Going sailing to SAVE OUR SEAS

Jimmy Cornell believes that ocean cruising rallies can help protect the marine environment.

“It’s a few years since Jimmy Cornell has been in the headlines. The founder of the Atlantic Rally for Cruisers (ARC) is still able to sell out venues with his blue water seminars, but he stepped away from the ARC in 1998 and decided that his round-the-world Millennium Odyssey in 2000 would be the end of his rally organizing days.

So it was a surprise six months ago when Cornell, now aged 73, announced he was putting on the Blue Planet Odyssey, an ambitious round-the-world rally with several possible routes, including one through the North West Passage.

And it was even more of a surprise in May this year when he launched the Atlantic Odyssey, a rival to the ARC but offering different departures and arrival points, with two possible start dates.

Both of the new events have a strong environmental focus, with Cornell encouraging entrants to take part in data collection projects for oceanographic institutes, education programmes helping communities in some of the remote stopovers, and link-ups with schools back home to raise environmental awareness.

Both rallies have received a positive response, with 17 crews already signed up for the Blue Planet Odyssey. But is the idea of taking large fleets of yachts to places threatened by climate change at odds with Cornell’s well-meaning intentions?

The doyen of ocean rallying visited the Yachting Monthly office to explain:

Rally legend, Jimmy Cornell, feels yachtsmen share his concerns for the future of the environment

There is a contradiction between our aims of raising awareness of climate change and what we ourselves are doing as sailors. But the two new events will benefit scientific research and the communities we’ll be visiting. An important aspect of it is simply that we’ll be able to go to islands in the Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, and show our empathy with people who are in trouble because of rising sea levels, and show them that we are aware there’s a problem. We’ll help with community projects, in schools and at hospitals. As cruisers, we’ve benefitted from the hospitality of these places for many decades – how nice would it be if we could turn the tables?

We will also be working with Emily Penn, a marine environmentalist who has set up schemes for the removal or treatment of our waste on the islands we will visit. Most of the rubbish yachtsmen leave on these islands is burned, allowing dioxins to get into the ground and then into the sea. Sometimes rubbish is just thrown into the sea. We will be showing local people how we now deal with our waste – and why. We’ll show them what can be burned, and what shouldn’t be burned. The response we’ve had so far shows that people really want to take part in these projects.

Flexible timetable

I’m 73, I didn’t have to do this. But my granddaughter said something had to be done, and I’ve always felt strongly about the environment. You have to try! I bought a Toyota Prius a few years ago. At least you’re using just five litres of fuel in 60 miles, rather than 17 litres. I recycle, I never anchor in coral now and I never throw anything out at sea. I’m late, but I’m learning.

No one is closer to nature than sailors. We have to be aware that the climate is changing. I’m not talking about global warming – that is a political issue and people get confused between the two.

A rally will always have some kind of schedule. On the Blue Planet Odyssey, to avoid boats having to motor in order to keep up with the timetable (which is what has happened in some round-the-world events), we’ll ask smaller yachts to leave earlier. But in trade wind conditions, many boats can sail faster than they can motor, and these events are all mostly downwind. The carbon footprint of a crew motoring in a yacht is much less than a passenger in a 757 or in a motor car.

People always ask me about the threat of piracy. The Blue Planet Odyssey will cross the Indian Ocean in three years’ time, but if it’s dangerous, we won’t cross that area. We have three possible solutions which we can implement if we have to, but I don’t want to go into details at the moment. There is certainly a greater security risk now for modern-day blue water cruisers. But we must remember that in the West, over the last 30 years, the standard of living has gone up, while in many of the countries we visit it has stagnated. Still, the chances of being a victim of crime are small.

According to the world cruising website Noonsite.com, last year there were 38 serious robberies from yachts worldwide. Over the past few months, we’ve seen the number of Atlantic rallies grow from one to five, but it’s no surprise. The ARC has dominated the market for too long. It deserves the competition! It’s no secret that the ARC has not stayed true to what it originally envisaged. It has been commercialised and is expensive for what it is. The Atlantic Odyssey will be a cruising event and entry will be £950. People ask how I’m able to do this, when the ARC and the Christmas Caribbean Rally charge so much more. I do it the same way I’ve always done it: everything is for the sailors.

The sponsors know an event like this can make their city, or their new marina. Las Palmas and St Lucia were made by the ARC. So we’re giving people free docking for a week, free haul-outs and so on. The sponsors have kindly agreed to these requests and we’ve passed it on to the participants.

What is it for me? Nothing! I didn’t make anything out of the ARC for many years. Look at the entry fees! When I left, the fee was about £150. We live in a materialistic world.

Jimmy Cornell was born in Romania and moved to London in 1969 with his British wife Gwenda. He took up sailing while working as a reporter for the BBC World Service and in 1974 fitted out a lift-keeler, Aventura IV, built to sail the North West Passage next year. Further information at: www.atlanticodyssey.org

ATLANTIC ODYSSEY

ATLANTIC ODYSSEY I

17 November 2013 from Arrecife, Lanzarote to Las Palmas, Gran Canaria

ATLANTIC ODYSSEY II

12 January 2014 from Santa Cruz de la Palma to St George’s, Grenada

For more information go to:
www.atlanticodyssey.org