

The Goleta Valley Chamber of Commerce named Noozhawk
Entrepreneur of the Year

That's just a fancy
way of saying we've
got a better idea.

SUSTAINABLE LIFE »SERENDIPITY: MARINE GRIDLOCK

Serendipity: Marine Gridlock

By **KAREN TELLEEN-LAWTON, NOOZHAWK COLUMNIST** | Posted on 11/14/2008

 E-MAIL  PRINT  COMMENT  SHARE

With ship traffic taking a heavy toll on sea life, we need to make a U-turn toward sustainability.

As Highway 101 approaches gridlock, we have ample freeway time to contemplate the seemingly tranquil sea. But peaceful the Pacific is not. Marine traffic off our coast mirrors the freeway: too many moving objects in too little space. This isn't obvious from land, but the problems are unsustainable in quality and quantity. What can we do to pacify Pacific marine traffic?



To begin with, there's the collision course between ship traffic and marine mammals, particularly endangered whales. The Long Beach and Los Angeles harbors are the busiest ports in the nation; ships heading there from around the world take a short cut through that Santa Barbara Channel that saves them a bit in fuel but crosses choice feeding territory. Two-thirds of the world's marine mammals live in or visit the waters off Santa Barbara. Many of them feed in the shipping lane, where the edge of the continental shelf causes cold water upwelling and a resulting seafood banquet.

Last year, five endangered blue whales washed up on South Coast shores, the victims of ship collisions. The root causes are still unknown. Did traffic density prevent the whales from avoiding the ships? Would slower ship speed reduce collisions? The [Coast Guard](#) issued an advisory, but refrained from ordering ships to slow down in the feeding area. Meanwhile, a container ship arrived in Long Beach Harbor early this month, a dead fin whale speared on its bow.

Ships travel through our channel at the rate of more than one per hour, each with the potential to pollute our coastal waters in a variety of ways. Cargo residue discharges pollute ports and waterways. Water from ballast tanks can spread harmful algae and other invasive species. Spills from oil tankers and chemical tankers and exhaust fumes containing dioxide gases of sulfur, nitrogen and carbon harm marine and human life.

“The sheer magnitude of these emissions really gives us a red flag,” Tom Murphy of [Santa Barbara's Air Pollution Control District](#) says. “Our county's pollution cuts are being negated by these emissions offshore.”



Dated international protocols exist but lack incentives for compliance, enforceability and provisions for modern ship traffic. Cruise ships are exempt from the [Clean Water Act of 1972](#) and can dump sewage not far from shore.

Jackie Dragon is the campaign manager for [Seaflo](#), a nonprofit group working to protect the ocean from the environmental threats of shipping and active Navy sonar. She says, “The ocean is being damaged by a ‘death of a thousand cuts’ from large cargo vessels and oil tankers, which emit intense low-frequency noise at the same frequency used by baleen whales, seals, sea lions, dolphins and fish, which depend on hearing for their survival.”

Scientists consider whether the ultimate cause of the whale-ship collisions was navigational systems compromised by Navy sonar experiments in the area, though some carcasses showed no inner ear damage. The [Supreme Court](#) is set to consider the sonar issue this fall.

Earlier this year, federal district and appeals court judges ruled unanimously for the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) that the Navy must adhere to environmental law during sonar exercises. The Navy has estimated that the continuing sonar drills will disturb or injure 170,000 marine mammals and cause permanent injury to more than 450 whales, as well as temporary hearing impairment in at least 8,000 others. This week, nevertheless, the Supreme Court ruled for the Navy in its first case of the year.

The key to ocean health may be the [precautionary principle](#). New technology and new actions should be evaluated for unintended consequences before being implemented full scale. It is basically what our parents told us when we did something stupid: “What the heck were you thinking?”

For the sustainability of life on the seas, it's time we applied this to marine traffic.

Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.canyonvoices.com.