

# SHADES OF GREEN

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUG MITCHELL



I found myself in a terrifying nightmare once. It was a warm, sunny day, and palm trees swayed in the light breeze that drifted in off the glinting ocean. I was walking along a beach, but instead of sand under my feet, there was an endless pile of garbage and waste. Plastic bottles and containers of every shape, colour and size. There were metal cans and old tires piled on top of discarded toys and clothing from another life. There were shoes...so many shoes. From men's flip-flops to women's high heels to children's sneakers, the spread of old and worn footwear was endless. Broken fragments of children's dolls eerily poked out of the refuse and stole my glance for a haunting second or two, and at once I felt seized by the grip of this nightmare. The scariest thing of all was that I was wide awake.

It was January 2009, and I had just got my first job as a deckhand in the yachting industry. I couldn't have been

more thrilled to get flown down to Panama City to join the 130-footer that would become my home and office for the next two-plus years and marveled at my luck to get to experience the Panama Canal on my third day. After a brief owners trip, we sat in Shelter Bay Marina on the Atlantic side of the canal to wait out some rough weather before making way for the Cayman Islands, and it was during this downtime that I set out exploring and came face to face with this nightmare and the grim reality of ocean pollution.

I'm sure by now everyone in the yachting industry has learned of the "garbage patches" in our major oceans, or at least heard whispers of these unimaginable islands of trash out at sea. If not, simply lookup "garbage patch" online for a terrifying dose of reality and an important wakeup call to the abuse and neglect we have shown our shared

planet. While some of the details are still based on estimates and conjecture, there is no denying that the swirling currents of our waters have collected and deposited millions of tons of plastic and other human trash into an area of relatively stable water to create these great garbage patches — natural oceanic gyres transformed into massive human dumps floating far enough away from civilization to retain their shockingly dirty secret from many of us.

It wasn't until I saw for myself in Panama this juxtaposition of manmade filth covering a beautiful beach like a sinister blanket that I realized we face serious problems. A place that once would have been paradise, with the palm trees and clean, sparkling sand leading down to the beautiful and refreshing water of the Caribbean Sea now sits as a neglected litter trap at the water's edge and quickly dispenses the notion of even dipping a toe in. To

me, this was proof enough that these islands of trash out at sea could easily exist.

Since then, I have made it my goal to live and work as green as possible on board yachts. I was fortunate to grow up in a place where the three Rs and respect for the environment are taught at a young age, so I've always strongly believed in trying to live that way. But never have I seen a more direct chain of impact than working on the water. From the products we use to keep our vessels maintained and shiny, to what and how much we consume as crew on a daily basis, the flow from human hands to Mother Nature's is plainly visible and almost immediate. Whether it is boat soap being rinsed down the scupper drains and into the sea or the daily buildup of garbage that needs to be stowed or dropped at a dock, our footprint on the Earth and splash on its oceans is right there for all of us to see. In this industry, no one can pretend it's out of their hands.

This may be the point where some people decide to stop reading. Some don't like to be preached at about living green, but I won't apologize. Not on this issue. Writing subjectively is the only way I can, and it's not something we can keep flipping the page on. I have been in many heated debates on the subject with many different people in and out of yachting. All have varying beliefs about what can or cannot be done, why things should be done, and how we should do them — diverse opinions that I like to think of as different shades of green.

Working on different boats this past summer as a freelancer has also given me insight to the different mindsets out there, both as individuals and as collective crews, and it has been both encouraging and worrisome. However, one constant theme that seems to be that, for the most part, crews act as a group when it comes to environmental decisions and there is a trickle-down effect that influences these decisions and behavior. For example, during a delivery I did to New York, one of the first things the captain told me was that I would not find any water in the fridge. Every crew member had a re-usable insulated water bottle to fill up with the filtered water system onboard, and as a result, there was zero plastic water bottle waste by crew.

On another vessel I did a 10-day charter on, the fridges were stocked a couple times a day with flats of plastic water bottles, and the guys on deck, myself included, drank up to 10 bottles each to stay hydrated in the staggering



heat and humidity as it was the only system in place. That's 10 plastic bottles for one person, in one day, on one boat. Suddenly, the whispers of those garbage patches being "twice the size of Texas" or "over 8 percent the size of the oceans they inhabit" don't seem so exaggerated.

It's the same with the products we use on deck and in the interior. Effective brands get passed down the crew chain because of their proven track record, but often without consideration to where they ultimately end up or what effects they have on the waters we float on and the marine life they support. Unfortunately, it's just a hard fact that some of the eco-friendly products can be more expensive and less effective than their counterparts. However, I think we have to look at the bigger picture before it's too late; a juncture that some argue we've already passed and can do nothing to reverse. "What can one person do?" is something I've heard more than once and seems to be more of a statement than a question. Some may chalk it up to misinformation or lack of education, but in today's world, I can only look at that as ignorance and laziness.

I am by no means a perfect example. Fighting the green fight is often a hypocritical battle; a crusade that requires constant education and discipline along the way, and practicing what you preach in yachting isn't always easy. Especially being the new guy or girl on board; joining a new crew with their own opinions and practices sometimes requires keeping your voice in check, at least until the right time. Even if some or all of the crew is willing, old habits die hard and there is often limited space on boats to do things like separating recyclables. Many

marinas or shipyards don't even have bins in place to receive different materials, but hopefully they will catch on. Hopefully sooner rather than later.

One thing I will say, much to the chagrin of the pessimists, is that there is hope. I learned that shortly after we left Panama, the crew of some of the other yachts and smaller sailboats organized a beach cleanup and in one day filled dozens of garbage bags and had it looking almost like a nice beach again. That is a strong and commendable group effort, and proof that working together can change things.

When I read some of the information out there about the giant garbage patches and how, apart from some environmental groups, no country has stepped up to take significant action to clean them up, I can't help but think of siblings pointing fingers at each other in blame over a mess made while mother turned her back. In an industry where the oceans mean everything to our livelihood, we all need to consider the mess we've made and at least how to do our best in preventing it from growing and overwhelming us all. Because, regardless of what your shade of green is, I'm sure we all want future generations to enjoy the ocean as we do. ☺

*Doug Mitchell is the former bosun aboard the 130-foot Westport M/Y Sovereign. He grew up in High River, Alberta, Canada, and studied photojournalism at college in Calgary. He has been in yachting since 2008.*

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