

Canada's not ready to have the World in the Arctic

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A CH-149 Cormorant flies over the flight deck of HMCS Montreal to recover a submariner casualty during a training exercise. (Corporal Robert LeBlanc)

The Globe and Mail Aug. 15 2012,

The World is the largest privately owned yacht on the planet. Flagged in the Bahamas, the 196-metre vessel is essentially a luxury condo complex, with 165 units valued at up to \$13-million each.

Later this month, the ship will transit the Northwest Passage, at no small risk to its residents – and to Canada's reputation as a competent coastal state.

The voyage will not undermine Canada's legal position that the Northwest Passage constitutes internal waters, since the World will request and receive permission before it sails through. Rather, the risk is of an accident involving more than 400 people in a remote and inhospitable region where Canada's search-and-rescue capabilities are inadequate to the task. Voyages by smaller, ice-strengthened "expedition" cruise ships have already revealed the dangers, including small chunks of icebergs called "growlers" that are exceptionally hard and float low in the water, making them difficult to spot.

In 2007, the Canadian-owned MS Explorer sank during an Antarctic voyage after striking a growler; fortunately, the sea was calm and all passengers were saved.

A second danger concerns the shallow waters of the Northwest Passage. In 1996, the German-owned MS Hanseatic went aground on a sand bar near Gjoa Haven, Nunavut. Fortunately, the weather was good and a Russian ship rescued the passengers within a week.

In 2010, the U.S.-owned MV Clipper Adventurer ran onto an underwater ledge near Kugluktuk, Nunavut. Fortunately, the weather was once again good, and the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker Amundsen was just two days sailing-distance away.

Striking bottom is made much more likely by the absence of good navigation charts. In 2010, John Falkingham told the Nunatsiaq News that inadequate charts are the "single biggest issue in the Arctic." Mr. Falkingham, who spent three decades in the Canadian Ice Service, explained that only one-tenth of Canada's Arctic waters are charted to modern standards, and that the job will – at the current rate – take three centuries to complete.

A third danger is unpredictable and extreme Arctic weather. Last summer, I sailed the Northwest Passage twice, and both times encountered gale-force winds and seven-metre swells.

Winds and waves like this are not usually a problem, but they will tear a grounded vessel apart – leaving the passengers, many of whom would be elderly, with no choice but to abandon ship.

Faced with hundreds of people adrift in storm-tossed, near-freezing Arctic seas, the Canadian Forces would deploy several Cormorant search-and-rescue helicopters from Comox, B.C., and Greenwood, N.S. But each aircraft would take more than a day to fly the 2,500 kilometres to the Northwest Passage, stopping to refuel along the way.

C-130 Hercules planes would also be sent from southern Canada, but unlike helicopters, fixed-wing aircraft cannot hoist people on board.

Worse yet, the Hercules used for search-and-rescue are nearly half-a-century old and often undeployable for maintenance reasons. Successive federal governments have promised to replace them, but no contract has yet been signed.

The Coast Guard's icebreakers are also growing old, with the Amundsen currently in dry dock with cracked engine blocks. As for the Navy, it lacks ice-capable vessels, with plans for Arctic/Offshore Patrol Vessels having just been delayed for another three years.

This hollowing-out of Canada's search-and-rescue capabilities could not happen at a worse time, because Arctic shipping is increasing at an almost exponential rate. In the century between 1906 and 2006, there were only 69 transits of the Northwest Passage. In 2010, there were 18 transits; last year, there were 22.

So far, the World is the largest passenger vessel to sail the Northwest Passage. But dozens of much larger cruise ships already visit Greenland and Norway's Svalbard Archipelago. They include the 3,780-passenger Costa Pacifica, the sister ship of the Costa Concordia, which ran onto the rocks off Italy earlier this year.

It's clear that Canada's search-and-rescue capabilities require an emergency upgrade.

Unless, that is, we're willing to stand helplessly by – as hundreds or even thousands of foreign tourists die in what we proudly insist is our Arctic.

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