



Return of sail

by Capt. Jorne Langelaan, CEO and Founder, EcoClipper

For thousands of years, sailing ships were the only available long-distance mode of transport and travel. About 200 years ago, steam and motor ships, and later aviation, started to take over. More recently, the realisation that climate change is a direct result of burning fossil fuels has led a small yet spirited group of organisations and companies to work toward the return of wind-powered vessels.

A recently published report (available at EcoClipper's website), probably the first of its kind in the world, documents this transition by analysing a growing market and what might be the most significant change in the world of freight shipping and travel in this century. The report is a result of a range of interviews with leading companies in the sustainable shipping and travel industries and a detailed study carried out by two sail cargo researchers, Hannah Hurford and Charlie Barker. The publication is meant not only to be an information paper but a key instrument for public and private entities – be they investors, financial institutions, shipping companies, or travel agencies – enabling them to make strategic decisions. Equally important, it represents a collaborative effort; an opportunity to establish new and strengthen the existing ties with sail cargo players in Europe.

Value-driven

During the previous years, the sail cargo and sustainable travel market have been characterised by a number of significant trends and developments, including the establishment of two industry associations, the International Windship Association and Sail Cargo Alliance;

climate crisis strikes by masses of school kids, teenagers, and other like-minded activists; the launch of the Poseidon Principles by large financial institutions; the International Maritime Organization's sulphur and greenhouse gas emission regulations and targets; and, of course, whatever will come to pass during and in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

Since the rise of coal- and oil-fired ships, the use of sailing vessels for commercial purposes has largely been restricted to training and leisure cruising. But with the rising public awareness of the climate crisis and the need for more ethical and sustainable transport and products, exciting new possibilities for a modern commercial sail industry have begun to appear. Sail cargo is an emerging, profitable market that has been under development for the last decade. It shouldn't come as a surprise, as a growing number of suppliers and consumers see it as a desirable alternative to conventional means of shipping. There are several aspects of a modern sail cargo industry that offer a unique advantage to the many people who now wish to trade and buy goods in a profitable but more climate-friendly way.

In order to better examine one of the primary comparative advantages of the sector – its environmental impact, the report looks

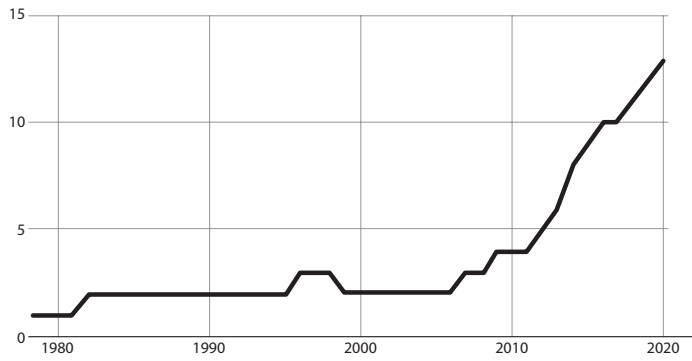
at sail cargo and travel in relation to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These aspects include community engagement, fair trade practices, and non-corporate, non-hierarchical business structures. But above all, it points out the simple fact that sail propulsion has huge potential given its environmental sustainability because, unlike motorised transport, it uses a free and renewable source of energy, and its emissions and pollutants are close to zero.

In essence, sail cargo brings together two aspects of ethical consumerism, namely green transports of products that were sourced and produced in a fair and eco-friendly way. It's a highly value-driven initiative, extending beyond a decrease in emissions and fossil fuel consumption, to promoting ethical and fair trade products, small-scale producers, collaborative and innovative logistics, as well as flatter, flexible and more inclusive organisational structures. Initial ventures are paying off, and the expansion of projects indicates future potential in a new and currently under-developed market.

True sustainability

In response to this expanding market, there is a rise in the number of sail cargo vessels being built or adapted. The more

Fig. 1. Sail cargo fleet size in 1978-2020



Source: EcoClipper

dedicated sail freight vessels there are, the more ports and other authorities will understand how to work with them, and the more companies will use sailing ships to transport products.

Future success is to be found in creating a market at the cross-section of ethical production and transportation, maybe even coupled with passenger transport, rather than throwing the

gauntlet to the conventional sea shipping industry. Doing this will require, on the one hand, creating an apt eco-ethical narrative, and, on the other hand, investing in technology – modern, purpose-built vessels which will allow for better economies of speed and scale.

As sail transport is usually more expensive and time-consuming, concerted awareness-raising and marketing will be required to alter consumer and passenger behaviour and expectations away from conventional, cheaper, and quicker alternatives. Social media will be crucial in spreading awareness of both sail cargo and travel.

The challenges are known, some of them top tier demanding, but it's also a fact that the popularity of the sail cargo market has grown exponentially during the past ten years. While previously there was not much interest in true sustainability, now companies and customers are increasingly looking for green solutions. At the same time, however, it is clear that to open up the market to a wider audience, a certain growth in scale and number of ships are needed.

Because of this, the EcoClipper team sees it as their task, now more than ever, to finalize design of a line of sail cargo ships. These will be larger than the current ones, sustainable, and designed for reaching all the SDGs, more so than other modes of transport and travel. Yet, these ships will be small enough to be financed with reasonable investment and produced swiftly. The striving is to serve the growing market for sustainable shipping and travel, to enable exponential growth in emission-free alternatives. ■

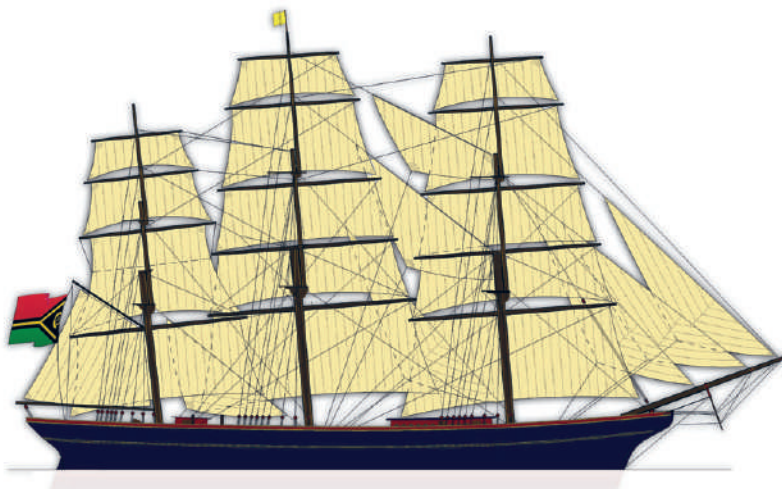


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