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Propulsion Systems and Marine Powertrains

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

Selecting and integrating the right propulsion system is one of the most consequential decisions in ship design and refit. It determines how efficiently a vessel converts fuel or stored energy into useful thrust, how quietly it transits sensitive waters, how reliably it completes missions, and how economically it operates over decades. This book provides a practical, engineering-focused path through that decision space, connecting hydrodynamics, machinery, power electronics, controls, and regulation to help researchers and designers choose optimal solutions for every vessel class.

We begin with fundamentals—how hull form, propulsor loading, and wake characteristics set the stage for efficiency and cavitation performance. From there, we examine propulsor options ranging from conventional fixed-pitch propellers to controllable pitch, ducted, azimuthing, podded, and waterjet configurations. Each choice carries implications for maneuverability, noise, maintainability, and integration with the prime mover. Throughout, we emphasize measurable performance, using thrust curves, propulsive coefficients, and off-design behavior to compare alternatives on equal footing.

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Prime mover technologies are evaluated with the same rigor. Diesel engines remain the backbone of commercial shipping; we treat their thermodynamics, rating philosophies, and fuel flexibility alongside maintenance and emissions strategies. Gas turbines are considered where power density and response dominate. Electric propulsion architectures—AC, DC, and variable-frequency—are presented as enablers for hybridization and precise power management. Fuel cells and hydrogen pathways are assessed for niche and emerging applications, with attention to auxiliary systems, safety, and operational profiles. Energy storage receives a dedicated treatment—from batteries and supercapacitors to hybrid energy management—focusing on cycle life, C-rate constraints, thermal management, and class rules.

Integration is often where projects succeed or fail. We provide step-by-step guidance on gear and shaft line design, bearing and seal selection, and alignment methods, then delve into torsional and lateral vibration control, cavitation-induced noise, and radiated energy limits. Practical methods—field alignment, strain-gauged coupling checks, and resonance avoidance—are paired with modern tools such as digital twins and automated modal testing. Power electronics, distribution, and protection are treated as first-class design domains, because the best machinery cannot deliver if power quality, harmonics, or protection schemes are mis-specified.

Regulatory compliance and emissions performance now shape nearly every propulsion decision. We integrate international and regional requirements with engineering

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responses: fuel selection, aftertreatment (SCR, EGR, particulate filtration), engine tuning, and operational strategies. The book shows how to quantify compliance impacts on space, weight, cost, and energy efficiency indices, and how to plan upgrade paths as limits tighten over a vessel’s life. Noise and vibration criteria, port-state requirements, and class notations are translated into design requirements that can be verified at dock and at sea.

Because projects live or die by economics, we include lifecycle cost modeling that is transparent and actionable. Readers will learn to combine CAPEX, OPEX, maintenance burden, residual value, and risk into scenarios that reflect real fuel price volatility, carbon costs, and utilization variability. Multi-objective optimization methods illuminate trade-offs among efficiency, redundancy, environmental footprint, and maneuvering performance. Checklists and decision matrices help teams converge on robust, defensible configurations rather than “best on paper” concepts.

Finally, we recognize that vessels differ—by mission, sea state, speed regime, and operating theater. The text concludes with case studies spanning tankers, ferries, offshore units, naval craft, and yachts, highlighting how the same principles lead to different answers when constraints shift. Whether your task is a newbuild design, a conversion, or a targeted upgrade, this book equips you to navigate the technical, regulatory, and economic landscape of modern marine powertrains and to deliver propulsion systems that are efficient, compliant, quiet, and dependable.

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CHAPTER ONE: Marine Propulsion Fundamentals: Power, Thrust, and Efficiency

At its core, marine propulsion is about moving a vessel through water. This seemingly simple task is governed by a complex interplay of forces and efficiencies, rooted in fundamental physics and engineering principles. Understanding these basics is crucial before delving into the specifics of engines, shafts, and propulsors. We must first grasp how force is generated to overcome resistance, how that force relates to the power delivered by the machinery, and how efficiently this conversion takes place. This chapter lays the groundwork by exploring the fundamental concepts of thrust, power, resistance, and the various measures of efficiency that define a propulsion system's performance.

The primary objective of any propulsion system is to generate sufficient thrust to overcome the total resistance the vessel experiences at a desired speed. Vessel resistance is a multifaceted phenomenon, primarily comprising frictional resistance, pressure (or form) resistance, and wave-making resistance. Frictional resistance arises from the viscosity of water shearing along the wetted surface of the hull. Pressure resistance is caused by the flow of water around the hull, creating pressure differences that lead to drag. Wave-making resistance is a consequence of the energy lost in generating surface waves as the hull moves through the water. At higher speeds, wave-making resistance becomes a dominant factor.

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Thrust, the forward force generated by the propulsor, must not only equal but exceed the total resistance to achieve acceleration or maintain speed. This thrust is typically produced by accelerating a mass of water in the opposite direction of travel. For a propeller, this means pushing water backward. The magnitude of the thrust depends on the momentum imparted to this water mass and the rate at which it is discharged. A fundamental principle here is Newton's Third Law: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. The action of pushing water backward results in the reaction force of thrust pushing the vessel forward.

Power is the rate at which work is done, or the rate at which energy is transferred. In marine propulsion, we are concerned with several types of power. Shaft power is the mechanical power delivered by the engine or motor to the propeller shaft. This is the input power to the shafting and propulsor system. Effective power, on the other hand, is the actual power required to overcome the vessel's resistance at a given speed. It represents the useful work done on the water to move the ship. The difference between shaft power and effective power is accounted for by the various efficiencies within the propulsion train.

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The relationship between thrust, speed, and power is central to propulsion system design. Thrust (T) is often expressed in units of force, such as Newtons (N) or pounds-force (lbf). Vessel speed (V) is measured in knots or meters per second. The effective power (Pe) required to propel the vessel is the product of thrust and speed, provided they are in consistent units: Pe = T × V. If thrust is in Newtons and speed in meters per second, effective power will be in Watts. This equation highlights a crucial point: to achieve higher speeds, either thrust must be increased significantly (which implies overcoming greater resistance) or the efficiency of the system must be improved.

Shaft power (Ps) is the power delivered to the propulsor. The efficiency of the propulsor itself, and the entire shafting system, determines how much of this shaft power is converted into effective power. A key metric here is the propulsive efficiency, which encompasses several sub-efficiencies. The overall propulsive efficiency is a measure of how effectively the shaft power is transformed into useful thrust power. Minimizing losses within this chain is paramount for fuel economy and environmental performance.

The wake fraction (w) is a critical factor in propeller performance behind a hull. As the hull moves through the water, it creates a disturbed flow field, known as the wake, that surrounds the propeller. The water approaching the propeller is moving more slowly than the ship's speed through the undisturbed water. The wake fraction quantifies this reduction in speed. A higher wake fraction means the propeller is operating in a slower-moving fluid, which affects the thrust it generates and the power it requires.

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Thrust deduction (t) is another important factor, unique to propellers operating behind a hull. It represents the increase in the resistance of the hull due to the action of the propeller. Essentially, the suction created by the propeller draws the hull's streamlines closer together, increasing the pressure drag on the hull. Thrust deduction is usually expressed as a fraction of the propeller's thrust. The effective thrust, which is the force that actually propels the ship, is the difference between the propeller thrust and the thrust deduction.

With these concepts in mind, we can define the quasi-propulsive coefficient (QPC). This is the product of hull efficiency (ηH), propeller open-water efficiency (ηO), and the relative rotative efficiency (ηR). Hull efficiency accounts for the benefits of the wake, relating the effective power to the thrust power developed by the propeller in its operational wake. Propeller open-water efficiency is the efficiency of the propeller operating in open water, without the influence of the hull. Relative rotative efficiency accounts for the variations in propeller efficiency due to non-uniform wake fields.

The relationship between these efficiencies and the overall propulsive efficiency can be expressed mathematically. The effective power (Pe) is related to the thrust (T) and

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the ship speed (V) as Pe = T × V × (1 - t). The thrust power (Pt) developed by the propeller is related to the shaft power (Ps) by Pt = Ps × ηO × ηR. The hull efficiency is defined as ηH = Pe / Pt = (T × V × (1 - t)) / (Ps × ηO × ηR). Therefore, the quasi-propulsive coefficient (QPC) is ηD = ηH × ηO × ηR = Pe / Ps. This equation is fundamental: it shows that the overall propulsive efficiency is the ratio of the power delivered to the water to propel the ship to the power delivered to the propeller shaft.

Understanding the components of resistance is vital for predicting the power requirements of a vessel. Frictional resistance is proportional to the wetted surface area and the square of the speed, with a friction coefficient that depends on the Reynolds number and the hull's surface condition. Pressure resistance is strongly influenced by the hull's shape, particularly its fullness and the smoothness of its form. Wave-making resistance, often the largest component at higher speeds, is highly dependent on the Froude number, which is a dimensionless ratio of the vessel's speed to the square root of its length.

The Froude number (Fn) is a dimensionless parameter that is crucial in scaling model test results to full-size vessels and in understanding the behavior of hulls at different speeds. It is defined as Fn = V / √(gLWL), where V is the speed of the vessel, g is the acceleration due to gravity, and LWL is the length of the waterline. At low Froude numbers (Fn

The power required to overcome resistance is proportional to the cube of the speed, assuming constant resistance coefficients. This relationship, often referred to as the "power-speed law," implies that doubling the speed would require approximately eight times the power if resistance characteristics remained unchanged. However, hull forms are often optimized for specific speed ranges, and resistance coefficients change with speed, so this cubic relationship is a simplification, albeit a useful one for conceptual understanding.

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Thrust is generated by imparting momentum to the surrounding fluid. The thrust produced by a propeller is related to the propeller's diameter, its rotational speed, and the properties of the fluid. For a given propeller design, thrust increases with the square of the rotational speed and with the density of the fluid. Conversely, to produce a given thrust, a larger diameter propeller operating at a lower speed is generally more efficient than a smaller diameter propeller at a higher speed, especially in open water conditions.

The concept of "effective thrust" is important because the propeller does not operate in isolation. As mentioned, the wake behind the hull reduces the inflow velocity to the propeller, and the propeller's action increases the effective resistance of the hull (thrust deduction). Therefore, the actual propulsive force experienced by the vessel is less than the gross thrust generated by the propeller. This distinction is critical when comparing the performance of different propulsor types or hull forms.

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The power required at the propeller shaft, known as shaft power (Ps), is the product of the effective power (Pe) and the inverse of the propulsive efficiency (ηD). Ps = Pe / ηD. This equation underscores the importance of maximizing propulsive efficiency to minimize the power that the engines must deliver. A higher propulsive efficiency means less fuel is consumed for a given speed, leading to lower operating costs and reduced emissions.

The propulsive efficiency (ηD) is not a single number but a combination of several factors. Hull efficiency (ηH) captures how well the hull form delivers a favorable wake to the propeller and how the propeller's action affects hull resistance. Propeller open-water efficiency (ηO) is a measure of the propeller's intrinsic performance in moving water, independent of the hull. Relative rotative efficiency (ηR) accounts for losses incurred when the propeller operates in a non-uniform wake, which is typical behind a ship's hull.

Cavitation is a phenomenon that can severely limit propulsor performance and cause damage. It occurs when the pressure on the propeller blades drops below the vapor pressure of the water, causing vapor bubbles to form. When these bubbles collapse, they create localized shock waves that can erode the propeller material. Cavitation also increases drag and reduces thrust, thereby decreasing efficiency. Understanding the conditions under which cavitation occurs, related to propeller blade loading and water speed, is crucial for propulsor selection and design.

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The concept of propeller loading is directly related to the thrust and torque required from the propeller. High propeller loading implies that the propeller is working hard, generating significant thrust and torque. This can lead to increased risk of cavitation, higher vibration levels, and reduced efficiency if the propeller is not optimally designed for that loading condition. Propeller designers often use parameters like the advance coefficient and thrust coefficient to characterize propeller performance at different loading conditions.

The advance coefficient (J) is a dimensionless parameter used to describe the operating condition of a propeller. It is defined as J = Va / (nD), where Va is the speed of advance of the propeller (effectively the ship speed adjusted for wake), n is the rotational speed of the propeller, and D is the propeller diameter. Different propeller designs have optimal operating points at specific advance coefficients, and performance varies significantly as J deviates from this optimum.

Rotational speed (n) is a key design parameter for propellers, directly influencing the thrust and torque produced. Higher rotational speeds generally lead to smaller, lighter, and less expensive propellers and shafting systems for a given power. However, higher speeds also increase the risk of cavitation and can lead to lower propulsive efficiency if the propeller is not designed to operate efficiently at that speed. This often leads to a trade-off between machinery size/cost and propulsive efficiency.

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The relationship between shaft power (Ps), torque (Q), and rotational speed (n) is given by Ps = Q × ω, where ω is the angular velocity (ω = 2πn). Torque is the rotational equivalent of force. For a given shaft power, a higher rotational speed will result in lower torque, and vice versa. This relationship is fundamental when selecting gearboxes and shafting, as torque limitations are often a critical design consideration.

The power required to overcome resistance is not constant but varies significantly with speed. This variability dictates the power and torque requirements of the propulsion machinery. For vessels that operate over a wide range of speeds, the propulsion system must be capable of efficiently delivering power across this spectrum, which often necessitates variable-speed machinery or sophisticated control systems.

The concept of “effective horsepower” (eHP) is often used in naval architecture to represent the power required to overcome the vessel's resistance at a given speed. It is essentially the effective power expressed in horsepower. This is distinct from “delivered horsepower” (dHP), which is the shaft power delivered to the propeller, and “indicated horsepower” (iHP), which is the power generated within the engine cylinders before mechanical losses.

The difference between eHP and dHP is accounted for by the various efficiencies of the propulsion system: propeller efficiency, shaft efficiency, etc. The difference between dHP and iHP is accounted for by the mechanical efficiency of the engine and gearbox. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for accurate power calculations and for evaluating the performance of individual components within the powertrain.

The efficiency of the entire propulsion train, from the prime mover to the propeller, is a product of the efficiencies of its individual components. This chain of efficiencies means that even small losses in each stage can accumulate to a significant overall reduction in performance. For example, a system with an engine efficiency of 90%, a gearbox efficiency of 95%, a shaft efficiency of 98%, and a propulsive efficiency of 70% would have an overall efficiency of 0.90 × 0.95 × 0.98 × 0.70 ≈ 0.59, or 59%.

Therefore, optimizing the overall propulsive efficiency involves scrutinizing every link in the chain. This includes not only the propeller design and hull form but also the mechanical efficiency of the shafting, the gear reduction, and the prime mover itself. Each element presents opportunities for improvement, and the choice of technology for each component will influence the overall system performance and its operational characteristics.

The selection of a propulsor type is intrinsically linked to the vessel's operating profile, speed requirements, and hull form. For instance, slow-speed vessels might favor large-diameter, low-speed propellers, while high-speed craft might benefit from waterjets or surface-piercing propellers. Maneuverability requirements also play a significant role, favoring azimuthing thrusters or podded propulsors for vessels requiring exceptional

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agility, such as tugs or offshore support vessels.

The concept of bollard pull is a specific measure of thrust, typically used for vessels like tugs and icebreakers. It represents the maximum static thrust the vessel can generate when it is stationary. This is a critical performance metric for these types of vessels, directly indicating their ability to tow or break ice. Bollard pull is measured using a dynamometer to record the tension in the towline when the vessel is operating at full power without moving.

The relationship between bollard pull and engine power is not linear. While more power generally leads to more bollard pull, the efficiency of the propulsor at zero speed (or very low speeds) is a key factor. Propellers designed for high bollard pull may not be as efficient at higher vessel speeds, and vice versa, leading to a design trade-off based on the vessel's primary mission.

In summary, the fundamental principles of marine propulsion revolve around generating sufficient thrust to overcome resistance, efficiently converting prime mover power into thrust, and understanding the complex interactions between the hull and the propulsor. Concepts like wake fraction, thrust deduction, Froude number, and various efficiencies form the bedrock upon which all propulsion system designs are built. A thorough understanding of these foundational elements is essential for making informed decisions about the selection and integration of engines, shafts, and propulsors for any marine application.

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