

# DNR Warns Boaters' Fun Goes Hand-in-Hand With Responsibility, Safety

Michigan is truly a boating paradise. With four of the five Great Lakes touching our shores and more than 11,000 inland lakes, it's no surprise that Michigan is one of the top states for boat ownership and activity.

As summer begins, boaters are preparing to take to the water. High gas prices may mean that some boaters will be out less this year, yet marine safety officials with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) are preparing for another active boating season.

Boating accidents in 2005 totaled 178, with 29 fatalities. Of the total boating accidents in 2005, 49 accidents involved personal watercraft, sometimes known as jet skis. Personal watercraft were involved in four boating fatalities last year as well. In 2005, accidents and fatalities were up slightly over 2004 statistics. In 2004, the state recorded 168 accidents resulting in 86 injuries and 27 deaths.

"Boating is a remarkably safe sport when you consider the number of people who do it and the number of watercraft out there," said Lt. Creig Grey, marine safety and education supervisor for the DNR Law Enforcement Division. "It's remarkable we don't see more accidents than we do."

Still, Lt. Grey said, the accident data clearly shows that unsafe boating practices account for the majority of the injuries and deaths, most of which could have been avoided.

"Most people tend to think of boating purely in terms of fun. That's good. If done right and correctly, it should be fun," Lt. Grey said. "But water enthusiasts also must realize



During a boat inspection Conservation Officer Damon Owens instructs one of the two persons on this boat to hold up the life jackets on board. State law requires every boat to have one life-saving device on board for every occupant of the boat. (DNR photographs by David Kenyon)

that safe, responsible, courteous boating is everyone's responsibility."

According to a 2005 report, Michigan ranked 10th nationally for boating accidents while ranking second for the number of registered watercraft. Florida ranked first in both categories.

According to the DNR, Michigan waters are safer than they used to be. In 1970, there were 435,000 registered boats in Michigan and 79 fatalities resulting from 66 accidents. In 2004, there were 950,000 boats registered and 27 fatalities from 26 accidents.

About 75 percent of Michigan boating accidents occur during June, July and August, when boating is in

high gear around the state. More than half of all accidents occur on a Saturday or a Sunday, and a vast majority occur in the afternoon or later.

Surprisingly, only a fourth of the accidents occurred on the Great Lakes. Most occurred on the state's inland lakes.

"When you put boats, personal watercraft, skiers, and swimmers all together on a crowded lake, there's a greater need for everyone to play it safely and use caution," said Lt. Grey.

The DNR credits the increased visibility of marine patrols by conservation officers and sheriff's deputies, especially on inland lakes that historically have had the most serious problems, and Lt. Grey also believes safety education and training is the key to reducing boating accidents.

"Boating safety classes are a lot like driver's education classes," Lt. Grey said. "Both teach you the rules of the road."

More than 200,000 students have been trained in boater safety education over the past five years, he said.

Boater education is available through your local sheriff's depart-

ment, the Coast Guard Auxiliary, U.S. Power Squadron, local boat dealers and others. Boating safety classes are posted on the DNR Web site at [www.michigan.gov/dnr](http://www.michigan.gov/dnr); click on the Recreational Safety Classes link found on the right side of the home page.

For safe and enjoyable boating, the DNR urges all water sport enthusiast to observe these safety guidelines:

- Wear a life jacket: 70 percent of boating fatalities involve drowning, and of those who drowned, 86 percent were not wearing a life jacket.

- Make sure your boat is properly equipped and your equipment is in good working order: In addition to all legally required equipment, such as life jackets and fire extinguishers, always carry a first aid kit, nautical charts, and an anchor. Make sure your navigation lights are working properly.

- Avoid alcohol: Nearly 50 percent of all boating accidents involve alcohol. Studies show that passengers also are 10 times more likely to fall overboard when they have been consuming alcohol.

- File a float plan: Always let a family member or friend on shore



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know the "who, what, when, and where" of your trip. Include phone numbers for the local sheriff or U.S. Coast Guard in the event you don't return when expected.

- Maintain a sharp lookout: Always be alert for other boats, swimmers or skiers, and objects in the water. This is especially important when operating in crowded

waterways, and at night or during conditions of restricted visibility.

- Carry a marine radio or cell phone. Be prepared to call for help in case you are involved in an accident, your boat becomes disabled, or you otherwise need assistance. Make sure a cell phone is fully charged, but be aware there often are gaps in phone coverage on the water.



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## Alcohol Is Major Factor in Boating Fatalities in State

Alcohol was involved in 51 percent of all boating fatalities in Michigan in 2004, according to the U.S. Coast Guard. By comparison, alcohol was a factor in 37 percent of Michigan highway fatalities during the same year, AAA Michigan reported.

Part of the problem, law enforcement officials say, is that boating is often viewed as just a recreational activity, and some of its more serious obligations may be overlooked. The problem becomes more of an issue when summer holidays like Memorial Day weekend, Fourth of July, and Labor Day bring large numbers of boaters in close proximity.

More than 80 percent of the drownings and fatal boating acci-

dents that take place each year can be attributed to reckless operation, alcohol use, or not wearing a personal flotation device.

Michigan law prohibits anyone from boating while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. A first offense is a 90-day misdemeanor with a \$500 fine. A second offense can yield up to one year in jail and a \$1,000 fine. Boating privileges are also sanctioned.

Michigan law requires all vessels be equipped with a personal flotation device for each person on board. These are required to be worn by all children younger than age 6 while on an open deck area, all personal watercraft operators, and water-skiers.

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