

# Postcard: Dry Tortugas. On the blue edge of the Gulf of Mexico, one reporter learns what it means to live sustainably. Going for a sail on board Greenpeace's Arctic Sunrise

BY BRYAN WALSH

**T**HERE SEEM TO BE TWO RULES FOR a passenger on a Greenpeace ship: 1) If you take a beer from the refrigerator, always remember to log it on the drinks sheet. (And pay your bar tab before you leave the boat; otherwise, I believe they'll make you walk the plank.) 2) There is no such thing as a passenger on a Greenpeace ship. Everyone works on board, and chores start at 8 a.m.—which is how I recently came to find myself on the *Arctic Sunrise*'s poop deck, sorting the glass recyclables from the organic trash. At first I was a bit annoyed. I'm a journalist, after all, not an assistant galley slave. But during the few days I spent sailing through the Dry Tortugas, a series of minuscule islands west of the Florida Keys, on board Greenpeace's *Arctic Sunrise*, I learned how the vessel's spirit of cooperation and conservation represents what it means to be truly green.

Greenpeace's navy is best known for its headline-generating protests. Think of the iconic *Rainbow Warrior* clashes with the French navy in the 1980s. But I joined the *Arctic Sunrise*, a former Norwegian ice-breaker and one of three Greenpeace ships scattered around the world, in mid-August for the first phase of a scientific mission to the Gulf of Mexico. For the next two months, Greenpeace will provide transportation and support to rotating teams of scientists carrying out oil-spill-related studies, from assessments of plankton health near the spill site to surveys of marine mammals that may have been affected by the crude. Given the controversy unfolding over the true extent of the spill beneath the Gulf's surface—the government says much of the oil has disappeared, but independent scientists are skeptical—the voyage couldn't have been better timed. "This is about bearing witness to what's going on," says Paul Horsman, a former Greenpeace activist and now director for the TckTckTck campaign on climate change.



**Green and blue** Greenpeace has undertaken a two-month expedition to study the oil spill

First up on our voyage were the Dry Tortugas, discovered by Juan Ponce de Leon in 1513 and named for their turtles (there were lots of them back then) and freshwater (there wasn't any). Marine scientists Charles Messing and Joe Lopez of Florida's Nova University were aboard to survey populations of sea sponges, ancient underwater animals that are plentiful in the relatively pristine coral reefs of the Tortugas. Because sponges filter huge amounts of water as they search for plankton, they can be a bellwether species for marine health. "It's great to actually be able to see the habitat you're trying to protect," says Lopez.

The sponges were O.K. Thanks to advantageous ocean currents, the Tortugas, a protected marine area, were spared any oil from the spill. As the *Arctic Sunrise* sails closer to the spill site, though, that's less likely to be true, and in the Tortugas, there were earnest discussions of the sort you'd expect on board a Greenpeace ship about the need to get the U.S. off oil, to create a truly sustainable way of life. "This is the outcome of our addiction to fossil fuels," says Dan Howells,

Greenpeace USA's deputy campaign director. "It's our job to make people understand that we really can change."

I've heard such sentiments many times in my years as TIME's environment writer. But my time aboard the *Arctic Sunrise* made those words resonate in a way I'd never experienced before. All waste on the ship that can be recycled is—not only because this is Greenpeace but also because when you're at sea, there's nowhere for waste to go. And a voyage that could have been chaotic worked because the boho, international crew comes together for a common purpose. "The spirit of Greenpeace is found on these ships," says Horsman.

If the world is ever to properly manage the multitude of crises it faces—population growth, resource depletion, global warming—we'll need to take a bit of that spirit onshore. It's easy to remember how vulnerable you are when you're encased in a cramped ship, knowing that you can rely only on what you've carried with you. But things aren't so different on Earth, sailing through a sea of stars. We work together to take care of our home—or we perish.

