

THE BOAT DOCTOR

Soda With POP

Clean your hull with a miracle pollution solution—baking soda.

WE MOORED OUR ROBALO R260 PROJECT BOAT in saltwater for an entire season. When we hauled the boat, we noticed marine growth had taken up residence on unprotected spots on the hull. Nasty. And the typical cleaning method is a labor-intensive job involving noxious chemicals. Nasty times two. So we decided to try a new technique called soda blasting.

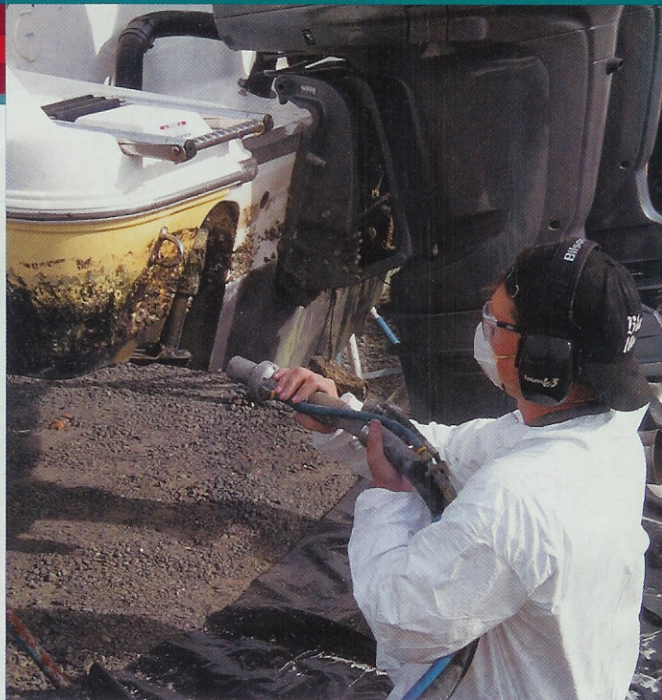
Soda blasting, developed by SodaBlast Systems (800/727-5707, www.sodablastboats.com), uses a pressurized machine, properly known as the SB200 Mobile Sodablaster, to blast your boat's hull with concentrations of sodium bicarbonate—baking soda. Yep, the stuff you use to deodorize your fridge can eliminate the crud from your boat. Does it work? We brought in All Island Soda Blasting (631/727-3354; check with SodaBlast for a contractor near you) to give our boat the business.

First, we had to put our boat on blocks, raising it at least two cinder blocks high at the keel. Leaving it on the trailer doesn't allow proper access to the bottom. Then we stood back and watched our contractor don a Tyvek suit and earplugs, fire up the SB200, and blast off a section of growth on our transom in a matter of minutes.

Soda blasting is similar to sandblasting, only much less abrasive, so it doesn't harm your boat's gel coat. It works because the baking soda crystals are sharp yet soft enough to explode and create shrapnel on impact—kind of like a microscopic hand grenade. As the shrapnel ricochets off your hull, it cuts through the material you're trying to remove. The soda blast is biodegradable and nontoxic, so it won't harm you or the surrounding environment. The process is messy, though, and depending on what you're blasting off, the Tyvek suit is still important.

Soda blasting is also relatively fast. Cleaning a 26' boat like our Robalo takes about two hours compared with the day-or-two timetable of traditional cleaning. How does the cost compare? To have the R260 detailed, pressure washed, and treated with a muriatic acid cleaner such as On-Off by MaryKate would cost about \$700, which is about what All Island would charge (SodaBlast typically charges on a sliding scale—\$30 per foot for a 30' boat, \$40 for a 40' boat, and so on).

PRACTICAL BOATER



Soda blasting wasn't 100 percent effective in removing barnacles, so if they colonize your hull, you're still going to have to shell out the \$30 for a bottle of On-Off to fully remove them.

Soda blasting also works to strip bottom paint. If you use ablative paint, the blasting machine can be set to a lower level so it strips off only the surface layer. But that paint is toxic, so you must follow the same environmental guidelines you'd use with traditional stripping methods. —PETE MCDONALD

CLEAN AND GREEN

THINK ALL OF THOSE SUDSY DETERGENTS YOU'VE BEEN USING FOR years to clean your boat can't be that bad for the environment? Think again. Although boat cleaning may seem a small contributor to overall environmental degradation, the effects stack up. If you think of 200 boats in your marina being cleaned after every trip, that's a lot of chemicals in your local waters.

What cleansing agent poses the biggest problems? Bleach. Although it's great at making a stained deck white again, it also works wonders at killing cells—it can sterilize an ecosystem. Check your soaps' labels for bleach, chlorine, or sodium hypochlorite, and if you can't wean yourself of it, water it down so you use less, or switch to less powerful borax or hydrogen peroxide. Here are some ecofriendly cleaning alternatives.

- White vinegar removes mold and can be used as a mild deodorizer. Also use it to get rid of hard-water buildup.
- Baking soda is a great scouring agent. Put it on a sponge to clean stainless steel, or combine it with salt to scrub your fiberglass decks.
- Shine metal by rubbing it with a lemon peel, then rinsing.
- Combine cream of tartar with hot water to clean aluminum. Or you can buff it with the shiny side of aluminum foil.
- White vinegar and hot water works on glass and as a mild cleanser for fiberglass.
- Scrubbing with cola and salt will remove rust stains.
- One quart of warm water, one teaspoon liquid soap, one teaspoon borax, and one teaspoon vinegar in a spray bottle works as an all-purpose cleanser. —JON MEADE