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Apollonia Cruises the Hudson River to Transport Local Goods

Liz Susman Karp March 24, 2022

Photo by Malcolm Martin

An eco-friendly ship cuts costs and carbon emissions when transporting area-crafted products by using our very own superhighway—the Hudson River.

Is there a future for sail freight on the Hudson River? Sam Merrett, captain of the schooner Apollonia, thinks so. “I’ve always been drawn toward practical solutions that you can implement now,” says Merrett, referring to the current environmental crisis. Sail freight is a part of a growing sustainable transportation movement around the world. Benefits include reduced carbon emissions, less highway and road congestion, and repurposing underused waterways. Apollonia is the 64-foot-long, steel-hulled boat Merrett outfitted to offer carbon neutral, efficient, and affordable shipping to small-scale producers in the Hudson Valley. Equally important, Merrett aims to develop community, educate, and foster a positive impact. In its 2021 maiden season (May through October), Apollonia transported locally made artisan foods and shelf stable goods up and down the Hudson from Troy to Brooklyn, stopping at waterfronts including Ossining and Newburgh.



Photo by Malclm Martin

A Rensselaer County native, Merrett says it was a real eye-opening moment in 2013 when he realized he could meld his passions for the water and alternative fuels—his company modified diesel cars and trucks to burn vegetable oil and he was part of Hudson Sloop Club—after seeing a boat built by a Vermont farmer to sustainably transport his produce to market. Roughly 50 businesses, including Sing Sing Kill Brewery (Ossining), Poor Devil Pepper Company (Hudson), Hudson Valley Malt (Germantown), and Hepworth Farms (Milton) are on board. Crew members even use a bicycle and cart to transport goods sustainably to businesses located near the docks. Last fall, Spirits Lab Distilling aged a rye whiskey on the Apollonia for a year to see how the flavor was affected by the climate, temperature, humidity, and movement of the ship—it will be released this year.



Photo by Sam Merrett

Determining diesel fuel cost savings is easy, says Merrett; more difficult is calculating the benefits of fewer trucks and less congestion on roads, job creation, keeping money local, and the learning, goodwill, synergies, genuine connections, and new products produced. A CSA featuring local products—referred to as “boat boxes”—will be available this season (updated details at schoonerapollonia.com). Merrett appreciates the “amazing” history of the Hudson and “our great connection and access” to it. He sees opportunity, noting that people are re-engaging with a cleaner river. “We’re not trying to recreate the waterfront of the past,” he comments. “We’re trying to create a waterfront of the future.”
