Winds and Currents

The Latest From the American Sailing Association

We Care

Sailors Can Truly Change the World

In an impassioned meeting at the offices of the American Sailing Association, far from the concerns of sail trim or tacking angles, ASA Founder Lenny Shabes was speaking to a group of fellow educators and ASA board members. They were discussing pollution in the world's oceans and waterways, specifically that of plastic, which makes up 80% of the debris in the ocean.

“We're all sailors here and over a million sailors have worked through our system on some level,” said Shabes. “That's a lot of people who look to us or touch base when it comes to all things sailing. With that in mind, we should impart the responsibility we all need to carry when we're out on the water.”

“It's so easy to help, just do a few things differently when you're on the boat,” says Cindy Shabes, president of the ASA. “Little things like not packing plastic straws, using reusable water bottles and scooping plastic debris out of the water when you see it. It sounds like nothing but if we all start developing these kinds of habits, it not only makes a difference, but sets an example and establishes a mindset that can go beyond the time we spend on our boats.”

According to Ecowatch.com one million sea birds and 100,000 marine mammals are killed annually from plastic in our oceans. But what's even more relevant, when it comes to plastic in the oceans, is not the image we've all seen of a dead seabird filled with little bits of plastic debris where food should be. As horrible and jarring as that is, what's more germane is what's happening to the one-cell universe that exists at the foundation of the ocean lifecycle.

As it turns out, plastic never breaks down completely, and once it reaches the size where phytoplankton mistake the microscopic particles as food, systemic problems form a ripple throughout the entire food chain.

Onegreenplanet.org reports that there is 270,000 tons of plastic floating in the oceans with 70,000 species of wildlife threatened by its existence.

“We can't sit idly by while the oceans get ruined,” Lenny Shabes says. “We should be a force that strives hard to take care of the oceans.”

ASA is committed to helping the cause in any way it can. We need our members to be part of the ongoing mitigation that is constantly happening. We will also keep looking for ways to get through to fellow sailors, reminding them of the situation and informing them about what they can do to help. Through the popular social media channels ASA has created (now 150,000 page-likes on Facebook) and a more than substantial mailing list, we can reach quite a few sailing citizens. ASA has supported wiz-kid Boyan Slat's Ocean Cleanup, Sailors for the Sea, (sailorsforthesea.org) 4 Oceans and forged awareness campaigns that urge sailors to be mindful of their own behavior when sailing.

"For the first 20-years ASA's focus was on creating systems and materials that would give instructors the tools to turn our sailors that would be competent, safe and better for the experience, Shabes said. “That is still our number one priority, but after being part of this world for so long now, combined with the fact that the plastic situation is much worse than it's ever been, we want to be an agent for some kind of change.”

Both Lenny and Cindy say people in the ASA universe can expect more talk of eliminating toxic plastics and about what we can do as sailors to keep the oceans the beautiful and awe-inspiring source of inspiration they should be.

“There is one thing that every single sailor has in common,” Shabes continued. “It's our shared love for this amazing environment - I think we all want to protect it... we look to do our part.”
3 Easy Things To Do To Be A More Conscientious Sailor

3 Get in the habit of using reusable water bottles.
More and more people are carrying around their own reusable water bottles these days and sailors should definitely form that habit. We’ve all seen an empty plastic water bottle suddenly jump overboard to begin its new life as a never-dying toxin that will only wreak havoc wherever it goes. Get a cool water bottle and encourage your crew to do the same.

2. Pick up floating balloons (practice MOB)
There are many places in the world where plastic floating balloons are all over the place. They mainly come from larger party boats that hold celebration events and the balloons inevitably get loose, make for the sky, then later land in the ocean. Sure, little Marvin had a great birthday but the ocean’s inhabitants shouldn’t have to pay the price. We believe picking up these balloons when they are spotted is a great excuse to both clean up the water around us and practice Man Overboard. Next time you go out, grab a net and tell the crew that if they spot one, it’s MOB practice time.

1. Flying Plastic!
Be more mindful of what’s happening in the cockpit. Entertaining on a day sail usually means managing bags of snacks, lunch containers, drinks and various wrappers. How many times on a 12-knot day have you seen a plastic bag fly off like a little parachute after that last sandwich gets unpacked? There is a tinge of guilt and life moves on but these things don’t breakdown and really do cause big problems in the ocean eco-system. Incorporate reusable bags and be extra vigilant when unpacking so the “parachute effect” doesn’t occur. It’s a quick “oops” moment for us but a problem that will outlive us in its new habitat.

Tip from the Teach! "Horn Signals"

Ash Ashbaugh
ASA Affiliate Rep & Instructor

I have to confess, sometimes I hear other boats sounding horns and I don’t know what’s going on. What am I hearing?

Ash: You’re not alone in not knowing what these horn signals mean, but it’s really crucial to know a few of the important ones. If you hear five short blasts that means: “I’m not sure of your intentions.” In other words you’re making someone nervous and you need to clarify whatever you’re doing.

You might often hear 3-short blasts – that means: “I am operating under stern propulsion.” This often happens when a bigger boat is backing out of its slip and wants to make sure other boaters stay clear.

It’s possible you might hear two short blasts. Keep your head up and understand that the boat you’re hearing is altering its course to port. If it’s only one short blast, they are altering their course to starboard.

There you have it. You should know that there are sound signals that are different depending on whether they are in international or US inland waters, but these examples apply to both and are the more common and relevant of the sound signals that you’ll hear in your day-to-day travels.

Oh, and also be mindful that while it’s usually an actual air horn that you’ll hear, it could also be the sound of a whistle. Small boats often carry whistles.

Check out ASA.com for great video tutorials!

Yoh Yoh Yoh!
An Amazing Teacher With An Amazing Story

The instructor force of the American Sailing Association is full of extraordinary sailors. There isn’t one that doesn’t have an interesting story to tell but there’s no one quite like Yoh Aoki who runs Aoki Yacht School in Japan.

Aoki was the first Japanese solo sailor to circumnavigate the globe and he did it aboard his self-built 21-foot boat that he created in his back yard. He was 22-years old at the time and the boat is registered in the Guinness Book of World Records as the smallest boat to ever circumnavigate the world via Cape Horn. Aoki navigated the plywood boat via sextant on a voyage that took him over three-years to complete.

At the Horn Aoki recalls being flipped upside down by a wave he estimated to be around 100 feet high:

“The upside-down boat had started sinking because a lot of water came into the cabin,” Aoki says of the catastrophic circumstance. Miraculously, another wave somehow righted him and he continued sailing.

Today, Aoki is one of ASA’s most esteemed sailing instructors. He has since written multiple books on sailing and is also a teacher of the Zen philosophy.

If you find yourself in Japan, stop in and say hello to Yoh. Not only is he very accomplished; he’s also a super nice guy!