Old Salts

English is the world's Esperanto. The Internet has rapidly finished what America's supremacy in other areas of popular culture began. The language of an idea's creators naturally dominates. Whether you like it or not, Americans invented 21st Century culture and if you want to be a part of 21st Century life you must speak English. The French may complain, but 'c'est la vie'.

Croatians are beginning to look at the encroachment of English into their daily lexicon with a similar Gaelic dirty frown. Words such as 'vikend' or 'telefonirati' continue to prevail in conversation regardless of attempts by linguistic nationalists to 'correct' people. Unfortunately, Croatia's 4 million citizens will find it difficult to resist this cultural invasion – how can they if over a billion Chinese cannot?

But Croatia has not always been the assaulted culture. Croatians, or more particularly Dalmatians, through technologies and techniques that they developed, are one of the maritime peoples that greatly affected the current relationship between man and the sea, and therefore their words entered the parlance of the maritime world.

Dubrovcani, the inhabitants of the Dubrovnik Republic, relied on maritime trade to survive and to prosper, and thus were its world leaders for centuries. They wrote one of Europe's oldest maritime insurance contracts in 1395 and in 1562 produced the *Ordo Super Assecuratoribus*, the world's first maritime insurance legislation to regulate these insurance contracts. A bastardized form of Ragusa, the Latin name for Dubrovnik, *argosy* was used in England during Shakespearian times as a general term for large merchant vessels.

More profound was Dalmatians impact on commercial fishing. Escaping the poverty during the 1920's precipitated by phylloxera's destruction of their island vineyards to America, Dalmatians there revolutionized the harvesting of fish. Jakov Kuljuš and Ivan Dellaitti produced the first acetylene lamps for night fishing; Petar Dragić, the purse seine net, the precursor of today's monster nets; Mario Puratić, the power block, essential equipment on any fishing boat; Ante Nižetić nylon nets, to replace those made with cotton; John Resić, the spray system to freeze fish. They also revolutionized fish processing with Martin Bogdanović building the world's largest tuna cannery, Star Kist and Nikola Bezmalinović, the first American floating fish factories. Paul Martinis was proclaimed the king of Alaskan salmon fishing by President Eisenhower.

From Alaska to Chile, Dalmatians ruled the boats and words from their native tongue drifted across into the language of the fleets.

It's now a paradox that the fishing industry of their home waters, the Adriatic Sea, is being destroyed by many of the same techniques for which the Dalmatians themselves were responsible. It is a further paradox that the boats and other traditions that disappeared because of industrial scale fishing will be what in the end saves Dalmatian island communities.

The arrival of steel-hulled diesel–powered vessels superseded the old *gajetas*, *leuts*, *trabakuls*, *bracereas* and *batanas* that had been used for centuries on various parts of the Croatian coast. The wooden boats were not replaced as they decayed and, as a result, over the last 60 years the ability to construct these boats has died with the old men who were last trained to build them. One yearly festival has also hastened this process.

In a throwback to pagan times, each Saint Nicholas' Day, December 6th, a wooden boat is sacrificed to the flames in the town of Komiža, on Vis Island. A unique boat had evolved in Komiža; the *gajeta falkuša*. Suddenly within the last 20 years it dawned on the locals that they had sent their maritime heritage up in smoke. This, coupled with the death of fishing as a source of continual income, has seen the community cast adrift from their past and not sure of their future. But they only have to look abroad to other maritime communities to see how they adapted.

Another boat, the kayak, has been able to find its place in the new world; why can't a boat such as the falkuša and a town like Komiža find their own niche markets?

The word *kayak*, or *qajaq*, entered into the English language from the Inuit – the aboriginals of the Arctic. It means hunter's or man's boat. Similar to a falkušas, a kayak is a refined answer to a complex problem. Amazingly though both isolated, the Komižans and the Inuit were able to arrive at their designs, which incorporate complex hydrostatic and hydrodynamic analysis, with out the aid of computers.

The task of catching large amounts of sardines on a distant rock gave the falkuša its distinct design, while the kayak was built to hunt large mammals, i.e. caribou, seals, walruses and whales, in frigid waters.

The falkuša is actually two boats in one. Because the fishing grounds of the Komižans were across 45 miles of open sea, they required a boat with a high freeboard to stop seas from entering. But retrieving sardine nets over a high freeboard is difficult, so the Komižans invented a system that allows them to remove the falkuša's sides. The Inuit needed a boat that was stable in the difficult water conditions of the Artic Circle; a boat that was fast to allow the hunters to chase their prey, silent to allow those hunters to approach their prey, maneuverable within the icepacks and rocky coastlines and watertight as the water temperature was freezing. The Inuit had to achieve all of this in a boat constructed with the limited available materials of driftwood, bone and seal skin and intestines.

Komižans were also reliant on local materials, Dalmatian pine and oak, for their boats.

The origins of both boats are lost. It is thought that Komižans borrowed the essence of the falkuša from Vis Island's ancient Greek colonists, meaning that the fundamentals of the boat's design are over 2 000 years old. Because kayaks are made from organic materials it is difficult to find archaeological evidence of them but it is believed that similar single person hunting craft were used over 4 000 years old.

Along with the boats, the Komižans and the Inuit needed to develop techniques to complement the craft. Komižans became not only expert sailors, being able to handle their boats in any weather conditions utilizing over 100 square meters of sail area on their 9 meter long boats, but they also became powerful oarsmen using the five long oars to outrun even the large Turkish and Venetian war galleys. The Inuit developed an extremely efficient system for powering their craft – the double bladed paddle. With this they became incredibly adept, being able to roll and brace, which allowed them to hunt without fear of drowning in even the most violent of storms. They also learnt that, in an emergency, two kayaks on the open ocean made the perfect raft.

Other knowledge was passed on within both communities via the oral tradition. They learnt the best locations and times of the year to fish or hunt different species and, most importantly for those surviving on the sea, they learnt to predict the weather in pre-satellite times.

Beginning in the early-20th Century, the modern world bombarded the Inuit with modern technologies such motor boats, snow mobiles and permanent housing. They discovered an easier life with all these 'mod-cons', which meant certain skills unfortunately died, including how to make and handle their kayaks. But, on the other hand, this globalization also saved kayaks by introducing them to the rest of the world. For Americans and Europeans, kayaks proved an excellent way to approach the sea on a personal recreational level – a relief from their late-20th Century anxiety. Today kayaks have been adapted and are everywhere, on every form of water – placid lakes, wild rivers and stormy seas. Kayaks have been paddled single-handed from California to Hawaii, across the Atlantic Ocean and recently an attempt was begun to cross the Tasman Sea from Australia to New Zealand. They have conquered the most dangerous rivers in North America, South America, Africa, Europe and Asia. Kayaks and kayakers are found from the extreme north of the planet on the frigid Arctic Sea to the frozen coast of the Antarctic on the very south.

The falkuša will never have the impact the kayak has had on the world's watery relationships but Komižans can also look at other examples of how to move forward using the past. Polynesian outrigger canoes are now made in fiberglass and raced all over the world, as are Chinese dragon boats; one of Venice's main events each year is the Regatta Storica with its gondola races; tall ships meet in Brest, France, every 4 years; Caribbean whaling boats have a race weekend on Bequia Island each Easter; and traditional boat building classes are very popular in the United Kingdom and United States.

The West's search for a sense of 'reality' is what Dalmatians need to tap into. Just as kayaks brought people back to the water, authentic low-impact cultural tourism on Dalmatian Islands is the future. More appropriately than B-class hotels, poorly built apartment blocks or gullets from Turkey, the old Dalmatian boats will reinvent life in their home ports.