

Superior or Salish?



Cattle Point Lighthouse across Cattle Pass, with Olympic Mountains in background.
Source: www.allsanjuanislands.com/history_museums/cattle_point_lighthouse.php

By Thomas J. Misa / Dec. 29, 2018

For in their interflowing aggregate, those grand fresh-water seas of ours,—Erie, and Ontario, and Huron, and Superior, and Michigan,—possess an ocean- like expansiveness, with many of the ocean’s noblest traits. — Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, chapter 54

It’s a Sunday mid-morning, so the Reverend Beth Eden is aloft in a small plane to her second of three Lutheran services. Over San Juan Channel she notices a lone sailboat below and wonders who it might be. Whitecaps slash the protected waters of Griffin Bay; stomach-churning rollers are to come. I’m on that sailboat with my younger son Henry, and on December 23rd we can ride tidal currents nearly 50 nautical miles clockwise around San Juan Island and back to our home port on Lopez Island. Confronting the primal forces of nature—wind, weather, water—is what attracts me to wilderness sailing. I once thought that salt-water sailing year around was essentially different somehow than fresh-water sailing during the summer months, but now I am not so sure.

I can say that nothing in four years of summer sailing on Lake Superior prepares me for the adrenaline rush of tacking upwind through Cattle Pass at a ground speed of 8.3 knots. We

are close-hauled against a 20 knot southeast wind, aiming for the gap between Goose Island and Deadman Island, and pushed by a 2 knot tidal current into the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Across the strait, the towering snow-capped Olympic Mountains sparkle in sun. Just beyond Cattle Pass we are hit by confused 5-foot rollers, the result of recurrent winter gales that have pummeled the shorelines, tossed telephone-pole-sized driftwood onto beaches, wreaked havoc on ferries plying the treacherous entrance to Admiralty Inlet, and kept small boats tied up. Our bow plunges deep, burying the anchor. Rounding buoy 3's mournful gong off Salmon Bank, with squat Cattle Point Lighthouse pivoting starboard, we ease sails downwind to the west. The Pacific Ocean beckons.

I recall that summer sailing on Lake Superior was principally about tactics. You judged the day's winds, hoped for favorable weather, and set a course for your destination. You could usually spot ominous clouds that signaled summer thunderstorms generating 30 or 40 knots of trouble. But where you went was largely in your control. I am learning that sailing on the Salish Sea requires strategy. You need favorable winds and tolerable weather of course, but the essential point is divining where winds and tidal currents allow you to go: where the forces of nature direct you. We're in luck today. The last gasp of an ebb tide flushes us south through Cattle Pass, then a flood tide coming in from the Pacific propels us north up the west side of San Juan Island through Lime Kiln State Park's well-known whale-watching grounds. We hope not to tangle with nearby Dead Man's Bay. Later, at Battleship Island, with "such a remarkable likeness to a modern battleship in its appearance, that it is locally known by no other name," we ride the end of the flood tide through dramatic Spieden Channel and back into protected waters near Friday Harbor.



Historical photo of Battleship Island by James A. McCormick. Source: [Saltwater People Historical Society](#)

The Salish Sea was named by marine biologist Bert Webber two decades ago to help make visible the natural connections of Canada's Georgia Strait, Washington's Puget Sound, and the borderlands' Strait of Juan de Fuca. Raw sewage from Victoria, B.C., to this day washes outward to the Pacific and inward to Puget Sound. Killer whale advocates in Seattle worry about Fraser River salmon swimming through Vancouver's primary-treated sewage. The Salish Sea's ecosystem of 6,900 square miles, stretching 150 miles north to south, vitally depends on both countries cleaning up their acts. Native peoples proud of the heritage of the Coast Salish embrace the Salish Sea to encourage cross-border cultural, judicial, and resource-management ties. All day on the water, we hear equal portions of US and Canadian coast guard radio advisories.

Many Pacific Northwest mariners assume that inland Lake Superior surely cannot equal the magnificent expanse of the Salish Sea. Herman Melville knew otherwise: "For in their interflowing aggregate, those grand fresh-water seas of ours,—Erie, and Ontario, and Huron, and Superior, and Michigan,—possess an ocean-like expansiveness, with many of the ocean's noblest traits."¹ Stretching 350 miles east to west, Lake Superior is actually 4.6 times larger than the Salish Sea in area and (I estimate) more than 20 times larger in volume. Placed down on the East Coast, Lake Superior would stretch from Boston to the Chesapeake Bay; on the West Coast, it's roughly Vancouver, BC, to Eugene, Oregon—all one continuous body of water. Twenty miles is a common prevailing wind fetch across the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and according to BoatSafe.com a sustained 30 knot wind over 20 miles kicks up waves of a maximum 7.2 feet. With Superior's 200 mile fetch for its prevailing northeast winds, the same 30 knots generates waves of 13.5 feet. And Superior's shallow shores means that these 13-footers become dangerous breaking waves. For our *Sunyata*, an S2 9.2A with 10 foot beam, the Salish Sea is rough but doable in these conditions whereas Lake Superior would be threatening.

If wilderness sailing is about confronting the primal forces of nature, it's clear that Lake Superior and the Salish Sea each offer plenty of challenge. All open-water crossings on Lake Superior should occasion careful planning, an eye on the charts and clock, and sharp attention to weather (see "[Whence the Magic Ladders?](#)" *GOB* Sep-Oct 2018). Any passage beyond the Salish Sea's inner-most protected waters likewise requires caution and care. Certainly we gain insight and inspiration from the classic sailing narratives of Bernard Moitessier, Eric and Susan Hiscock, Lin and Larry Pardey, Hal Roth, and the recent rough-water exploits of Skip Novak. But I think that at the moment—on the water itself—such sailing tests your muscles and fills your mind. You have no clue or concern about what sailors in San Diego or Santo Domingo might be doing. Such sailing can be therapeutic, cathartic, or just plain fun.

¹ See <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm#link2HCH0054>

Henry and I approach our home port after winter's utter darkness has descended, and we can see almost nothing of the marina's basalt breakwater. We creep along until spotting the broadside of a large white motorboat; our slip is on the far side. We arrive, tie up safely, and give a nod of respect for the forces of nature that we collaborated with today.

Thomas Misa and his sailing spouse, Ruth Fothergill, moved *Sunyata* from Lake Superior to the Salish Sea in summer 2018, and thereafter have sailed each month including February's brisk 38 degrees Fahrenheit. Website tjmisa.com