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Northwest Passage

The Northwest Passage is a sea route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans that winds its way through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. After the successful voyages of the Spanish and Portuguese explorers in the late 15th century, Pope Alexander VI split the discovered world in two between Spain and Portugal. Denied a sea route to Asia either around Africa or America, England, France and the Netherlands were desperate to find a solution. The following centuries saw a succession of unsuccessful attempts, many of which ended in tragedy. It was only early in the last century that the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen finally managed to navigate this treacherous waterway in the sloop Gjøa, but even he could only accomplish this feat by overwintering twice between seasons. A number of specially reinforced ships made the transit in subsequent years, but it was only in August 2007 that the Northwest Passage became open to ships without the need of an icebreaker.

The opening of the Northwest Passage is among the most conspicuous results of global warming and the fact that a number of Blue Planet Odyssey boats will attempt to transit this once impenetrable waterway highlights the effects of climate change. Nowhere in the world is this phenomenon more obvious than in the Arctic regions where the arctic icecap has been retreating at an increasingly accelerating pace. According to NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), in the summer of 2012 the Arctic sea ice dipped to its smallest extent ever recorded in more than three decades of satellite measurements. The global consequences are already being felt and rising sea levels are now affecting many low lying islands and coastal areas, some of which lie on the route of the Blue Planet Odyssey.

One third of the early confirmations are from sailors who plan to sail the northern route and shows their determination to carry the message of the Blue Planet Odyssey into those high latitudes. The start of the Blue Planet Odyssey from London on 20 July 2014 will mark the 45th anniversary of the first landing on the moon, an achievement which, like the transit of the Northwest Passage, was once regarded as impossible. Both at the time and in the intervening years, some people have questioned the justification of space exploration when those efforts and resources could have been put to much better use in solving the many
problems that we have here on earth. While the far more modest aims of the Blue Planet Odyssey cannot possibly be compared to the feat of landing a man on the moon, the fact that some sailors are prepared to take such a risk in order to highlight one of the greatest dangers faced by humankind today would no doubt attract the approval and praise of their famous predecessors: from Martin Frobisher and Roald Amundsen to Willie de Roos, Eric Brossier and some sixty other valiant sailors who have successfully completed the transit in recent years.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

In preparation for the transit of the Northwest Passage, which I intend to do myself, I have been in contact with several sailors who have accomplished a transit in recent years, have attended several lectures on the subject, have read all relevant material that I could find, and have also consulted people who have worked in that area. I believe that I now have a fairly good idea of what such a transit entails. The main conclusion is that compared to other high latitude voyages, such as passages to Antarctica, Spitsbergen or Alaska, which are areas where I have sailed myself, the challenges posed by the Northwest Passage are entirely different. Whereas in the former cases, the success of a voyage depends primarily on the experience of the skipper and crew, as well as the suitability of the vessel, in other words, on objective criteria, in the case of the Northwest Passage, there are several subjective criteria which are entirely out your control and therefore can result in failure unless you are prepared to do all in your power to minimize those risks.

For an east to west transit, as in the case of the proposed Blue Planet Odyssey passage, the main points that need to be taken into consideration are the following:

◊ The fact that the ice usually retreats from west to east means that in most years the eastern approaches to the NW Passage are the last to become free of ice. The way to overcome this is to plan on arriving at the chosen point of departure in the second half of July, and be prepared to wait until the ice has started retreating to such an extent that a transit may be safely attempted. This tactic can entail a long wait, and also that one must be ready to go as soon as conditions look favourable, as the situation can change rapidly.

◊ Weather conditions in the Northwest Passage can be unfavourable, with either contrary NW winds, or light winds and calms, when the only solution is to proceed under power. This means having a good reserve of fuel, and, although there are fuel depots along the way, being able to refuel at will cannot be taken for granted for a variety of reasons. Some locations may not be accessible because of weather conditions, the depot may be out of fuel, or the route may need to be altered because of weather conditions which would mean missing the nearest depot. For this reason it is strongly recommended that every vessel should carry sufficient fuel to be able to cover 1200 miles under power.

◊ Unless the transit is completed in the early part of the summer, the days begin getting shorter and nights longer, and sailing, or motoring, in the dark, may not be advisable or possible. A late arrival in the North Pacific may result in unfavourable conditions for the continuation of the voyage to British Columbia and the US west coast.

The alternative may be to spend the coming winter in Northern Alaska, or sail to Hawaii and join the southern route in the Marquesas or Tahiti in April-May 2015. The plan is for the Blue Planet Odyssey fleet to rendezvous in Asia and on to Singapore and a long awaited rendezvous with the southern fleet route. There is no question that the Northwest Passage presents a considerable challenge but challenges are there to be overcome, hence my late decision to have a new boat built and do it myself. Northwest Passage, here we come!

Compared to other high latitude voyages, such as Antarctica, Spitsbergen or Alaska, the challenges poised by the Northwest Passage are entirely different”
The Arctic is the harbinger of the world's climate. It is only 13 years since we started our Arctic voyaging, and in this relatively short time we regularly perceive obvious signs of major changes. The evidence gathered by Arctic settlements all point in the same direction. The safe navigation season has increased in the last 30 years from one to three months, the ice cap is no longer as thick as it used to be in the heart of winter, some areas have become accessible, and new plant and animal species are arriving from the south. But higher temperatures do not disappoint everyone! Neither does the idea of new employment areas have become accessible, and new plant and animal species remain one of the most remote and difficult voyages on the planet, yet it is also a place that seems forever changed.

I look forward to welcoming you soon in the Arctic!

Eric Brossier

Sailing above the Arctic Circle was everything we hoped it would be: challenging, frightening, beautiful, fulfilling. We’d been hypnotized and dazzled by the stark landscapes, the whales and polar bears, the never-ending daylight. We’d been humbled by the notion that we were passing through the same historic waters where the heroic Roald Amundsen triumphed and the tragic Franklin expedition came to grief. But stepping ashore in Pond Inlet was also bittersweet: due to the diminished Arctic ice pack, we were one of many cruising boats that have transited the once impassable Northwest Passage in recent years in record-setting numbers. The Passage remains one of the most remote and difficult voyages on the planet, yet it is also a place that seems forever changed.

Eric Brossier and France Pinczon du Sel were the first navigators to transite the Northwest Passage in 2002-2003 on their 33 foot steel yacht Vagabond. For the last five years they have been based in the Arctic, doing research work on the effects of climate change and the state of the polar icecap. They are now accompanied by five-year-old Leonie and three-year-old Aurore, and sent us this report from Ellesmeré Island at the end of a very cold and dark winter.

Herb McCormick completed in 2009 a 28,000 miles circumnavigation of the Americas on the 64 foot steel Ocean Watch to raise awareness about the ailing health of the world’s oceans.

Herb McCabe at Gjoa Haven

The Northwest Passage has been a fantastic adventure for life. It is difficult to express in words the many impressions we have had on the way. How do you describe the crystal-clear air, the colours, the ever-changing landscapes, the ice in all its blue-white splendour, the midnight sun, the constantly changing light, and moving through it all on a small sailboat? The community spirit and friendship with other sailors? Or the very special experience of having eye contact with a family of polar bears a few boat lengths away?

Kym Mathiesen

Canadian Richard Hudson transited the Northwest Passage on his steel schooner Issuma from east to west in 2011.

Richard Hudson

Australian Alex Whitworth completed his second circumnavigation of the globe (2008-2010) via the Northwest Passage on the 33 foot Berrimilla 2.

Alex Whitworth

The Northwest Passage knows neither victory nor defeat – it just exists, grimly indifferent to our presence, just like the Southern Ocean. We have been astonishingly lucky and the best we can say is that we have negotiated our way through. We made some really good calls on the way, but each could have been disastrous had we been wrong. It has been the most difficult thing I have ever done – makes Cape Horn look like a jelly by comparison. As to the highlights: wonderful sunrises, sometimes with huge bongs in glorious orange silhouette. Belugas: these small whales are superficially more like oversize, white, friendly dolphins. I’d never seen a beluga whale before, but I have to say it was love at first sight.

Icebergs: blue, black in silhouette, square ones, shapes you can Rorschach into anything you like, little treelike ones, huge rockpile ones, slabby ones and all dangerous.

Glaciers: mostly remains, as all of them must once have reached the sea. Now most of them end a long way back up the slope, some several miles back. Bad news for the world.