



COMMANDER
NINTH COAST GUARD DISTRICT
CLEVELAND, OH 44199-2060

07 May 2008

This boating season, “*Boat Responsibly*”

To the Great Lakes boating community:

This year, May 17th marks the 50th Anniversary of National Safe Boating Week, a week-long observance designed to raise awareness of safe boating practices among power and sail boaters, paddlers and anglers. In recognition of this important week, I want to share a few of my thoughts about how boaters can “*Boat Responsibly*” and help make the 2008 boating season safe for themselves, their families and those who share our waterways.

The Great Lakes region is home to more registered recreational boats than any other part of the country. Within the region’s eight states, there are approximately 4.6 million registered boats, 800,000 in our 86 shoreline counties, alone. In addition, there are about another 1.2 million registered boats within the Province of Ontario.

Despite the number of boats, the good news is that recreational boating on the Great Lakes is a very safe activity. Annual recreational boating statistics support this positive note. And it’s the U.S. Coast Guard’s responsibility, as well as that of our state and local boating safety partners, to ensure the continued safety of all waterways users. It’s a big job, to be sure, but one made far easier by boaters who choose to “*Boat Responsibly*.”

So, what are some of the ways boaters can “*Boat Responsibly*” this year?

First, before heading out on the water, brush up on boating safety regulations, as well as the Rules of the Road. If there are no traditional boating classes being offered in the area, explore free basic boating courses available online. Make a visit to the local library to check-out books on boating and boat handling. These can be a great refresher.

Next, time should be set aside to inspect the boat, top to bottom, stem to stern. Are the lifejackets in good condition? Are visual distress signals on board? Where are all the controls? Where is the emergency shut-off valve for the fuel supply? As an added measure of safety, a free Vessel Safety Check (VSC) is an excellent way to get reacquainted with a vessel and its gear following a seasonal lay-up. During a VSC, an examiner from the Coast Guard Auxiliary or local U.S. Power Squadron goes over a check-list of safety equipment required under federal and state law. The boater accompanies and assists the examiner, laying hands on every item indicated on the check-list. If there are any deficiencies, there is no penalty. The boater merely corrects whatever is wrong before being issued a VSC sticker and getting underway. To find out more about the VSC program or locate a local VSC examiner, visit the web at: <http://www.vesselsafetycheck.org/>

Once a boater launches for the first time in a season, it’s time for a shake-down cruise. Unlike boating in warmer climates, Great Lakes boaters are limited to a three to five month season. During the off-season, boaters’ skills get rusty. Although one may not forget how to drive a boat, proficiency is degraded until there’s an opportunity to exercise those skills again.

Upon launching for the first time, a boater should take it slowly. Rediscover the handling characteristics of the vessel and how it reacts to changing sea conditions. How quickly does the vessel react when changing course? How quickly does the vessel come about, should someone fall over board? These are things which must be exercised each and every season to ensure one is truly in command of their vessel.

Practice docking. It sounds simple. However, docking a vessel is, perhaps, one of the most difficult evolutions one will ever experience while boating. Docking occurs in a relatively confined area and is influenced by the handling characteristics of the vessel, the direction of the wind, existing current, and the tidal action created by other vessels in the vicinity. Again, take it slowly. There is no prize for docking quickly. The key is to dock the vessel as safely as possible.


Another preventive measure boaters can take is ensuring they are sober when operating a vessel. Drinking has long been a part of the boating culture. Vessel names such as "Last Call," "Happy Hour," "High Ball," "Booze Cruise" are still common and reinforce an acceptance of this cultural behavior. Unlike driving an automobile, drinking and boating is not illegal. However, operating a vessel under the influence is illegal. Each year, hundreds of boating accidents result in serious injury and death, due to impairment by alcohol. Simply don't drink if you are operating a vessel. And remember, boating is a team sport - a conscientious mariner watches out for those aboard their vessel, as well.

The Coast Guard, as well as our marine patrol partners, are often criticized for cracking down on those who boat under the influence. In these boaters' minds, we're taking the fun out of the sport. Owners of waterfront establishments sometimes complain too, fearful business will be driven away. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our job is to ensure safety, period. Boaters under the influence are not safe. They present a risk to everyone on the water and our job is to eliminate that risk.

Lastly, boaters can help themselves by helping us protect our Nation through America's Waterways Watch (AWW). Managed by the Coast Guard Auxiliary, and in partnership with the U.S. Power Squadrons and state boating programs, AWW is similar to a neighborhood watch program. Since the Coast Guard and local law enforcement cannot be everywhere, we rely on the boating public to report any activity on the water that they feel may be suspicious or illegal.

During this 50th National Safe Boating Week local Coast Guard units and Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotillas will be hosting boating safety open house events. Many of these events are listed on the web at: <http://www.safeboatingcampaign.com/events/events.htm> . The Coast Guard is committed to making the Great Lakes as safe as possible for the boating public. I ask the boating public to share that commitment by pledging, now and always, to "*Boat Responsibly.*"

Sincerely,



JOHN E. CROWLEY, JR.
Rear Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard
Commander, Ninth Coast Guard District