

Sharing the channels – Capt. Geoff

In Discovery Passage, part of the major North South protected waters corridor for BC, the channel narrows to less than a mile across in many places. This brings all type of vessels closer together than normal.

Large ships and tugs with barges have limited manoeuvrability. Many large ships require a half mile or more to stop. Tugs with barges can have even more difficulty, because if they stop too quickly, their barge(s) could overrun them or sheer off towards other vessels or the shallows. Also, if they take the strain off their wire towline, it can sag down and drag on the seafloor, and may get damaged or snagged.

Even without currents, the channel itself challenges large ships and tugs with barges. For example, you might notice that many large vessels and tugs with tows favour the Quadra side of the channel just north of Cape Mudge. This is because of Yaculta Bank, which, at low tide, has a minimum depth of just over 5 meters. Some tugs and barges don't draw this much, but even for a small tug, their wire towline can sag down enough to catch the bottom. Seymour Narrows is also quite a challenge, with the channel narrowing to less than half a mile, and an almost right angle corner at the south end.

When currents are added, the passage becomes even more difficult for these types of vessels. Seymour Narrows can only be transited by very large vessels when currents are minimal, so a lot of vessels will be using the passage around the same time, requiring timing and cooperation between them.

Under the nautical rules of the 'road' (part of the Collision Regulations), large vessels, and tugs with barges, would consider most of Discovery Passage as a "Narrow Channel", requiring smaller vessels to stay out of their way. Believe me, that the navigators on those large ships really appreciate you making it clear very early that you are staying out of the way. You can best do this by making a significant course alteration to show what you intend to do (it is also part of the rules - make sure you are aware of all of them).

Commercial Vessels over 20 metres in length (less than 20 metres if they are towing, 24 metres for a fishing vessel) and Pleasure craft over 30 metres are required to participate in Vessel Traffic, providing estimated arrival times for reporting points such as Cape Mudge, Steep Island, Seymour Narrows and Separation Head. They communicate between each other and Traffic Services on Channel 71 in this area. Smaller vessels do not normally participate. However if you are operating a boat in Discovery Passage, and you have dual watch capability, it is a good idea to be monitoring the traffic channel. Large ships really appreciate the ability to make contact with you if they are unsure of your intentions. They may try channel 16 first, but would prefer to make passing arrangements on 71 so all vessels in the system know what is going on. Note that you must have your Radio Operator's Certificate to operate a Marine VHF.

Another aspect of the problem for large vessels can be thought of as a slight variation of the bumper sticker sometimes seen on larger trucks and trailers - "If you can't see my mirrors, I can't see you". If you are close enough to a large vessel that you can't see the bridge, then the people on the bridge may have also lost sight of you. For a large ship, losing sight of a small vessel close in, is the equivalent of trying to back out of your driveway when the family dog is loose in the area, and in this case the 'brakes' may not work so well.

Most people know the towline between a tug and barge is normally invisible, as it is mostly underwater, but still very dangerous as it may be close to the surface. But they may not be aware that a pick-up line may be trailing on the surface over a hundred feet behind the barge. If your small vessel runs over that line, and it catches in the prop or leg, it can easily capsize your vessel.

Like all articles in this series, this was not written to scare people off of boating. This is a beautiful area for boating, with hundreds of miles of channels and many inlets and bays to explore. However, like driving on the road, you must know the rules, and Discovery passage can be akin to a busy road at times. To learn more about Collision Regulations and other subjects, including information on the in-depth courses that Ripple Rock Power & Sail Squadron offers, please visit <http://www.ripplerocksquadron.com/>