

# SKIP NOVAK

CAN YOU MAKE A SERIOUS CONTRIBUTION TO SCIENCE  
WHILE SAILING? SKIP CERTAINLY THINKS SO

Sailing, whether it be peripatetic cruising as a lifestyle or carving up the seas in competitive round the world ocean racing, can sometimes harbour a tinge of guilt. We should at least spare a thought for saving the watery part of the planet that we sailors so enjoy.

Making a scientific contribution in one form or another while at the same time living our passion is now a trend, but the idea is nothing new. In fact, explorers through the ages have often relied on a scientific mission to help launch projects through patronage. Captain Cook's voyages immediately come to mind. Fitzroy and Darwin on HMS *Beagle* was another, both producing enormous amounts of new specimens and data now stashed away in the vaults of London's Natural History Museum.

Sometimes, though, a scientific quest can be costly. Let's not forget that Scott died coming back from the South Pole hauling rock specimens for science. The Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen made no compromises in his bid to be first to the Pole – and he lived to tell about it.

Today this dynamic persists. There is a surfeit of no compromise 'adventure expeditions' verging on circus. And there are many others that Bill Tilman described as having a 'thin veil of science' to justify themselves. Famously, Tilman hated having to help carry a plane table theodolite to map parts of the Himalayas when all he wanted was to go mountaineering. I wholeheartedly agree. There's nothing wrong with having a go at a challenge for the fun of it. It needs no scientific justification.

My experience of dabbling with science projects with the prime motive of simply having an adventure has rarely been satisfactory. 'Doing some science' always sounds good and it might help you get funding from commercial sponsors or even via the budgets of some naïve university, but it usually winds up as a dog's dinner of agendas and the scientific output is minimal.

A few superyacht and megayacht crews, on the other hand, have embraced this trend in a big way, often with significant

results. The recent Five Deeps Expedition is a case in point, where a wealthy American and his mega motoryacht took a submersible to the five deepest trenches in the world's oceans. This was the real deal in terms of an adventure challenge, where not only new geographical ground was explored, but also new species, unique habitats and behaviours of benthic marine organisms were documented.

Superyachts have been donated at little or no cost for less ambitious projects, the message being that these vessels have the logistic capability to produce valuable outcomes.

Where does this leave little guys like ourselves? There have been some noteworthy examples that do work. Dee Caffari's *Turning the Tide on Plastic* was a winner. Sampling micro-plastics en route during the Volvo Ocean Race

produced worthwhile results, and shocking ones at that. In the far south, some of my colleagues in the charter business are making repeat trips with the same scientific institutions taking samples of marine life and making

observations on a dedicated basis.

The so-called expedition cruise ships with 100 to 400 passengers have also bought in to this idea, giving their guests something worthwhile to do including cloud observation, seabird surveys, phytoplankton sampling and concentrations of sea ice. The problem with most of these initiatives is how to give the feedback to those citizen scientists – the payback, if you will. This is tricky with esoteric sampling, observations and measurements that often need years of analysis to produce a conclusion.

One stands out though: **Happywhale.com**. How many of us have seen a humpback whale and how many of us have got that tail fluke photo? Yes, plenty of us. It's easy to do.

Happywhale was conceived and developed by Ted Cheeseman, a colleague from Antarctic tourism, and this is probably the most gratifying for the citizen scientist. You can upload your photo into a recognition database, even name your whale if it is a first sighting, and then track it from other future sightings. A humpback feeding in the Antarctic was later sighted off Nicaragua. This should be a buy-in for any yachtsman. Check it out. ■

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this trend in a big way'**

