a central location. Representatives from various countries can convene to share their knowledge and advance the cause. Attendees who arrive via sailboat or outrigger canoe will get a double lei (no double entendre intended).
At the conference STN projects under discussion can be manifested in various forms: new shipping companies, expanded eco-tourism, passenger service, green jobs generation, energy saving and pollution abatement, and communication such as cultural exchange.

Many boats are already available for sail transport, in part because they are low-cost compared to new cars. Meanwhile, some new, large boats must be designed and built too, and this is already underway. A potential STN supporter can make a donation of his or her boat's time for STN's use, resulting in a tax deduction. Likewise, a charitable gift of a boat for the Sail Transport Network or related nonprofit entity can help this movement on its way. Existing as well as new boats need to be outfitted with gear and crew. (Please see our wish list at the first link at bottom.) Biodiesel/veggie-oil engines and electric motors as auxiliary for sailboats are available. Renewable energy charging through solar and wind systems help, as does regenerative propeller charging at sea. Gathering information on the best models, their installation and cost needs to be done for the network to share. The role of the sculling oar may become surprisingly significant.

As with the marine research vessel Alguita, the catamaran sailboat made famous by Captain Charles Moore (who displays the STN burgee), sailboats can do important research such as on the presence and source of plastic plaguing the sea and its creatures. Another contribution to the common good is for sailboats to be available for emergency rescue if oil for the Coast Guard boats is unavailable. Indeed, saiboats might have to rescue Coast Guard "sailors" at sea.

The possibilities for Sail Transport Network are so awesome that I am more excited about the potential than anything I can imagine, short of kicking back in a perfect ecovillage by a beautiful cove.

Interns and volunteers are being sought to help implement STN plans, and integrate them with academic advancement, job possibilities, fund raising, and logging hours at sea. Please contact us (info@culturechange.org), and sign up for the listserve [never mind the technical lingo "private information" that is simply our STN description].

Making a donation toward STN development will help Culture Change and STN spread the word about the growing movement: sail transport networking. Thank you for your participation in any way.

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Further reading:

Sail Transport Network's wish list is on the website of The Farm's Global Village Institute for Appropriate Technology

Sail Transport Company - the first STN regular service, pioneered by Capt. David Reid

Sailing the Salish Sea: Passenger Service in BC - meet the history-making, enterprising Carson Tak

Fair Transport, sailing the freight schooner Tres Hombres, based in Holland, has its own brand of rum marked sail transported

B9Shipping, non-fossil fuel shipping to from the UK's and Ireland's biggest wind power provider

"Reflections Before the Collapse of Oil" - Printed in China on May 6, 2011
posted in English on March 8, 2011 on Culture Change:
Shanghai Oriental Morning Post - Jan Lundberg's interview, by Beilei Jin who also translated.

"Worst ever carbon emissions leave climate on the brink" Guardian.co.uk -
Record rise, despite recession, means 2C degree target almost out of reach

Songs of Petroleum, Jan Lundberg's new autobiography tells of STN's birth and progress

Appearing in July 2011: an interview of Jan Lundberg in a Danish magazine on the issue of living in nature, including on the water

How 16 ships create as much pollution as all the cars in the world

Container ships slow down to speed of old clipper sailing ships Oct. 31, 2010, Business Insider - Money Game / Helenic Shipping News: "...by mid-2010, half the world's active container ship fleet, carrying 35 per cent of global trade by value, was steaming slower than before the economic downturn - 15 knots or less." This keeps the ships moving and busy instead of halting their use, and saves money by using less oil.

You and Your [energy] Slaves, by Andrew Nikiforuk, 5 May 2011, TheTyee.ca (subsequently appeared in Energy Bulletin and AlterNet)

The adventures of Capt. Charles Moore aboard his RV Alguita catamaran for the Algalita Marine Research Foundation has alerted the world to the continent-sized Northern Pacific Garbage Patch of plastic soup.

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