

Press Release



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Volvo Ocean Race increases awareness of global environmental threat

The Volvo Ocean Race, with Stockholm the current host, is reaching a close. This also means the end of the ocean research project conducted by the crews. Throughout the more than 37,000 nautical miles of the competition, the amount of microscopic life in the oceans has been surveyed to increase knowledge of one of the greatest environmental threats facing the world's seas – the spread of invasive species. The project initiators, Swedish-Norwegian Wallenius Wilhelmsen Logistics and Swedish Wallenius Water, are very pleased with the results.

Regular water samples have been taken by the race teams throughout the Volvo Ocean Race in order to map the amount of microscopic life in the sea. The initiative was the work of the Swedish-Norwegian shipping company Wallenius Wilhelmsen Logistics and the Swedish environmental engineering firm Wallenius Water, which want to increase awareness of one of the greatest environmental threats faced by the sea today – the spread of invasive species. Marine microorganisms are moved around the world in ship ballast water (the water ships need for stability) and risk, if the water is not purified, being released in new ecosystems where they lack natural predators.

Despite this threat affecting us all, it is relatively unknown to the general public. Entire ecosystems risk being wiped out, biodiversity could be impaired, diseases such as cholera could be spread and local tourist and fishing industries could be put out of business. One of many examples of invasive species is the comb jelly, originally from the Atlantic coast of America, which has spread exponentially in the Baltic Sea. It has already wiped out large fish populations in the Black Sea. The UN's international maritime organisation, the IMO, has classed the spread of invasive species as one of the greatest maritime threats today.

“The project features both communicative and research elements. The communicative objectives are to spread knowledge of this global threat and to get more countries to ratify the convention the IMO has drawn up to solve the problem. We are very pleased with the attention the project has received. The international media have shown great interest and this has paved the way for like-minded politicians. Since the Volvo Ocean Race began, five countries have ratified the IMO's convention, which is a most satisfying result,” says Torkel Elgh, CEO of Wallenius Water.

As for the research side of the project, Wallenius Water is responsible for processing the results and is now initiating extensive work to analyse and interpret the measurements.

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Almost 2,000 measurements have been reported by the race teams. Some interesting trends are already apparent:

“At present, ballast water management is governed by local regulations and recommendations that encourage vessels to change ballast water out to sea. This is motivated by arguments such as the theory that there is less biomass in open seas than there is along coastlines. Measurements made during the Volvo Ocean Race, however, indicate several areas where the amount of sea life is roughly the same out to sea as it is near the coast,” Elgh explains.

In order to solve the problem with invasive species in ballast water the IMO has drawn up an international convention that, when enforced, will force ships to purify ballast water before it is released. Despite the convention being adopted back in 2004, it has not yet been ratified by enough countries to apply. So far 18 countries representing 15.36% of the merchant navy have signed the convention. The convention will come into force 12 months after 30 countries representing at least 35% of the merchant navy have ratified the convention. Sweden has indicated its intention to ratify the convention this autumn.

“Our project indicates what many experts in the field also claim – that changing ballast water out to sea is not a reliable method. As such we want to encourage vessels to voluntarily purify their ballast water and to underline the importance of more countries signing the IMO’s convention. Only then can we preserve biodiversity and avoid ecological disasters caused by invasive species,” says Elgh.

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Wallenius Water was founded in 1996 and is a Swedish environmental technology company that has developed a chemical-free water purification method. Today, this patented method, Wallenius AOT, is used to purify everything from drinking water and water in cooling towers and greenhouses to water used in industrial processes as well as ballast water.