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Powered by the Sun

Solar-powered boat crosses the Atlantic

By Emma Louise Huibregtse



Sun21 crosses the Atlantic as it approaches Manhattan on May 8, 2007 in New York, at the end of its journey from Switzerland. (Photo: Dylan Cross/AFP/Getty Images/NewsCom) May 10, 2007

As the *sun21* glided along the Hudson River in New York City, it looked like a regular gas-powered boat—except for a few important details. The solar-powered catamaran made no noise and left no oily residue behind.

The boat and its crew of five docked in lower Manhattan on Tuesday after a 7,000-mile trip across the Atlantic Ocean—without using one drop of fuel. An international group of environmentalists and solar enthusiasts applauded onshore as the ship quietly cruised by. The crew then held a press conference to talk about its adventures.

“What a privilege to make such a long journey with the sun,” said Martiin Vosseler, the ship’s doctor.

Vosseler is also an internationally renowned environmentalist from Switzerland. He and the crew of *sun21* began their journey in Basel, Switzerland, with a trip down the Rhine River. The catamaran was then taken by ship to Spain, where it continued its journey along the path that Christopher Columbus took to the Caribbean Sea. *Sun21* then sailed up the eastern seaboard to New York. The entire trip took 29 days.

“I want to shout to the whole world: The sun is the energy source of the whole world!” said Michel Thonney, the boat’s skipper. “I am extremely proud to have accomplished this journey with no technological setbacks.” He ended his remarks with a big thank-you to “the sun, of course.”

The boat and crew arrived in New York to usher in the first World Clean Energy Awards. The awards will be presented in Switzerland in June. Their focus is to recognize the use of clean energy in everyday life.



Martin Vosseler of Switzerland, talks to Scholastic Kid Reporter Emma Huibregtse while in the background people inspect *sun21*, The *sun21* pulled into a harbor in New York City on May 9, 2007. (Photo by Suzanne Freeman)

“The United States is about to get back into the game of sustainable energy,” said Chris Flavin, of the World Watch Institute in Washington, D.C. Flavin, who was not a crew member, was the emcee at the press conference. He pointed out that the U.S. was a leader in renewable energy sources like solar and wind generation in the 1980s. Since then, the U.S. has fallen behind European nations in creating and utilizing technology for clean renewable energy.

Vosseler explained it this way: “If everybody on the planet lived like we do in Switzerland, we would need three planets,” he told Scholastic News Online. “If everybody in the world lived like people in the U.S., we would need five planets. So we have to reduce the energy consumption so we can live with only one planet, and that’s a big challenge. We showed how with this journey.”

Adventures like the trip of the *sun21* will help “change the nature of travel,” said James Cavanaugh, president of the Battery Park City Authority in New York City. The authority is in charge of the land where the *sun21* docked. Every building in Battery Park City has to generate at least 5 percent of its electricity from the sun.

The biggest global energy savings is likely to come when people change the way they power travel. Boats like *sun21* can help show the way, according to Alex Mathieson, President of Riverkeeper, an environmental organization that aims to find ways to clean up the Hudson River.

“We can now imagine a life where all transportation is electric and all electricity is renewable,” Mathieson said. “I can see a day when all the boats and ships on the Hudson River are powered by the sun.”