



Southern Gulf Island anchorages are a vital part of BC's south coast port operations, but aren't what many Gulf Island residents and vacation property owners feel they signed up for. Conflict is becoming the inevitable result.

PHOTO COURTESY COWICHAN BAY SHIP WATCH SOCIETY

Southern Gulf Island Anchorages: *Vital, misunderstood, and under attack*

By Fred McCague

There are 33 designated anchorages scattered throughout the Southern Gulf Islands. And there are serious, ongoing efforts to close them. Why are they even there? The simple answer is geography.

Between 1968 and 1975 Neptune, Westshore, Cargill (then SaskPool), Lynnterm, Vanterm and more opened in Vancouver. The Port outgrew English Bay anchorages and more were needed.

The foreshore of Richmond and Delta would be the perfect location, but unusable. The Fraser River delta features mud flats and shallows along its entire length. Existing terminals need long causeways – BC Ferries 3 km long and Deltaport/Westshore 5 km – just to reach deep water. Georgia Strait then deepens dramatically to about 150 metres, far too deep for anchoring.

The search for additional anchorages in the 1970s soon looked across the Strait of Georgia. It was led not by the Port, but instead by the shipping industry, pilots and (possibly) Transport Canada. It was very familiar territory. Ships loading forest products were already busy calling the docks serving

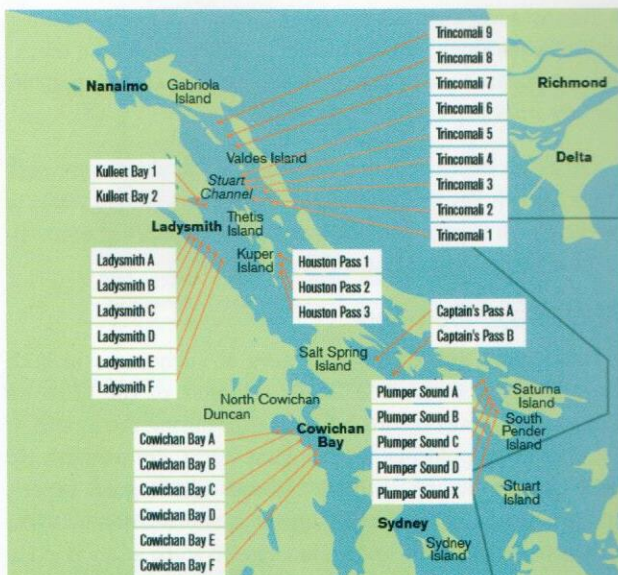
the complex of sawmills, log dumps, and pulp and paper mills at Cowichan Bay, Crofton and Chemainus. They would also drop the hook when needed while waiting for a mill berth. The Gulf Islands were largely vacant, just beginning to get service from the then-young BC Ferries.

The result evolved into today's 33 anchorages in the Southern Gulf Islands (SGI). The area was then and remains today outside of any port authority limits. Yet it, along with English Bay, has been a major component of the anchorage network for the Port of Vancouver for decades.

Change, Growth and Responsibility

Over the past 50 years the SGI area has changed. The Crofton pulp mill and many sawmills remain, but the only active docks for deep-sea vessels are the pair at Crofton.

While the coastal forest industry has declined, every other export sector in Western Canada has grown. Grain exports are at near-record levels, and potash is now about 10 million tonnes per year.



There are currently 33 anchorages within the Southern Gulf Islands. While their original use – for ships serving the coastal forest industry – has declined, every other export sector in Western Canada has grown.

The Port of Vancouver now handles as much cargo as the next five largest Canadian ports, including Prince Rupert, combined. Increased bulk cargo flows have also increased use of the SGI anchorages.

Other changes have occurred in the region. The small Gulf Island National Park Reserve was created in 2003 and sits in the vicinity of Plumper Sound and Haro Strait. In 2011, a much-larger National Marine Conservation Area Reserve was proposed that would cover most of the waters of the Gulf Islands. This proposal remains under consideration. While the plan did include provision for anchorages, the conservation pressure to eliminate them will be considerable.

During most of the time since the 1970s, SGI anchorage assignments were directly arranged between the ships' agents and the Pacific Pilotage Authority.

However, increased use of the SGI anchorages has led private members' bills in the House of Commons, and petitions, to ban anchorages. In 2018, this increased pressure to "do something"



Over the past few years, anchorages in the Southern Gulf Islands have become heavily used. During the recent winter holiday break, 22 to 25 of the 33 available spots were in use on most days (25 ships in this screenshot from December 27, 2022).

resulted in Transport Canada, the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority (VFPA) along with the PPA, Chamber of Shipping and Nanaimo Port Authority (NPA) bashing out an Interim Protocol passing the task of assigning SGI anchorages to the VFPA Harbour Master's office. This was to ensure a better rotation of anchorage assignments through the use of algorithms.

The VFPA is a landlord port. Apart from Canada Place Cruise Terminal, it operates none of the deep-sea docks in the Port of Vancouver, and has no control over ship scheduling at the terminals. The VFPA does, however, control and assign all of the anchorages in English Bay and Burrard Inlet.

Nanaimo retained control of its six anchorages.

The protocol has done nothing to reduce overall use of SGI anchorages. Due to high usage – this winter averaging about 66 percent – algorithms are about as useful as a dart board for improving rotation. Over the holiday season, there were 22 to 25 ships anchored in the SGI most days, rising to 27 on New Year's Day.

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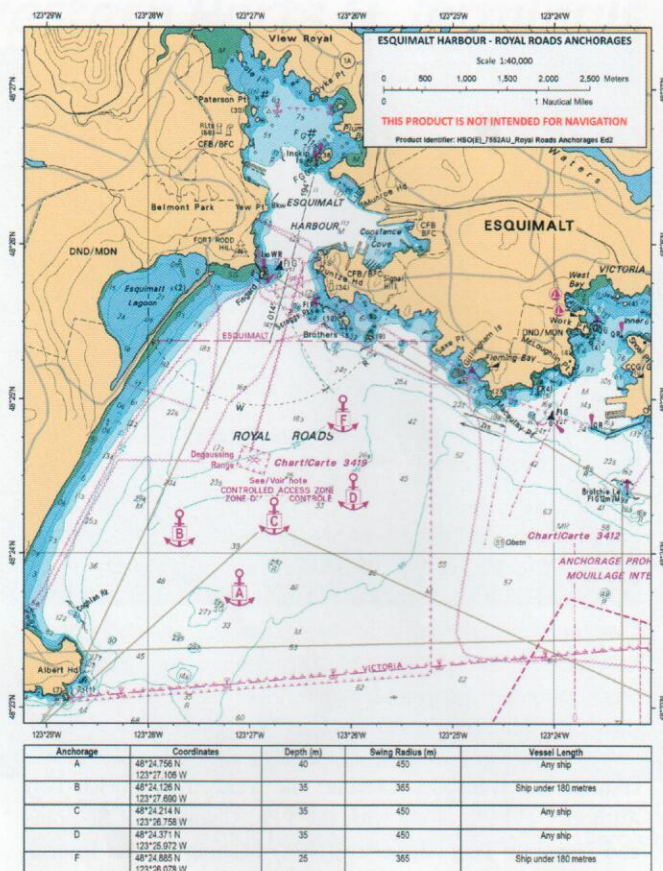
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Additional anchorages are available at Royal Roads, which is controlled by the King's Harbour Master at CFB Esquimalt, but they are underutilized and two of the five anchorages are only suitable for very small ships.

Other problems remain. During 2021, 24 ships were sent from English Bay to Gulf Islands anchorages and, in 2022, 14 by the end of September. Without having details, this seems to be foolishly compounding a serious problem.

Anchorage Demand

Grain ships are the biggest users of anchorages in both English Bay and the SGI. Mark Hemmes of the Quorum Corporation notes record rail deliveries during the month of October 2022, pointing out the great warm, dry weather. He then noted problems with the railways fulfilling car orders, and produced a chart showing an inverse correlation between failure to provide cars and an increase in ships at anchor. He also pointed out the ongoing multiyear problem of rain delays in Vancouver.

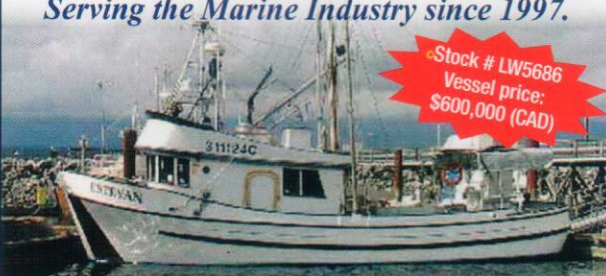
Overall, anchorage use for grain ships peaks during the winter. The impact of cold weather, especially temperatures of -25 degrees C or lower on the prairies or in the mountains, affects the air brakes on rail cars, slowing speeds and shortening train length. The annual three-month winter closure of the St. Lawrence Seaway due to ice halts grain exports through Thunder Bay and begins at the end of December.



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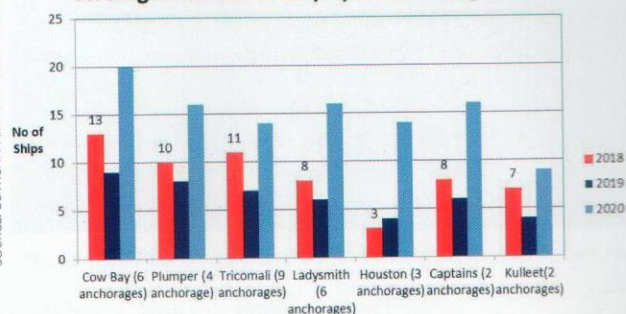
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Average Number of Ships per Anchorage



2020 saw a significant spike in the average number of ships per anchorage in the Southern Gulf Islands.

Coal ships are the second-biggest users, but the size of the ships limits where they can anchor.

Competing Interests

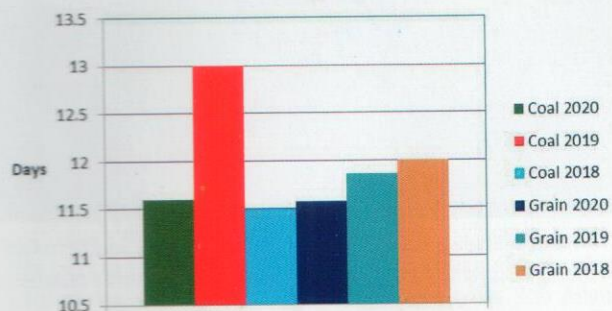
Groups opposed to the anchorages are under the umbrella South Coast Ship Watch Alliance, which has the subtle name *#nofreighteranchorages*. The affiliated Cowichan Bay Ship Watch Society maintains a thorough and excellent database with charts on the area.

Peter Holmes, CBSWS president, notes Cow Bay anchorages CB C and CB D, suitable for 310-metre ships, are heavily used, far more than others, especially the large ship ones at the north end of Trincomali Channel. While he blames a night sailing restriction, a quick look shows C and D feature straightforward approaches for sluggish 175,000 dwt bulk carriers.

2021 saw major disruptions in export cargo arriving in Vancouver because of railway shutdowns, due to wildfires and the major flooding in November. Added to that was a worldwide disruption in import container traffic that saw container ships filling a large portion of English Bay anchorages although, due to their size, only a handful dropped their hooks in the Gulf Islands.

While an almost two-year-long container ship backlog has been cleared, a month-long strike at Westshore Terminals last September and October resulted in an increased number of coal ships anchoring in the fall.

Average wait



Average wait times peaked for coal ships in 2019. Wait times have improved since then, but remain stubbornly high at over 11 days on average for all vessel types.

Chamber of Shipping President Robert Lewis-Manning discussed SGI anchorages, and he said Transport Canada "Have had to learn a lot."

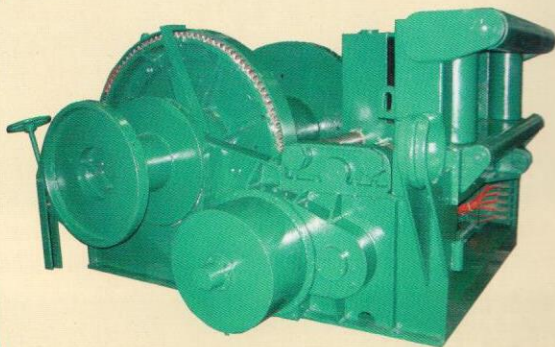
He pointed out, "There are five separate areas, all controlled by different jurisdictions" (VFPA, Transport Canada, NPA, CFB Esquimalt, PPA) and suggested they should be aligned into one system.

There are two underutilized anchorages near Victoria.

Royal Roads is controlled by the King's Harbour Master at CFB Esquimalt. During 2021, Royal Roads anchorages A, C and D were used 24 times for Vancouver-bound ships – 13 for coal and 11 for containers. In 2022, up to September 30, 17 bulk carriers and 10 container ships used them. Anchorages B and F are only suitable for much smaller ships.

Constance Bank has five anchorages just off Victoria in Juan de Fuca Strait. The Pacific Pilotage Authority (PPA) controls them and currently restricts their use to a maximum of 48 hours, with one reserved for emergency use. The PPA notice to industry states: "The anchorages are exposed to wind, waves and swell." Figures for anchorage use are not readily available.

On two occasions, this 48-hour limitation has been greatly exceeded. Following the bankruptcy of a container line, HANJIN VIENNA sat, under arrest, at Constance Bank from August 2016 until March 2017. In 2021, following container losses at sea and fire in a container stack, ZIM KINGSTON anchored at Constance Bank from October 23 to December 3.



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Crowding in English Bay has spillover effects for the Southern Gulf Islands, with ships regularly sent from English Bay to Gulf Islands anchorages: 24 ships during 2021 and 14 in the first three quarters of 2022.

No Easy Answers

Lewis-Manning said there was no easy answer to the anchorage problems, as Vancouver is “one of the most complex ports in the world [with] ... multiple people in the supply chains.” He added, “The buyers of Canadian exports have their own logistical needs”

The need to have a ship under the spout at grain elevators cannot be overstated, but the requirement means having ships at anchor waiting to load.

Orcas use the same waters as anchored bulk carriers. All levels of government worry orcas are disturbed by ship noise (from freighters, not ferries).

The VFPA usually takes a strong approach, even on areas well outside port limits and jurisdiction. The successful ECHO program is an excellent example. However, a review

of SGI anchorages is buried deep in the VFPA Active Vessel Traffic Management Program. “The program roll out will begin in 2023 with the Second Narrows Traffic Control Zone (TCZ-2) because of the complexity and importance of this multipurpose intersection for many port users.”

After four years of the interim protocol and a decade of pressure, the VFPA held a “phase three engagement for the AVTM Program” including a November 22, 2022 meeting in Cowichan. VFPA Harbour Master Shri Madiwal spoke of the need to “Clarify the governance structure and jurisdiction over the Southern Gulf Island anchorages”, and promised a code of conduct for ships at anchor. Indeed.

Southern Gulf Island anchorages are vital for the Port of Vancouver and the economy of Western Canada, yet they are vulnerable to elimination with the stroke of a pen. ▶



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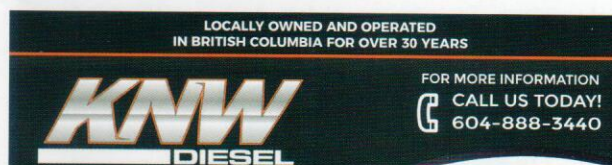
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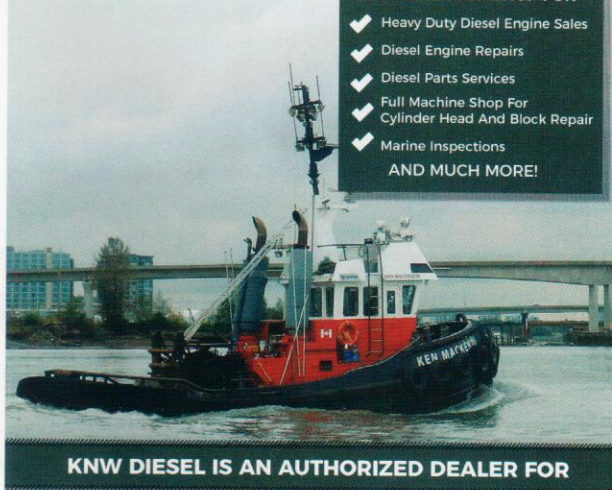
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