

What price the following conversation between two Lee-on-Solent locals in the year 2,050?

*'Were you outside last Sunday?'*

*'No fear, with the wind north-west you can't breath when they are working at Fawley! You didn't go out did you? Must be mad!'*

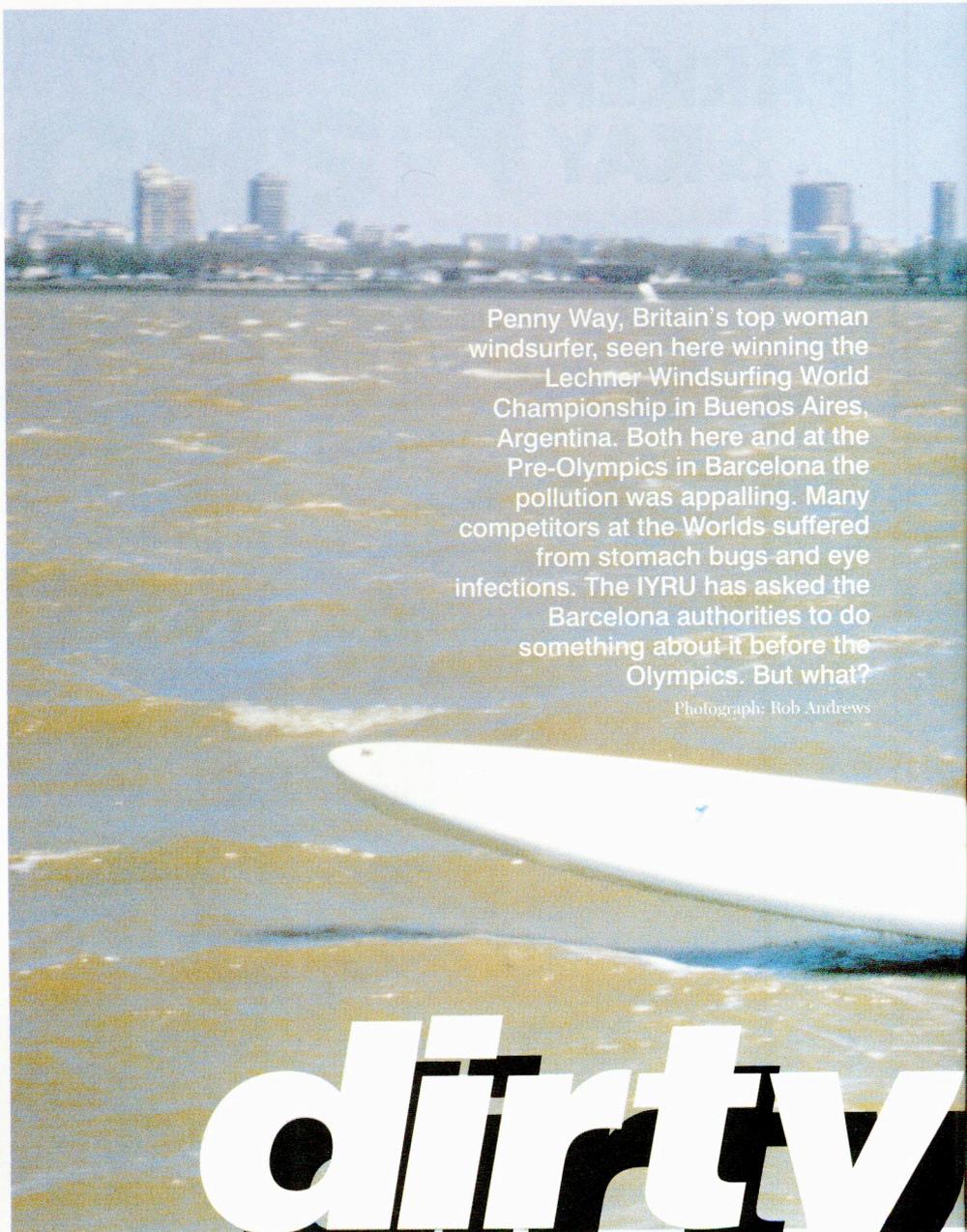
*'Well I bought one of those new masks and went to try it out with a walk along the shore. Couldn't take the dog of course. She's still getting over the last walk when she jumped into the water after a stick. All her fur fell out the following week. Anyway what I wanted to say was I am sure I saw a yacht.'*

*'Never! You didn't? How do you know it was a yacht? I'm not sure that I'd recognise one after all these years. How long is it now since Southampton Water became an officially designated open sewer? My grandfather tells me that it started to go down hill in the 80s and 90s. There used to be a lot of yachts then. He used to joke and say the racing stopped when the water became too thick to sail through under a force five! Remember that Admiral's Cup series that used to be sailed in the Solent. They took it to Christchurch Bay to avoid the dirty water, moved it several times looking for somewhere clean, then stopped it altogether. Nowhere left to go, and the other teams wouldn't come any more!'*

*'No it wasn't a yacht I'll bet it was just condensation inside your mask. After all, where would it go? The Department of the Environment closed down all those marinas years ago as a health hazard because the extra toilets were polluting the waters. They were failing anyway because once the motor car was banned because of national air pollution the owners had no way of getting to the coast. They then stopped dredging and they say that at Port Hamble and Mercury you'll soon be able to walk across the river at low tide.'*

*'No it certainly wasn't a yacht, probably one of those clouds of toxic vapour you hear about.'*

**F**ar fetched? Unfair to those working to make the Solent fit for bathing again? Yes, probably; but if we take the more charitable scenario, things have certainly gone downhill fast of late. A report, highlighting the presence of condoms, sanitary towels used syringes and chip boxes upon the shores, was not, unfortunately, a wild exaggeration. The stage has been reached when any wise sailor must con-



Penny Way, Britain's top woman windsurfer, seen here winning the Lechner Windsurfing World Championship in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Both here and at the Pre-Olympics in Barcelona the pollution was appalling. Many competitors at the Worlds suffered from stomach bugs and eye infections. The IYRU has asked the Barcelona authorities to do something about it before the Olympics. But what?

Photograph: Rob Andrews

# dirty

Remember the jubilant proclamation that fish were being caught once more in the Thames in London? We had long ago given up our capital city's major artery as a carrier of oxygen and life, regarding it as a mega-drain legitimately carrying our refuse out of sight and out of mind into someone else's domicile to the east. Doctor Frank Newton takes up the issue of water pollution, one of particular concern to the sailor and which increasingly affects our sport



# water

sider keeping his anti-tetanus jabs up-to-date if sailing in waters carrying sewage effluent.

Make no mistakes, this is not just a problem of the Dirty Brits but, since we are the nation who insist upon carrying our refuse offshore and dumping it, we must expect to earn the reputation of a third-world power. Out of sight out of mind cannot go on forever.

At Newport Rhode Island in 1980, during the America's Cup Challenge series, one of the many unknown handicaps that John Oakley had to contend with was that of having to keep Lionheart in the water all the time whilst the other nations dry-sailed their boats. Our base, in a secluded corner of Newport Harbour, was ideal in many respects but was situated in a part of the

harbour where the hull had to be cleaned off daily since the \$500 that was required to fabricate a hoist out frame was not forthcoming. Crew members were required to dive daily underwater through floating turds, fish heads and slime to perform this task. On one occasion a toilet-seat bumped gently against the hull. It was several days before the team doctor was able to secure for the diving crew members funds for protective face masks. All this happened during a serious challenge for the world's most famous trophy.

In Barcelona at the pre-Olympic regatta in 1990 there were problems with water contamination in the sailing area and sickness amongst crews. Following the IYRU meeting in London in November last, the published CPOC re-

port reads: 'Pollution: The water quality off Barcelona is very dirty, especially after a thunderstorm when the storm sewers empty into the sea. It is requested that the Union insist that the organisers address this issue seriously.'

The writer feels that instructions given to King Canute might similarly read: 'The King must take action to see that the Sea does not reduce the size of the UK twice in every 24 hours.' The task is probably of similar magnitude.

The conclusion has to be that man is the variable to be focused upon if we are to improve our environment. We are the dirty creatures and those of us with the privilege of owning sailing boats are as guilty as non-sailing homo sapiens. The Round the Island Race could, until recently, have been plotted by floating beer cans and bottles ejected by crews *en route*. The sea bed probably has a circular treasure trove of aluminium deposits that would make the bauxite smelter at Holyhead redundant.

Non-Sailing Man, the sub-species, is adept at ejecting into holiday harbours and on to sea shores the polystyrene fish and chip containers that will last until the final big bang. In future your Big Mac will contain its generous calories within a cardboard container, since the chain has had the foresight to realise that whilst its copious refuse containers are ignored a bio-degradable package is the only way to go.

The water itself seldom bears close scrutiny. It is now opaque where 50 years ago the bottom could be seen clearly. Insult is added to injury in that we now regularly recognise the nature of the larger particles. Little is left to the imagination: if sight were failing the other senses would confirm our worst fears.

The desecration of our shoreline, however, is probably the greater pollution as far as the sailor is concerned. As far as the eye can see there is building after building, tall chimneys, storage tanks, palls of smoke, hotels, caravans and dare it be mentioned hundreds of masts marking the site of marinas. We are indeed as guilty as the rest.

Recently biological hazards have loomed large for inland sailors. Many reservoirs and lakes were closed for sailing in the latter part of 1989 as a result of the presence of Blue Green Toxic Algae. This potentially toxic cyanobacteria has been noted as present in fossil remains but was recently associated with the death of dogs, sheep and cattle. Lakes in Sweden have often been ▶

# dirty water

closed during the summer months when this toxic organism has been present. But the problem became high-profile news in the UK which resulted in cautious water PLCs closing waters to sailors. Investigation revealed that high concentrations of nitrates in the soil through which rainfall had drained were deposited in the silt at the bottom of these reservoirs. The high concentrations and the Greenhouse effect of unusually hot summers had encouraged spectacular blooms of the algae.

Considerable effort on the part of the RYA in producing a users' code of practice resulted in waters opening again for leisure sailing, though several were again closed last year.

The risk of an illness, Weils Disease, caused by an organism in the urine of infected rats has persuaded the Canoe Union to advise against the practising of Eskimo rolls near the edge of inland water. Similar advice against the practice of capsizing drill in sailing dinghies by children in such situations has been given by the RYA.

While hazards may exist in the deep waters of the ocean these will have been present since man first took to the sea – with one exception. As spaceage man is beginning to clutter outer space with his refuse, he is merely following his own example in having cluttered the sea. The risk of striking floating mega flotsam in the form of containers, drifting buoys and piles is now significant. The risk now extends below the sea as is demonstrated by the loss of fishing vessels when catching submarines in their nets. In some seas the nets grow larger, longer and more dangerous and are being left unattended below the surface.

Unseen, indeed, is the risk of exposure to radiation posed by outflows from powerstations, or from military operations. Out of sight out of mind were it not for pressure groups like Greenpeace whose vigilance keeps the operators of such establishments on their toes.

Perish the thought that we shall one day have a matching Geiger Counter on the navigational console. Its rapid crackle rivalling that of the depth sounder as we head into dangerous

waters. Beneath the surface the power-driven yacht is now more likely to foul its prop upon a plastic Sainsburys shopping bag than upon a trailing rope or submerged mooring buoy. Back in the marina it'll probably snag on the trolley.

The final insult comes from non-sailing man polluting the pleasure of sailing man with a plethora of bodies eroding the very water itself: you can't moor here; you can't sail here; no anchorage; no landing; no launching; Lulworth Firing Range in operation today.

In February 1990 the Central Council for Physical Recreation called a conference on 'Polluted Water and Recreation'. Of 98 delegates present, 27



**Above: Sailors of multihulls, dinghies and boards are a lot more exposed to the water than sailors of more traditional craft. The risk to them of infection from pollution is therefore higher**

Photograph: Kos

**Top: The water-quality issue hit inland sailors in a big way in 1989 when the presence of Blue Green Toxic Algae caused the closure to watersports of several reservoirs**

Photograph: Roger Lean Vercoe

represented large 'Authorities' administering vast areas of water. A further 18 were from the all-powerful National Rivers Authority. From yacht clubs and sailing schools but five persons outnumbered by canoeing, rowing and scuba diving organisations. Whilst fishermen showed the greatest presence in trying to preserve their sport. In relation to Weils Disease we were told that the causative *Leptospira* organism can survive for four weeks in sterile tap water, for 20 hours in sea water but for only 12 hours in sewage. Ah! I thought. We must be safe in the Solent where sea and sewage mix!

A Mr Charles Thompson MBE, Director National Rescue Training Council, said that his organisation concerned only with rescue was considering disbanding due to the risk of pollution to his members. Yet

there is no statutory quality for waters used for recreational purposes, which is fortunate since most 'Authorities' will not be able to improve significantly the quality of their waters in the future anyway.

By coincidence, the Deputy Chief Engineer of London Docklands Development Corporation, who was at the seminar, wrote to the RYA five days later asking for details of 'any

specified standards required for the quality of water at watersports centres recognised by your organisation'.

'We like an early Perrier Sir. But failing that any good clear water. Not too many condoms, a dash of oxygen, a little sewage to keep away the *Leptospira* and not too thick an oil slick on top'.

Several years ago the writer asked the RYA Council 'What is our policy on pollution?' He was told 'We have no policy but we don't like it.' This year saw the launch of the RYA Clean Code. The mood has changed. Now we don't like it and we will try to do something about it. It has been proposed that an RYA Environmental Committee be formed to co-ordinate response from a variety of divisions. But we – the members – are the RYA. The action has to start with us!

Homo sapiens: Man as a species, 'a reasoning being,' or, Homo: Man . . . with sap . . . 'a simple person'? Time will tell. But how long have we got? ●

**Dr Frank Newton is the Chairman of the IYRU Medical Commission and Medical Officer of the RYA**