Why Rotating Disc Arrays Produce Massive Thrust Compared to Traditional Paddle Wheels

Electric Ship | Walking Barge | Sealift

[TEL] +1-608-238-6001

[Email] greg@electricship.com

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Discover why a rotating disc array system can theoretically produce vastly more thrust than a simple flat paddle wheel, and the fluid dynamics principles that explain this performance boost.

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A 240-disc rotating array powered by a 10 HP motor produces hundreds of thousands of pounds of thrust—far exceeding that of traditional paddle wheels. Why is it so much more powerful? Here's the fluid dynamics explanation.

In the search for highly efficient propulsion systems for watercraft, particularly multi-hull vessels, the comparison between traditional paddle wheels and rotating disc arrays reveals dramatic performance differences. A theoretical analysis of a 240-disc array shows that it can produce over 670,000 pounds of thrust, vastly outperforming a flat blade paddle system using the same motor power. What causes such a leap in theoretical performance? The answer lies in surface area, velocity scaling, and hydrodynamic principles.

1. Surface Area Is Everything

Thrust is primarily generated by displacing water, and the more surface area that contacts the water, the greater the displacement force. A typical paddle wheel might have 9 flat blades, each with around 3 square feet of submerged area. In contrast, a disc array composed of 240 large discs (6 feet in diameter, spaced 0.2 inches apart across 4 feet of width) yields a total frontal area of over 6,700 square feet.

This is more than 250 times the surface area of the paddle wheel, and it directly contributes to a proportional increase in force generation.

2. Thrust Grows Exponentially with Velocity

The drag force equation illustrates a key point:

$$
F = \frac{1}{2} \cdot \rho \cdot C_d \cdot A \cdot v^2
$$

Thrust increases not linearly, but with the square of the velocity at the rim of the disc. Even at 30 RPM, the 6-foot diameter discs have an edge speed of over 9.4 ft/sec. As velocity doubles, thrust quadruples. In the disc system, both high velocity and high surface area combine to multiply thrust output dramatically.

3. Continuous Water Contact Increases Net Force

A paddle wheel blade only generates thrust for a limited portion of its rotation. The rest of the cycle includes blade entry and exit phases, which contribute little or no thrust—and often create energy-wasting splashes. In contrast, a disc array maintains continuous water contact across the full 360 degrees of rotation.

This consistency allows the disc system to convert nearly all rotational motion into forward thrust, further increasing net performance.

4. Optimized Water Entry Reduces Losses

Flat paddle blades often strike water at inefficient angles, causing turbulence, splashing, and drag losses. Rotating discs, by contrast, enter and move through the water uniformly, reducing waste and increasing the proportion of mechanical energy that is converted into forward movement.

5. Hydrodynamic Enclosure Effects