SAILING

The human side of the blue economy

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FOTO: Digital processing of a photo by Volivaud - A. Courcoux - A. Pilpre. © C. Barredo

Sailing is a profound way of relating to the sea. Culture, technology, adventure, science and education are intertwined in an ecosystem that sustains maritimity and becomes an economic asset on the path towards sustainability. They are keys that allow us to understand why sailing today occupies a central place in maritime innovation, in ocean science and in the construction of a blue economy that looks to the future.

Seafarers know it well and they've always experienced it: sailing requires developing skills and knowledge that are rarely found in land-based activities. It requires interpreting the wind, reading the sea, anticipating changes, making quick decisions and assuming responsibility. Sailing is a school of life that combines technique, intuition, maritime culture and an intimate relationship with the environment. That is why sailing has been one of the most profound expressions of humanknd's relationship with the sea for centuries.

Like all human activity, sailing is part of the economy in its broadest sense: the science that studies how societies create value, manage resources and project the future. In the last decade, a specific concept that

has broadened this perspective has emerged with a great deal of momentum: the blue economy.

A key economy for the planet

It is not a simple maritime spin-off of the green economy, although it shares the vision of sustainable development. The blue economy arises from the convergence of marine science, public policies and industrial innovation. It has become one of the keys to protecting and managing seas and coastal areas. The European Commission has placed it at the centre of its agenda while coastal governments are incorporating it into their strategic plans.

Today the blue economy is understood as an interconnected ecosystem that features at least eight dimensions that feed back on each other: ports, fishing, marine renewable energies, oceanography, climatology, nautical tourism, the naval industry and ocean biotechnology.

The blue economy is important across the globe. Earth's oceans produce more than 50% of the planet's oxygen, absorb nearly a quarter of the CO_2 we emit and regulate the global climate. They are the main source of protein for more than 3 billion people, host the largest reserve of biodiversity on the planet and concentrate energy, biotechnological and mineral resources essential for the ecological transition.

In this sense, the blue economy is not just a development framework. According to the United Nations, it supports around 600 million people and generates 100 million direct jobs, mainly in fishing, aquaculture and coastal tourism. If formal maritime sectors are included —transport, marine energy, tourism, industrial fishing— the figure rises to 133 million jobs and could grow to 184 million by 2050 with an appropriate sustainable transition. The value of the ocean's assets exceeds 2.5 trillion dollars, making the blue economy the seventh largest economy in the world in terms of GDP. It is a planetary infrastructure that directly affects the future of the world.

Sailing: a strategic sector

Understood in its broad sense in terms of sport and leisure, sailing forms the basis of a large part of the blue economy. It is a strategic, cross-the-board sector: sailing involves close relationships between athletes, race organisers, designers, builders and specialists who are intertwined in a context that reinforces maritime culture, environmental respect, scientific knowledge and human and humanitarian values.

Race organisers, sponsors, technical teams and sailors have always internalised these values and have helped them to evolve, which has succeeded in demonstrating how the natural capital of the sea can be transformed into well-being, knowledge and economic value for society.

As a sport that relies on ancestral technology reinterpreted from a contemporary perspective, sailing fosters an emotional and cultural bond with the sea. Maritimity —the set of knowledge, trades, practices and bonds that connect a community with the maritime environment— is, in itself, a cultural infrastructure. And sailing is one of its most effective vehicles: it teaches how to read the environment, demands cooperation, rewards resilience, forces respect for physical and meteorological laws and instills a long-term perspective.

Knowledge of materials and the ability to transform this understanding into control and manoeuver offer a direct perspective on industrial processes. Against the backdrop of the climate emergency, all these attributes contribute to forming more keenly aware communities that are prepared and working for the required adaptation.

Sailing has enormous potential across Europe: nearly 48 million citizens regularly participate in recreational nautical activities, 36 million of whom are sailors. Six million boats are in European waters while there are more than 10,000 marinas in operation, offering more than a million moorings. The everyday infrastructure of the blue economy in Europe explains the true breadth of the sector.

Start of the first edition of the Barcelona World Race on November 17, 2007 © Jean-Marie Liot

The Moll de la Fusta in Barcelona, the days before the start of the Barcelona World Race. © Cris Barredo / WeLearnBlue

The Optimist Trophy in Palamós demonstrates every year the enormous potential of sailing among young people and the dynamic, economic and cultural impact on a local scale. © Alfred Farré

High-precision maritime innovation

Competitive sailing is a laboratory of constant innovation. Hydrodynamics, aerodynamics, advanced materials, electronics, meteorology, modeling, simulation and communication systems are part of the day-to-day work of any top-tier project. The diversity of competitions —from inshore regattas to ocean crossings— leads to a range of technologies and processes that engage a vast industrial sector. Shipyards, companies that make composites, electronics manufacturers, telecommunications suppliers, energy equipment and research centres form a value chain that places sailing right at the centre of contemporary maritime innovation.

Extreme sailing circuits clearly demonstrate this. The 37th America's Cup in Barcelona in 2024 generated 1.034 billion euros in economic impact, attracted 1.8 million visitors and unleashed technological investments exceeding 200 million euros per team. For its part, SailGP has become the fastest and most media-intense professional circuit in the world, with an annual economic impact exceeding 100 million dollars and global audiences exceeding 150 million viewers. Both circuits have turned the competition into an advanced test bed where engineering, sensors and state-of-the-art materials are then transferred to the maritime, energy and technology industries.

Ocean sailing: an economic, technological and educational driver

Ocean sailing represents the most extreme, human-focused dimension of sailing. Regattas such as the Vendée Globe, an unassisted, solo round-the-world race, are demanding examples that test materials, systems and people. The race has a global impact: the last edition achieved more than 350 million views on social networks, 418 million page views on its website, television coverage in 190 countries and an estimated economic impact of 100 million euros in the French region of Vendée.

The Ocean Race, the team race around the world, has generated a cumulative impact of 500 million euros in GDP in Spain, created more than 8,000 jobs, produced more than 200 million euros in media returns and attracted 1.6 million visitors to the Ocean Live Park in Alicante.

Ocean sailing has also proven to be an educational space with enormous potential. The Barcelona World Race educational programme, with more than 50,000 participants, and the Barcelona World Race Ocean Campus, with more than 60,000 people registered, were pioneering initiatives that tangibly demonstrated

the extent to which this sport can generate high-value educational and scientific content in both schools and universities. Both projects brought oceanography, meteorology, health sciences and maritime culture closer to thousands of students, and ensured that sailing is a tool capable of integrating disciplines and engaging people's curiosity in scientific careers.

Classic ships are authentic museums of ancestral technology reinterpreted in a contemporary key and foster an emotional and cultural bond with the sea. © Christian Palau
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Racing sailing generates design and high industrial technology. In the photo, the initial construction process of an IMOCA. © Absolute-dreamer
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The learning potential of racing sailing is extensive, especially in the area of electronic technology. In the photo, Marcel Van Triest and Anna Corbella prepare a class for the Barcelona World Race Ocean Campus. © Santi Serrat / WeLearnBlue
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Local regattas: a real impact on the region

At the local level, regattas act as major economic and cultural drivers. In Catalonia, the Palamós regattas —the Christmas Race and the Optimist Trophy— generate significant impacts for a medium-sized municipality. The Christmas Race, held in December, has an impact of close to 800,000 euros, while the Optimist Trophy, held in February, provides close to 600,000 euros. These are significant figures for winter periods when tourist activity is slow.

The experience of the Ballena Alegre Sailing Club reinforces this idea. Since 2022, the club has been conducting socio-economic impact studies that demonstrate the true magnitude of these events. The results are eye catching: a world championship —like the iQFoiL held in Sant Pere Pescador— can generate an impact that exceeds 8 or even 10 million euros, while an Optimist World Championship can reach 14 million euros. These data show that sailing, even on the most local scale, is a highly valuable economic and social asset for coastal regions.

An asset for the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development

Sailing demonstrates that the sea is not just a physical space, but also a cultural, economic and technological driver capable of transforming regions and impacting the future. From the extreme innovation of large circuits to the direct impact of local regattas, sailing links community, industry and knowledge with unique precision. In this context, the Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, promoted by the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO, places the ocean at the centre of the global agenda: science, governance of the seas, the ecological transition and sustainable economics converge to

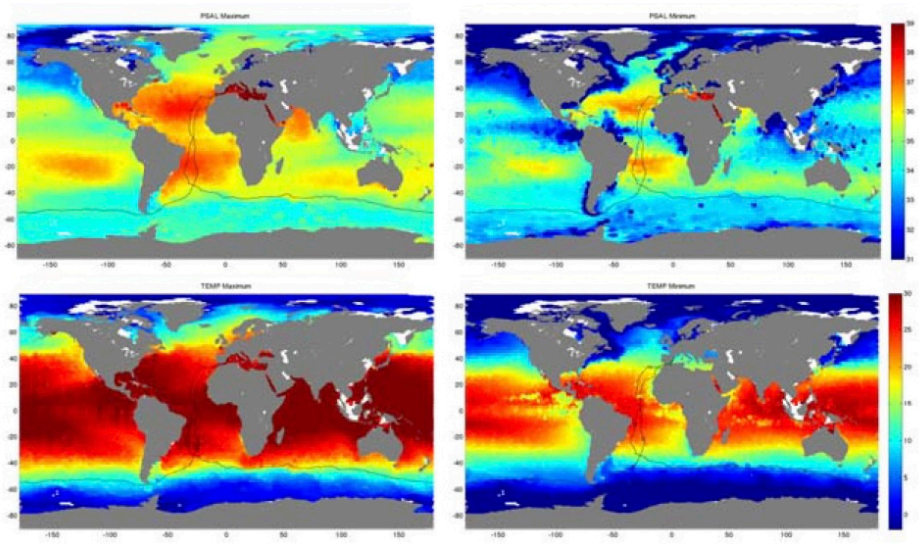
guarantee a viable future. Sailing embodies this vision and confirms that the blue economy is not merely an abstract concept, but rather a living reality that comes from the sea and that increasingly defines the future of our societies.

Sir Robin Knox-Johnston was the winner of the first solo circumnavigation of the world: the Sunday Times Golden Globe Race held between 1968 and 1969. The race was a paradigm shift in ocean sailing and set a universal standard for human endeavours. © Bill Rowntree / Knox-Johnston Archive PPL.

A pioneering oceanographic observatory

The Barcelona World Race opened up an unprecedented path for marine science. In the 2007 and 2010 editions, data on sea surface temperature and salinity were collected in remote areas that had been inaccessible to conventional research. Led by Jordi Salat, an oceanographer at the Institute of Marine Sciences (ICM-CSIC), the project demonstrated the scientific potential of ocean sailing and set up a new generation of oceanographic and climate research platforms that have since been followed by regattas such as the Vendée Globe and The Ocean Race.

The Barcelona World Race Oceanographic Observatory involved the UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC-UNESCO) and earned the UNESCO Science Prize for work done during the Barcelona World Race.



The Barcelona World Race Oceanographic Observatory promoted pioneering experiences in the use of ocean regattas as scientific research platforms, such as obtaining temperature and salinity data from the sea surface. © Jordi Salat / ICM-CSIC.

Inclusive sailing: technology, autonomy and social awareness

Inclusive sailing is today one of the most transformative dimensions of contemporary maritimity. The case of Dani Anglada Pich, who completed the circumnavigation of the Isle of Wight aboard a Catalan sailing skate thanks to a haptic guidance system that Anglada himself built, is an exceptional example of how innovation can expand rights, autonomy and participation. The Yes We Sail project demonstrates that technology applied to navigation can become a real tool for inclusion: it allows people with functional diversity to take part in sailing in a safe, dignified and independent manner. His journey, a pioneering feat in the international field, shows that sailing is also a space for social awareness, improvement and technological creativity, and that it forms part of a blue economy that encompasses all human capacities.

Dani Anglada aboard his Catalan sailing skate while circumnavigating the Isle of Wight. © YesWeSail.