

As abandoned boats pile up in California waters: Who is responsible for the environmental damage?

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

On Jan. 2, a 27-foot sailboat sank off the southern coast of Alameda in stormy weather. Rescue crews saved the man on board, but the ship

landed beside a long rock wall jutting from the island.

The next day, Brock De Lappe, a former harbor master and Alameda resident, walked over to the rock wall. The boat floated nose up, half submerged in water. From the shore, he could see its registration number had been scratched off the side, a practice some owners take to avoid having a jettisoned boat traced back to them.

De Lappe took photos and documented the craft, adding to a comprehensive collection of shipwrecks and marine debris he has documented for years.

"Who is going to pay to remove that boat?" De Lappe said. "This shouldn't happen."

There are hundreds of thousands of boats registered in California—the fourth-most in the nation—and the state's \$10 billion recreational boating community supports tens of thousands of jobs. But the state has few comprehensive plans for disposing of aging or abandoned boats. Registration and insurance requirements are limited and rarely enforced. There is no registration requirement for new owners.

Although shipwrecks can conjure romantic images of treasure and adventure, in the Bay Area they are more likely to serve as environmental and navigational hazards. When owners get fed up with aging, costly vessels, they often dump their boats in the bay, sometimes filled to the brim with trash. Frequently, there are pollutants onboard—gas, chemicals, even sewage.

"They basically become a floating landfill," said Sejal Choksi-Chugh, executive director of San Francisco Bay Keeper, a local environmental nonprofit.

Eileen Zedd, the harbormaster and property manager of the publicly owned Alameda Marina, said she has observed an unfortunate pattern in the final stages of a faltering boat's life. People rent spots for their vessels in the marina, and later run into financial trouble, or lose interest in boating, or can't afford their boat's upkeep. They fall behind with their payments. And ultimately, they walk away, leaving the marina with an aging vessel in poor condition.

"There's this cycle that repeats itself," Zedd said. "It's really hard for marina operators to deal with these types of situations, but there's just not much help out there."

In order to gain ownership of the abandoned boat, allowing them to access funds that will help them remove it, marinas must undertake a months-long lien process. They may have to pay hundreds or even thousands in back taxes to the county. Meanwhile, the boat takes up a slip, no longer making any money for the business.

To avoid that outcome, some marina operators have long sold abandoned boats to interested buyers for as little as one dollar.

"In some cases, you get someone who is into boats who wants to fix it up," Zedd said. "In other cases, it's people who want to anchor it out, and they never get it registered, and they move it around the estuary and other parts of the Bay."

In a Bay Area grappling with a homeless and housing crisis, some of these abandoned boats have become homes for those who might otherwise be unhoused. "Anchor-outs" is a catchall term for people living rent-free in waterways across the Bay Area.

Richardson Bay near Sausalito has long hosted a large anchor-out community, as has the Oakland Estuary.

Earlier this summer, the anchor-out community in Oakland found itself at the center of a maelstrom when a "pirate" crime spree brought intensified scrutiny to the waterway. Over a three-week span in August, dozens of small boats and dinghies were stolen, stripped for parts and sunk. The boating community pointed the finger at anchor-outs living near Oakland's Union Point Park.

That [crime wave](#) led to greater coordination between Oakland and Alameda police, and a renewed emphasis on clearing the estuary of anchor-outs.

But long before that rash of crimes, advocates had raised the alarm over the problem of abandoned boats in the estuary.

De Lappe, for one, has spent years chronicling abandoned and sunken boats in the estuary. In the early 2010s, there were dozens of people living illegally in poorly maintained vessels, at least some of whom had bought boats abandoned in marinas, and a number of sunken vessels, he said. After many grant applications and coordination, a multi-agency effort in 2013 brought the estuary back to pristine condition.

"At the end of that, the estuary was totally, totally clean," De Lappe said. "For a long time, it was okay, but then of course we gradually started to get more anchor-outs."

At the end of December, Oakland police undertook another expensive cleanup, the second in 10 years, removing at least a dozen abandoned or derelict boats and demolishing them in Jack London Square. The police department is still applying for a grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for money to salvage sunken boats.

But as the estuary returns to a healthier state, advocates like De Lappe are asking if we truly resolved the problem, or just completed another

cycle in an endless loop.

The Surrendered and Abandoned Vessel Exchange program, established by the California Division of Boating and Waterways in 2014, is intended to help dispose of abandoned vessels. The grant program provides funds to local agencies for the "abatement, removal, and disposal of recreational vessels that are abandoned or creating a nuisance in public waterways."

According to the state, these grants have offered approximately \$20 million for the removal and disposal of 5,352 recreational vessels across the state.

Still, the fund is not a panacea. There is only \$2.7 million available each year, an amount intended to cover all of California, and half as much as observers say is needed. Meanwhile, privately owned marinas are not eligible to receive the grant funds directly, but rather must partner with local agencies who have other priorities for the money. Marinas are also only eligible to access a grant once they've navigated the challenges of the lien process and actually gained ownership of the boat.

"There are just so many hoops you have to jump through," Zedd said. "It's a nightmare."

There is no dedicated recycling center for boats in California, so many abandoned vessels are turned into expensive trash. The boats crushed at Jack London Square were ultimately sent to a landfill. And although the Division of Boating and Waterways says it encourages marinas to be "proactive with promoting the surrendered vessel program" and encouraging responsible ownership, in reality, according to harbormasters, that doesn't always happen.

"I think the SAVE program is a good starting point, it incentivizes people

to bring in their boats," Choksi-Chugh said. "But it doesn't go far enough; there are still changes we see that need to be made."

Without changes such as insurance and registration requirements, and greater leeway for marinas, neglected or abandoned boats will continue to end up in public waterways, Choksi-Chugh said. At least some eventually sink, and the cycle begins anew.

"There's no such thing as a cheap [boat](#)," Zedd said.

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