

Sustainable Cruising

As derelict vessels pile up in remote anchorages, cruisers must take responsibility for sustainable boating practices to protect the waters we love.

BY JILL GALLIN

CHANGE *Starts* WITH US

Imagine your anchor is set in a pristine anchorage. The sails are flaked, the lines are stowed, and the drinks are poured. There's nothing left to do but relax in the cockpit and enjoy the simple, sustainable sailing life.

As you soak in the view under the setting sun, the scenery

takes your breath away—until you spy an eyesore. It's a derelict sailboat. The once-white hull is stained with yellow streaks. A hole in the port side reveals the boat's innards. Its fractured mast points at you like a broken finger.

According to the NOAA Marine Debris Program and

the International Maritime Organization, about 1.5 to 2 percent of recreational fleet vessels in the United States and Europe are retired annually—amounting to roughly 242,000 boats in the US and 130,000 in Europe requiring disposal. As many as 65,000 additional vessels are lost annually due

to weather events alone in the United States.

Not surprisingly, abandoned vessels now litter harbors around the world. These derelict boats are not just an inconvenience for visitors; they pose serious threats to residents' environmental and economic livelihoods. Worse,



A half-sunken sailboat—one of many derelicts that endanger ecosystems and burden local communities—lies forgotten in a remote anchorage.

in the underdeveloped remote places that cruisers love to visit, the burden of this boat garbage is unfairly shouldered because most of it is not their own.

The problem is multifaceted. First, abandoned boats contain toxic substances such as oil and batteries, which must be removed from the water. Wave action will break up any fiber-reinforced plastic vessel parts, releasing hazardous plastic material into marine and shoreline environments.

Second, disposal is costly, and dumping facilities are limited. Burning, previously practiced in some countries, releases noxious compounds, and landfill space is often minimal.

Third, recycling is impossible if industrial and transport infrastructures are lacking.

And last, there's an increasing number of derelict boats because many fully FRP-constructed vessels built during the 1980s production boom are at the end of their 30- to 40-year

lifespan. What was once a nuisance has become a crisis for many nations.

As cruisers, we have a vested interest in addressing abandoned vessels because the future of our lifestyle is at stake. If the problem persists, underdeveloped remote nations may have no choice but to revoke the

Holding owners responsible is easier said than done. It's often impossible to find the culprit, and many owners sell or gift their vessel before skipping town.

privileges that visiting yachts currently enjoy. Sadly, I can see the storm clouds gathering as I write this article from Tahanea, a remote atoll in the Tuomotus of French Polynesia.

And unfortunately, solutions are steeped in misconceptions. Holding owners of abandoned vessels responsible is easier said

than done. It's often impossible to find the culprit, and many owners sell or gift their vessel before skipping town, without disclosing its state of disrepair. The new owner is then stuck with a ship that isn't fit to float, no means of disposal, and likely fines or even criminal charges for polluting.

Solving the problem by sinking these vessels is also widely misunderstood. An international agreement (MARPOL) makes it illegal to discharge plastic at sea, whether by accident or scuttling, and dumped vessels with FRP components do not make suitable artificial reefs. It also would be a challenge to sink many of today's popular, lightweight, non-balasted vessels even if we tried.

Finally, my husband and I, as insured cruisers, assumed that the salvage of our boat was covered in case of abandonment, and it is. But there's still no simple way to dispose of it.

The problem is daunting but

not insurmountable. Measures are being implemented to stem the tide of boat litter, and some apply to underdeveloped remote areas. Turn-in programs, popular in the United States, give owners an alternative to abandonment, eliminating the hefty cost of salvage. However, transport to a partner nation would be necessary in places with limited space.

An International Boat Registry has been proposed to deter abandonment, and to let nations track and fine owners responsible for abandoned vessels. Addressing the problem will take money that many countries don't have, so establishing end-of-life funding is imperative. Owners and retailers will be responsible as fees are added to the purchase of vessels, cruising permits, insurance and registration. Ultimately, legislative action will be needed to ensure that these funds are collected and allocated toward improving the



abandoned-vessel situation.

There are more-immediate measures that the sailing community can take. Cruisers should build or buy boat models made with less FRP

material. (We owned an aluminum-hulled Allures 45.9 for six years, and sometimes I wish we still did.) If FRP or carbon fiber suits you, then consider buying used instead of new.

Look for simple, quality boat models that will stand the test of time. Ask whether a portion of a new-boat purchase is allocated to an end-of-life fund. Obtain insurance and review

Derelict boats crowd a quiet anchorage. A proposed international registry and end-of-life funding could help hold owners accountable and ease the burden on host nations.

the salvage section of your policy. Be responsible and ensure that your vessel is seaworthy for the long haul before visiting underdeveloped remote places.

Hurricanes, pandemics and other unforeseen circumstances happen, but they're the exception, not an excuse for the cruising community to overlook the boat-litter crisis. Change must start with us. ☸

Jill Gallin, a US Coast Guard-licensed captain and pediatric nurse practitioner, is sailing the world with her husband on their 2011 Outremer 49, Gerty. Follow them at svgerty.com.