

Notes from the Wharfinger

Bo Curtis, Wharfinger. 2023

Although new to the board, my membership in SISC goes back to a time when there were no fingers on C dock, A dock had fingers facing the shore, and F dock was a repurposed BC Ferries ramp. We had a fine facility then; today it's among the finest on the coast, and being wharfinger is a responsibility that gives me a mixture of pride and humility.

In my first months on the job I have found that when I take time to discuss things with club members, the help and cooperation I get from them is impressive. By offering a miniseries of notes from the wharfinger through the Crowsnest, I'm hoping to keep communication wide open. I'll kick off with something I'm sure is near and dear to all: regulations.

Written applications for moorage are accompanied by a "regulation acknowledgement" initialled by the applicant, serving the same purpose as those boxes you tick on installing software that say "I accept the terms and conditions..." but ideally with a bit more background knowledge. Here are a few of the more important regulations for members to know about:

- Not only do you need liability insurance, you need to provide proof and indicate the date of expiry. This is a requirement of the club's marina insurance, and the regulation is a matter of due diligence on the part of the Board of Directors.
- The regulations specifically empower the wharfinger to do things that would otherwise be considered tampering or trespassing. For example: unplug your power cord if you don't have a galvanic isolator; re-tie or replace (at your expense) inadequate docklines; board your boat to tie back slapping halyards.
- Dinghies are not to be stored in the water next to your boat. This is intended to avoid having dinghies sink from rainwater, coming untied and drifting loose, or obstructing vessel movement in case of emergency.
- And the big one, worth further discussion in a future installment: slip assignment is at the sole discretion of the wharfinger. Vessel length and member seniority are key factors, but not the only ones. Such things as maneuverability, draft, beam, docking characteristics, stress on dock bollards, and accessibility issues of members, are all considerations. The guiding principle is the safe and optimum use of our facility, for as many members as possible.

Club regulations are printed in the yearbook and also posted on the member resources page of the club website. They don't make entertaining bedtime reading, but they're worth a good look.

Considering Slip Assignments

Part 1, a Bit of History

For me the most satisfying part of being wharfinger is the logistic puzzle of assigning moorage. It has not always been quite so complicated; prior to the mid-nineties our marina only offered moorage alongside four long docks, and it was a matter of matching

Notes from the Wharfinger

Bo Curtis, Wharfinger. 2023

dock space with boat length. It was the responsibility of the Rear Commodore, with the help of the wharfinger and a moorage committee, to allocate space along the docks, assigned in order of date applications were received, i.e. first come, first served.

In 1994 marina space was boosted with the addition of fingers on two of the docks. This led to a distinction between fees based on LOA for “alongside” moorage and fees based on finger length. You paid a non-refundable one-month’s fee on new application or for relocation to a finger; when a spot was assigned the one-month fee was credited, but you were expected to pay for four year’s moorage in advance.

New in 1995 was the establishment of two waiting lists: the “A” list was for members seeking moorage for the first time, while the “B” list was for those seeking a more preferable spot. A member on the A list was expected to accept the first offer. If it was not what the member wanted, they went onto the B list. If a B list member turned down an offer, they were sent to the bottom of the B list. A member’s position on either list was still based on application date until 1997, when it was replaced by member seniority.

Perhaps the most significant administrative change in 1995 was the inclusion of the wharfinger on the board of directors. Responsibility for moorage was transferred from the Rear Commodore, and the decisions of the wharfinger were made final, subject only to appeal to the board.

There was less dock space then, but boats tended to be smaller as well. The 1995 regulations stipulated a size limit of 48’, and in 1996 a beam limit of 11’ (!) was set. The beam limit was primarily for slips between fingers, as exceptions were made for alongside moorage for up to 13’... what would still be considered very restrictive for today’s beamy boats.

Over the following two decades the marina grew, and today most boats are moored on fingers, with only F dock, the north side of D dock, and a short section of B having “alongside” moorage. The advantage is efficient use of our foreshore, access without having to “parallel park” along a dock, and convenient proximity to power and water. The complication, at least for the wharfinger, is that it calls for trying to match boat size and handling characteristics with slip size and location.

Considering Slip Assignments

Part 2, the Modern Marina Tetris Game

Back when all SISC moorage was alongside docks, there was some flexibility in making optimum use of the available dock space. Having a waiting list based on member seniority was practical; if you were next up on the list, you could be fairly confident that regardless of your LOA the wharfinger would soon be able to fit you in, perhaps with some minimal shuffling.

Now that most of our moorage is in slips between fingers, berth assignment is more complex, and can even seem a bit unfair. If you’re a longtime member who just bought a 40’ boat, your seniority won’t help you if the only vacancies are 30’ or 34’ slips. If the

Notes from the Wharfinger

Bo Curtis, Wharfinger. 2023

reverse is the case, and only large slips are available, it can be problematic to assign a 30' boat to a 42' slip. Not only would the moorage fee be based on the 42' slip length, but marina space as a whole would not be well utilized.

Assigning moorage is not unlike playing Tetris; each new puzzle piece has to be made to fit the existing arrangement with as little wasted space as possible, all the while keeping an eye on what's likely to be coming next. We don't always get it right, but unlike Tetris we can do a little rearranging. Since I've been wharfinger there have been no new vacancies, but with some relocation of highly cooperative and understanding members, we've been able to welcome five new members, with boats ranging from 24' to 49'.

The regulations are intentionally vague about moorage allocation, citing the complexity and granting a great deal of discretion to the wharfinger. For safety, slips with convoluted approaches are more suited to maneuverable boats with skilled skippers than to long-keeled boats with sluggish handling and novice sailors. A boat requiring 1000W 30A shore power can't be moored at a spot that only has 15A service. A fin-keeled racer with no motor and 7' draft wouldn't be happy deep inside the marina at low tide.

F and D docks offer our remaining "alongside" moorage, with the flexibility that comes with it, although members with boats on these spots have to take one for the team and relocate on the Round Saltspring Race weekend. The very flexibility that these spots offer is crucial in cramming in 100 visiting racers, something we'd be hard pressed to do without the cooperation of our F and D dock tenants.

With one of the finest marina facilities on the coast, we arguably have no "undesirable" slips, but we all have our preferences. Members often verbally tell me they'd like to move, but especially if it's been a while since you first applied for moorage, you may not know that the same application form for moorage is used for relocation. Filling out this form and leaving it in the clubhouse wharfinger box begins the process and leaves a paper trail that's less ephemeral than my memory. If your preferred slip becomes available, I will first relocate you, and then offer your newly vacated slip to a new applicant.

Finally, keep in mind that slips are assigned to members, not to boats. If you sell your boat to another member, the slip doesn't go with the sale, and that member needs to apply for moorage. Your slip is now deemed "vacant" and it could go to the new owner, but it's first made available to any member with more seniority. If you buy a different boat that still suits your slip, the slip remains assigned to you. If your new boat is significantly larger or unsuited to your slip, you obviously need to apply for relocation.

This is the part of the wharfinger's role that is most complicated, but nothing quite beats the satisfaction of offering moorage to a member who has been eagerly awaiting a spot. Another aspect of the role, that of enforcing moorage regulations, is much less pleasant, and is the subject of my next Notes from the Wharfinger.

Notes from the Wharfinger

Bo Curtis, Wharfinger. 2023

Enforcing the Regulations

The enforcement of moorage regulations, while one of the prime duties of the wharfinger, is not a part of the job that gives any great satisfaction. On the few occasions when I've had to play marina cop, so far members have been cooperative and congenial, but the potential for some hard feelings certainly is there.

As club members we have all re-tied loose docklines, retrieved flotsam, chased otters, or reported concerns to fellow members. But as wharfinger I'm finding I see things through slightly different, more critical eyes; let's take a little dockwalk and I'll tell you what I might see.

Heading down the ramp, a glance at the dinghy racks reveals a few boats unsecured (regulation 5.3) or possibly filled with water. Whose boats are they? Well, they're not all identified (regulation 5.2.1) so in order to contact the owner I need to consult the database, and hope the dinghy is actually in its assigned spot.

Looking along the dock I might see a few anchors or pulpits hanging over the docks, or some outboard motors protruding into the channel (regulation 4.9). As I write this there's an unidentified, inverted, unsecured inflatable sitting out on F dock, in the way of foot or wheelbarrow traffic.

I don't have to walk far before I find evidence that the purpose of spring lines is unclear to some members. Spring lines serve as an old-school aid to docking maneuvers without bow thrusters, but once moored a boat relies on its spring lines to prevent fore and aft movement. A two-foot long "spring line" led abeam from a midship cleat to the dock rail serves only to stress the rail... and the cleat... when the boat rolls.

There are also a few boats whose breast and spring lines are the same piece of rope. I've noticed a boat with a line from the bow cleat to a few turns or clove hitches on the rail, back to the midship cleat (or worse, a lifeline stanchion), back to a few more hitches on the dock, and finally back to the stern cleat. I challenge the skipper to cast off that line quickly in an emergency (regulations 4.2 and 4.5).

Although a great deal has gone into upgrading our marina shore power, nothing changes the fundamental fact that water and electricity don't play well together. Even when equipped with galvanic isolators (regulation 5.11.6e) and marine-grade fittings (regulations 5.11.6 a-d) a lot of trouble can arise if plugs aren't twisted home in their bayonet fittings, or (worst case) dangling live ends into the water.

So as I stroll back to the ramp, perhaps in step with the rhythmic beat of the slapping halyard symphony (regulation 4.6), I have to remind myself that it's easy to find fault if you look for it. We have over 140 boats secured in our marina, and most of them comply fully with regulations, primarily because the regulations come from club members themselves, looking after each other.

I invite you all to cast an enforcer's critical eye on your boats and those of fellow members, and if anything isn't quite right, to make it right. That way I can put more focus on the aspects of being wharfinger that are truly satisfying.