

The Oil Slick – Oceana scientists “roughing it” in the Gulf

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When I received a fund raising email from Andrew Sharpless, the Chief Executive Officer of Oceana, to help support Oceana’s scientific efforts in the Gulf of Mexico with a \$500 donation, I was a bit intrigued in a positive sort of way. Anything that distracts him and his minions from persecuting fishermen is well on the way to being a winner in my estimation.

As I was getting my checkbook out, I followed the link ([here](#)) to the YouTube video of a tour of the Oceana “research vessel” identified as the Oceana Latitude that was to be employed in this two month long scientific “expedition” (Pew/Oceana’s term for the undertaking). Some of the content of the video tour, conducted by researcher Margot Stiles, really piqued my interest. First, there was more well-kept teak decking on the Oceana Latitude than I had ever associated with a research vessel. Second, the working research boats that the Oceana Latitude carries all appeared to have never done a lick’s worth of work in their obviously well polished existence; in fact, they resembled luxury sports fishing vessels far more than research platforms. Next, Ms. Stiles stated that some tarps that she was sharing a scene with were to cover an unspecified “bunch of stuff” that was being stored on deck. Finally, what she referred to as a “mini office” seemed to have far more of the yacht than the sea-going office about it.

Needless to say, this whole production struck me as curious, particularly considering that it was in support of a fund-raising plea from an ENGO that was tied to more Big Oil \$Billions than any of us mere mortals, at least those of us who don’t work for the federal government or a “charitable” foundation, could ever imagine.

I put my check signing impulses on temporary hold.

After a couple of minutes with Google, I found that the Oceana Latitude was really the M/Y (that stands for “motor yacht”) Latitude, described as an expedition motor yacht built in Germany and listed for charter - at \$99,000 per week - at CharterWorld.com ([here](#)). The shiny work boats are listed as “water toys” on the charter agent’s page and include “a 43 ft Mares Catamaran Sport Fisherman motor boat, which is completely equipped and rigged for fishing” and “a 27' Catamaran rigged for fishing (New in 2007).” The M/Y Latitude also features a really big Jacuzzi with room enough for a dozen intrepid scientists, perhaps part of the “bunch of stuff” covered by that tarp, and the accompanying photos indicate that the interior décor is about as far from “scientifically Spartan” as it’s possible to be.

But in all candor, I have to admit there was no mention of an on-board sauna.

Now I realize that I don’t have any right to question what fabulously well-endowed ENGO leaders spend on or what they chose to call “research vessels” or on how those vessels are equipped - after all, we wouldn’t want visiting NOAA, EPA or MMS personages, New York Times reporters, Spanish models ([here](#) - as indicated, the originally linked picture of Spanish model Almudena Fernandez was removed from the M/Y Oceana Latitude Flickr page. However, another picture including her - in a more “scientific” context - is available [here](#)) or network producers to really have to rough it like all of those fishermen helping to fix the BP screw-up. But for Andrew Sharpless to be seeking such large donations – at least in an “us regular folks” context - to subsidize the operation of such a floating palace, regardless of the work that the people who are slaving on it for two months actually do, does seem a bit much, doesn’t it?

For anyone who is wondering, the Greenpeace research vessel in the YouTube clip [here](#) (ABC Action

News) looks much more like a working research vessel than the M/Y Latitude, but imagine actually trying to do science on steel decks and without plush furniture, wet bars and water toys. No models are going to be visiting the R/V Arctic Sunrise, I'd be willing to bet. So what are they going to do for photo-ops?

C'mon, Andy! My checkbook went right back into the drawer.

(Note that if any of the linked websites are taken down, I will attempt to post pdf files of them [here](#).)

Ps - Ms. Stiles, if you chance to read this, the next time you have a starring role on YouTube, I'd advise you to either ditch the footwear or have a sound tech edit out that distracting "flip, flop, flip, flop...."

Pps - I posted the above column on a fisheries-oriented listserv that I subscribe to. In reply, a member who is on the staff of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute suggested that I was somewhat lacking in ability in using Google and then wrote, referring to the M/Y Latitude aka the Oceana Latitude "it's clearly a research vessel and not a motor yacht." I replied with another link ([here](#)) to a website that features a more complete slideshow and an extensive video tour of the vessel including the spa/hot tub/pool, what it was rebuilt for - to reiterate, an expedition motoryacht - and its origins. I find it hard to believe that anyone visiting that website with an even cursory knowledge of working research vessels could consider that's what the M/Y Latitude actually is, but the MCBI staffer, conceding that he had missed the spa/hot tub/pool on the first go 'round, still ended with "teak decks and the general layout of the vessel are not out of the ordinary, but hot tubs certainly are. Perhaps it's an upgraded dive boat?"

The audio track that accompanies the M/Y Latitude video starts out "at first glance this might not look like a yacht, but don't be fooled. She's the power lifter of the yachting world... the interior was transformed into a spacious luxury beach house." The Marine Conservation Biology Institute has been closely tied to the Pew Charitable Trusts and their various iterations since its founder and President, Eliot Norse, was a Pew fellow. Perhaps, as his staffer wrote, such vessels - sans the hot tub - are the norm for Pew connected ENGO researchers, but they're definitely not for anyone else.