

Rowers challenged on Atlantic trek High waves put damper on journey

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Rogue waves and snapped oars have added to the challenges Adam Kreek and his fellow rowers have faced in their expedition to row across the Atlantic.

Kreek, along with Jordan Hanssen, Markus Pukonen and Pat Fleming, left Dakar, Senegal on Jan. 23 to row across the Atlantic Ocean, to Miami, Fla., a journey they hope to make in 60 to 100 days. During the Canadian Wildlife Federation Africa to the Americas 2013 expedition they are gathering data about the health of the ocean. They're measuring pH, temperature, salinity and dissolved carbon dioxide and oxygen.

Those who are following their journey through the OAR Northwest website will know the crew has had to spend time on sea anchor because they've hit bad weather. On Day 28 they went down to four oars as a big wave snapped a second oar. They've decided they'll have to row more conservatively, especially at night when they can't see the waves. That will slow their progress but they hope for favourable weather in the days ahead.

Their 29-foot rowboat is equipped with GPS tracking, a satellite phone, a small wind turbine and solar panels to operate communication equipment.

Kreek visited Grade 7 students at Wilson Middle School last year and they've been eagerly following the expedition. Every day they are trying to walk as many kilometres as the crew is rowing.

From the middle of the Atlantic, Hanssen and Pukonen responded to some questions via email.

Q: How does it feel to be a teacher when you're in the middle of the ocean?

Hanssen and Pukonen: It's inspiring yet also humbling to be able to play a role in developing a student's interest in the world outside our borders, and from an environment that few have the opportunity to explore at any point in his or her lifetime. I sometimes wonder if this is what early astronauts felt like when in space - being so far away, yet so closely connected through the day's modern technology.

Q: Your rowboat is outfitted with all kinds of technology to measure the health of the ocean. What is your sense of the health of the ocean from what you have seen so far? Do you come across all sorts of flotsam and jetsam?

Hanssen and Pukonen: When you're completely surrounded by the ocean on every horizon, you find that it's teeming with life so abundant - marlin, leatherback turtles, dolphins, whales! But it's also not hard to recognize civilization's reach. We're cataloging garbage seen floating by, (we see at least one piece of floating garbage every day. An interesting fact: the majority of garbage in the ocean does not come from direct dumping. Rather, most garbage in the ocean is from improper disposal of waste on land. Rainstorms and water runoff carry litter and garbage from poorly managed dumps and littered city streets to the ocean), tracking the volume of CO2 absorbed by the ocean and its direct effect on pH and ocean acidification, and sharing the data freely to anybody who hopes to understand its impact on the local ecosystem and on the food chain. I want my kids to be able to eat shellfish by the time they're 50!

The ocean we see is very full of life, but we only have this experience to compare it to. I have seen more wildlife in general than in the north Atlantic. However, when you look back to history you hear about levels of abundance that are tenfold to what we see now. I think the ocean, because it is huge, can still be healthy in a lot of places. If we let it heal then I think it will heal quickly; we just have to decide, as humans, how much we want the ocean to provide for us. Do we want to be able to take from it a little less each year or do we want to show some discipline, do without and steward the ocean until it reaches a level of health that we can harvest abundantly and sustainably from it?

Q: I imagine that living in such close quarters means you all know each other's habits very well by now. Do you ever get in each other's way? How do you handle disagreements?

Hanssen and Pukonen: Communication is key onboard a small 29-by-six-foot space - it all begins with saying "please" and "thank you" even when you don't mean it! Everybody wants to get to Miami, and if there's a disagreement onboard then it's just going to be a long, slow, trudging journey for the next 60-100 days. It's in everybody's best interest to either come to an agreement or trust the judgment of the deciding opinion. We live by a highly structured schedule that allows for (nearly) adequate rest, food and, of course, rowing. Decisions are made by discussion and vote, and if there is a tie, then our captain, Jordan Hanssen, has the deciding vote. It's very democratic, in that we allow everybody a say because we're all cognizant of the challenges and the options and recognize that every rower has an opinion and has needs that need to be met. We support each other by communicating well, laughing often, singing songs and making the necessary sacrifices to ensure everybody gets home safe and happy.

The fact is we are always in each other's way, so that means we have to give each other a helping hand to get out of each other's way and onto the next part of our day, be it cooking, cleaning, sleeping or rowing. To manage conflict onboard: Don't take anything personally; space is limited onboard the JRH (the James Robert Hanssen) so there is no room for large egos and pouty pants; and be prepared to give and receive honest feedback regularly.

Q: What has been your greatest learning since embarking on this journey?

Hanssen and Pukonen: You have to learn to submit to the sea. She is a powerful being with immense forces acting below the surface, and also forces acting on it from above (wind, temperature, etc). We're at its intersection and have to learn to continually adapt to what it offers, use what it gives us (surfing great waves vs. sitting on sea anchor for 36 hours in messy unconsolidated seas). This rings true for nature wherever you interact with it, though, and the best thing you can do is be prepared through proper planning, experience, and good tools/equipment. If you don't have the experience, start small and build yourself up from there!

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