What's Happening IN CALIFORNIA ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE VOL 12, NO 4 DECEMBER 2010

The Mothball Fleet is Disappearing

Suisun Bay lies north of San Francisco Bay. For about 150 years it has been home to ships that the U.S. military is not using. In recent years more than 70 ships have been there. Most are in bad condition, and they have been polluting the water. Now the government is removing many of them, one by one.

After World War II the U.S. Navy had thousands of ships that it no longer needed. It put the best ones in reserve, in case it could use them again sometime. They included destroyers, freighters and tankers. It stored its reserve ships near naval bases or shipyards. Now it has only three fleets, and one of them is in Suisun Bay.

Storing the ships is called putting them "in mothballs." Once there were more than 350 ships in the Suisun Bay Reserve Fleet. The Navy used some of them again in the wars in Korea and Vietnam. The rest stayed tied up in the bay. It removed weapons, ammunition and many parts from them. Most are now beyond repair.

The U.S. Maritime Administration (MARAD) is responsible for the ships. MARAD knew for a long time that the ships were polluting the water. They were leaking fuel and oil. Their paint also had harmful metals like lead and zinc. MARAD says that 20 tons of it has peeled and fallen into the water.

The pollution has spread out from Suisun Bay. It has gone down to San Francisco Bay and east to the San Joaquin Delta. The poisons have damaged the habitats of endangered salmon and shrimp in Suisun Bay.

In 2007 three environmental groups filed a lawsuit against MARAD. They were San Francisco Baykeeper, Arc Ecology and the Natural Resources Defense Council. They argued that MARAD was breaking a law called the Clean Water Act. They also claimed that MARAD was keeping hazardous waste on the ships illegally.

Settlement of the lawsuit came in March 2010. It forces MARAD to remove 52 of the ships from Suisun Bay. It must remove the 25 in the worst condition by September 2012. It must clean peeling paint from the rest of the ships within two years and remove them from the bay by 2017. MARAD also must test the water, inspect the ships, clean peeling paint and fix leaks regularly.

Already MARAD has removed 11 ships. It cleaned them at a dry dock in California, but then towed them 5,000 miles to Texas for recycling. From now on, though, workers in California will do the work. That will create local jobs that will last for years. At the same time the waters in and near Suisun Bay will slowly get the chance to become clean and healthy again.

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BIOGRAPHY

SAUL BLOOM

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ARC ECOLOGY

Saul Bloom first saw the ships in Suisun Bay in the 1980s. He was a young man protesting against naval weapons not far from there. Now more than 25 years later he is part of the reason the government is removing the ships. Mr. Bloom is the executive director of Arc Ecology, a group that filed suit to stop the pollution.

Saul grew up in New York City. Often his mother took him to the great art museums there. He learned to love art. He not only used to doodle a lot in school. At age 10 he also took art lessons at the Modern Art Museum in New York City.

"When I got close to the ships, I could see the paint flaking off."

As a teenager Saul developed an interest in science. He enjoyed visiting the Museum of Natural History, and he read lots of science fiction novels. Things were happening around the country too. The U.S. had just begun its space program, and the environmental movement was growing.

Saul also was interested in peace and social justice. Movements for equality for Blacks and women in America were strong. The country was still fighting its war in Vietnam. He protested against that war. In fact, his parents learned about his protests after his uncle had seen him on television.

After high school he was unsure about what he wanted. He did not want to spend a lot of money to study away from home, so he chose City College of New York. After three years he dropped out. He was interested in protecting the natural environment. He also hoped to make a career as a musician, writing songs and playing his guitar.

Mr. Bloom left New York in 1974. After a few years he ended up in San Francisco, where he still hoped to sing and play. Instead he started working for the organization Greenpeace. It fought government programs that harmed humans and the environment. During that time Mr. Bloom sailed in Suisun Bay and first saw the ships there up close.

In 1993 he helped to found Arc Ecology. Mr. Bloom is neither a scientist nor a lawyer. He calls himself an organizer. In Suisun Bay, for example, Arc Ecology used science to identify damage to the environment. It informed the local communities of the problems and gained their support. Then it used environmental laws to force the clean-up, which brought jobs to local workers.

Saul Bloom has two young children. He organizes his work hours around them. That still gives him plenty of time in the office, where there are lots of old and new projects. Although he did not make a career in music, he has reached people in a different way. Their lives are safer, healthier, and maybe even more peaceful because of his work.

Background Information

MARAD is an agency within the U.S. Department of Transportation. Its other two fleet storage sites are in James River, Virginia and Beaumont, Texas.

People also call the ships in Suisun Bay the "ghost fleet."

The yearly cost to maintain the entire reserve fleet is about $20 million. MARAD provides $1.2 million per ship for scrapping. Of the 190 ships in all three places, it plans to remove 140 of them.

In 2008 the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board joined the lawsuit.

The settlement came four years after the final deadline that the U.S. Congress had set for removing the ships.

By eliminating the ships now, MARAD will prevent about 50 tons of poisons from entering Suisun Bay.

In the future no new ships with peeling paint will be allowed into the anchorage at Suisun Bay.

The State of California has warned people to limit the amount of fish that they eat from Suisun Bay.

The groups of ships in the anchorage are called either "nests" or "rows." A nest arranges the ships so that it faces the opposite direction from the ones next to it. Steel rope connects the ships to each other. Bigger or longer ships may get additional stern anchors. Six-foot cube wooden fenders prevent the ships from banging into each other.

Most reserve ships become useless quickly. In addition to just scrapping them and recycling the metal, others have been used for target practice, as floating museums or artificial reefs in other places. Sometimes MARAD sells a ship to another nation that converts it for civilian purposes.

At its height in 1950 the reserve fleet had 2,277 ships at anchorages in eight states.

During the Korean War 540 reserve ships were put back into service. For the Vietnam War there were 172 ships.

For years Bangladesh has led the world's ship-scrapping business. When it receives a ship, it requires the exporting nation to guarantee that the ship is free of poisonous substances.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- What do you think happens to naval ships that are no longer in service?

Comprehension:

- Recount what the settlement forces MARAD to do with the ships at Suisun Bay.

Beyond the Text:

- What do you think happens to the tons of poisonous paint that MARAD removes from the ships?
- Tell about any naval ship that you have seen.
- Why do you think that MARAD did not take care of the ships at Suisun Bay, even though it knew that they were polluting the water?

Vocabulary

Article-specific: to pollute; freighter; naval; shipyard; fleet; mothball; ammunition; lawsuit; hazardous waste; dry dock

High-use: to remove; reserve; to store; beyond; to peel; habitat; endangered; environmental; to claim; settlement; to inspect

Sources

Huffington Post June 8, 2010

San Francisco Chronicle November 20, April 1, 2010; March 13, 2009

Environment News Service March 31, 2010

www.cbs13.com May 12, 2008

Natural Resources Defense Council **www.nrdc.org**

Arc Ecology **www.arcecology.org**

Maritime Administration **www.marad.dot.gov**

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English - Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development
2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies
2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—*Intermediate and Advanced*
Reading Vocabulary Development / Comprehension
Writing Strategies and Applications
Listening and Speaking

History-Social Science
4.1; 4.4