

# Ships in the Salish Sea

## Gulf Islands are hosting an international shipping backlog

by Peter Ommundsen

An overflow of large cargo ships awaiting entry to the Port of Vancouver has overwhelmed the Southern Gulf Islands and has brought a multitude of environmental concerns. Coal and grain ships anchor at some 33 different Gulf Island locations, often for several weeks, and ship congestion has increased more than ten-fold since 2008, a trend that is not sustainable.

Multiple risks are associated with anchorages. Anchor chains scour the highly productive sea floor (benthic) ecosystem and release suffocating turbidity plumes. Constant ship generator noise can disorient marine life, bilge water may contain invasive species and disease organisms, and anti-fouling compounds can leach into seawater. Bright lighting can disrupt planktonic migration, and air pollution can impact ocean acidity and human health.

One anchored bulk carrier ship produces about ten tonnes of greenhouse gases per day. Pollution can concentrate locally because of a low ventilation index in the Southern Gulf Islands (classified a “high smoke sensitivity zone” by the province). Accidental ship movements from anchor dragging can result in collisions, groundings, and spills of fuel oil. According to the Transportation Safety Board, there have been 102 reports of anchor-dragging since 2015.

The huge ship backlog that has been displaced from Vancouver into sensitive Sal-



ish Sea habitats has created a quandary for the Port of Vancouver and for Transport Canada. The Port of Vancouver is supposed to be “responsible for maintaining efficient movement of marine traffic and cargo” and has a goal to become “the world’s most sustainable port.” Specific aspirations of the port include climate action, protection of aquatic species, supporting species at risk, reduction of underwater noise, and preventing the spread of invasive species. The mandate letter for the Minister of Transport includes “making Canada’s major ports among the most efficient and cleanest in the world.”

The Southern Gulf Islands Trust Area,

where the ships are forced to anchor, is of high conservation value and has been mandated for protection by the Islands Trust Act. The Trust Council has asked for closure of the anchorages, noting that the Trust Area “is one of the most productive marine ecosystems in the world and includes the highest density of species at risk in Canada.”

Parks Canada has proposed a “Southern Gulf Islands National Marine Conservation Area,” a category of protected area that meets an international standard of being “conservation focused with nature as the priority.” Coast Salish First Nations have expressed concern that

“anchorage in these inside waters and narrow passages between islands pose an unacceptable risk to the ecological integrity that sustains our food resources, which are critical to the long-term livelihoods and well-being of our members.” Fisheries and Oceans Canada has proposed the Southern Gulf Islands as an “Environmentally and Biologically Sensitive Area.”

### Why is this happening?

It has been argued that there is a common law right of a ship to anchor anywhere. But this refers to anchoring for a reasonable purpose (such as a weather emergency) and for a reasonable time frame. In fact, Section 301 of the Navigational Safety Regulations prohibits anchoring in designated areas, and several sections of the *Canada Shipping Act* provide means of restricting anchoring locations.

The Port of Vancouver cites three reasons for ship congestion. There are weather-related delays, as with loading grain in the rain, but this problem has been solved elsewhere and requires acquisition of adequate safety equipment for workers. A second reason for ship congestion given by the port is growth in trade. This is contradicted by a report from the Centre for Marine Affairs, showing a ten-fold increase in ship congestion in the Southern Gulf Islands Trust Area while total bulk carrier arrivals in Vancouver increased by only 10%. The question has been raised as to why growth in trade should require longer lineups of ships if a port is managed efficiently.

A third reason given for ship congestion is upstream supply chain delays. Although significant investments have been made in supply chains, ship congestion has increased. This raises the question of whether exporters overestimate the

capacity of supply chains and whether adjustments in expectations could avoid vessel bottlenecks. Port traffic management may require increased public accountability, as ship congestion adversely impacts public resources, public health, the natural environment, and the economy. Prairie farmers have had to absorb tens of millions of dollars in a given year in payments to ships for delays in loading.

Ship congestion escalates when vessels arrive early or arrive into a growing lineup, with the cumulative loading time of all previous ships resulting in weeks at anchor in the Gulf Islands. Other ports have dealt efficiently with ship congestion. For example, Newcastle, Australia, prohibits ship arrival earlier than 48 hours prior to the estimated time of loading. The Newcastle vessel arrival system is recognized worldwide and has won commendation from the United Nations.

Solutions await expeditious leadership from Transport Canada, the Port of Vancouver, and industry to set targets, regulate vessel arrivals, and ensure oversight of port logistics, scheduling, and loading. Three years ago,

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Transport Canada initiated an “interim protocol” for the purpose of studying the issue, but there has been no reduction in anchoring. Transport Canada also commissioned studies from the World Maritime University, but these results have not been available to the public.

While the shipping industry has dozens of registered lobbyists, citizens have formed non-profit groups calling for more efficiency at port and an anchorage-free new National Marine Conservation Area. These groups include No Freighter Anchorages <https://nofreighteranchorages.ca> and Protect the Islands Sea <https://protect-the-islands-sea.org>

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