

BC's Harbour Hulks

The Curse of the Black Dragon



Delores Broten

by Arthur Caldicott

Everyone on the coast sees them – the broken hulks of boats. They're almost as prevalent as discarded plastic containers, and far more perilous.

Derelict vessels are a maritime nightmare – an eyesore and navigational hazard, and the source of toxic substances such as gasoline, diesel, heavier fuels and lubricating oils, battery acids and metals, paints containing lead and copper, even sewage. These things leach, leak, and spill into our harbours and bays from neglected boats.

The boats sit at anchor or tied to a mooring buoy, avoiding moorage fees. For months or years, they don't move and no one is ever seen aboard. Rust and rot seeps out of them. Occasionally, an oil slick will appear around the hull. Then one day there's a storm and the next morning the vessel is grounded on nearby rocks, or has crashed into the local marina. Sometimes, folks simply watch the ship sink.

The environmental risks are very real and entirely predictable.

Not Our Department

No official agency will take any precautionary action, until one of

these boats sinks or until the oil spills or the vessel becomes a navigational hazard. By then, the damage is often done.

The Canadian Coast Guard [CCG] may raise the vessel, and tow it to some place for disposal – if there's an oil spill risk. CCG can recover these costs with a claim to the Ship-source Oil Pollution Fund (SOPF). But no oil, no SOPF, and no Coast Guard.

"The solution is simple. We need to establish recycling for boats, just as we have for cars, tires, newspapers, tin cans and other products."

The annual report of the SOPF contains a lengthy list of these boats which have broken up or sunk in harbours on Canada's coasts. It makes interesting, if infuriating, reading.

Most of these incidents could have been avoided, had someone acted earlier. It's not like no one saw them coming.

The fact is, people in harbour communities on the coast look at these derelict ships every day, and

they do complain – to local, provincial, and federal governments, to environment ministries and the Coast Guard. If they get a response at all, it's a deplorable game of bureaucratic hide-and-seek.

Tod Inlet is on the east side of Saanich Inlet, near Victoria. It has been accumulating derelict vessels – fishboats, sailboats, barges – for years. The Saanich Inlet Protection Society (SIPS) has been on the case – to get the derelicts removed, and have some controls put in place.

"We had no satisfaction from any level of government – just a lot of buck passing," says Frances Pugh, SIPS President. "Government agencies are absolutely not doing their jobs."

Out of frustration, the Central Saanich Maritime Society moved beyond writing letters to bureaucrats and ministers. It went to media. Reporters and cameras came to Tod Inlet.

Toward the end of June, the Coast Guard began removing the derelicts and now claims to be monitoring the situation.

Allan Adams, Maritime Society President, says, "It was a small victory." He points out that only two of the twenty or more derelicts were dealt with by the CCG: a sunken gillnetter was raised and towed to Ladysmith for demolition, and a crane was removed from a barge. The barge remains. A third boat was removed by its owner.

Stafford Reid is an expert in marine emergency preparedness, and he understands the disharmony and inaction that results when a number of different agencies from two levels of government have fingers in the derelict boat pie. Transport Canada licenses vessels, but it is the province's role to deal with the derelicts. "Essentially, they are wastes causing environmental pollution and nuisance," says Reid,

Excerpts from the Annual Report of the Ship-source Oil Pollution Fund

but “the province does not want to admit this as their mandate.”

Recycling Program

Calvin Sandborn, Legal Director of the Environmental Law Centre at the University of Victoria says, “The solution is simple. We need to establish recycling for boats, just as we have for cars, tires, newspapers, tin cans and other products. The province should establish a recycling program for boats – funded by charging boat purchasers an ‘Advance Disposal Fee.’”

Washington State’s Derelict Vessel Removal Program (DVRP) has removed about 220 boats since it started in 2003, more than half the inventory of derelicts. The annual budget of about \$750,000 is recharged by small fees on annual registrations and foreign vessel identification documents.

Removing the wrecks is one thing. There’s still the problem of disposal. Pugh says that there are hundreds of old and unseaworthy fibreglass boats on the BC coast and in backyards across the province. Fibreglass lasts forever, unlike wooden and steel boats which eventually rot or rust back to nature.

By one report, the cost to have a 40-foot sailboat hauled to the dump and demolished, is from \$5000 to \$10,000. Victoria’s Hartland Landfill will take your boat, in sections eight feet or less in all dimensions, for \$95 per tonne, and in larger units, for \$345 per tonne.

Adams, Pugh, and Reid agree with Sanborn that a disposal fee is a solution. Reid adds, “Don’t hold your breath...it took decades just to get monetary returns on pop and beer cans in BC.”



Arthur Caldicott is a writer and activist on energy issues in BC and a frequent contributor to the *Watershed Sentinel*.

The Ship-source Oil Pollution Fund (SOPF) was established with levies collected between 1973 and 1976 from shippers of oil products. It hasn’t been collected since, but with accruing interest, there is now some \$150 million in the fund. It is used to pay “last-resort” costs for damage caused by marine oil spills from ships or from untraceable sources. You can read more about it at www.ssopfund.gc.ca

The Black Dragon (Heung Ryong)

The *Black Dragon*, an old Chinese flag fishing vessel of some 120 feet in length, was involved in the smuggling of illegal immigrants to the West Coast at the end of 1999, seized by the authorities, and tied up at Port Alberni, BC. Crown Assets subsequently sold the *Black Dragon*, but she eventually ended up moored to a DND Navy buoy in Mayne Bay [Barkley Sound, south of Ucluelet]. On October 26, 2003 the vessel sank in about 120 feet of water and was boomed off. The vessel was raised by a Coast Guard contractor with great difficulty on December 5, 2003 and some hull repairs made in preparation for the tow to Ladysmith for disposal. On December 9, 2003 while undertow and in a position off Johnstone Reef [off Cadboro Bay, Victoria] the vessel sank again. It is understood that the CCG will not undertake further action regarding this sinking.

Cost to SOPF: \$568,749.63 plus interest

Sea Shepherd II

In April 2004, the *MV Sea Shepherd II*, located in Robbers Pass, Tzartus Island [also in Barkley Sound], was in a derelict state and in danger of sinking. By May 11, 2004, 188 tonnes of a mixture of waste oil and diesel was pumped off the *Sea Shepherd II*, but some 16 gallons per hour of seawater was leaking back into the vessel. On May 26, 2004, the vessel was taken in tow, arriving at the Esquimalt graving dock the next day for break up. By June 17, 2004, seven large waste bins of oiled debris had been removed from the vessel. By July 30, 2004, the break up of the vessel had been completed.

Cost to SOPF: \$331,892.31 plus interest

Rover No. 1

This 74-foot ex-tug went aground and sank in Genoa Bay [Cowichan Bay] on May 8, 2005. The vessel was raised and towed to Nanaimo Shipyards. It was determined that the vessel was in extremely bad condition and would need to be deconstructed to safely remove all the oil. By September 9, 2005, destruction of the vessel had been completed. Nanaimo Shipyards reported 4500 litres of oil was removed from the vessel.

Cost to SOPF: \$64,740.15 plus interest

Ocean Tribute

Sunk at the dock in Ladysmith, on September 5, 2006. There was fuel oil in the water and absorbent pads were used to clean-up. It had been converted to a fish & chip restaurant. The owner hired a commercial contractor to raise the vessel. It was raised but sank again shortly thereafter. The vessel was not insured. The owner did not have the means to respond any further. Approximately 100 gallons of oily fluids were removed. The vessel was demolished.

Cost to SOPF: \$25,806.29