

Experience is One Thing –Stupidity is another

Even Seasoned Boaters Need to Wear Life Jackets

By Ashley Massey, Oregon State Marine Board

You know what they say about statistics...you never want to be one. In 2008, 13 individuals lost their lives in boating related accidents. Only three motorized boats were involved and the other ten were in non-motorized watercraft, such as a canoe or raft. One thing all the victims had in common was that they drowned. Nine of those 13 victims were not wearing life jackets, and there's a good chance they would have survived if they had been wearing one.

Every year, a fun day out on the water turns into tragedy, simply because someone was not wearing a life jacket or was recklessly consuming alcohol.

We are fortunate that Oregon has a relatively good record of safe boating practices. Sadly though, when it comes to boating safely on our state's waterways, there is something we have in common with the rest of the nation: boaters who don't wear life jackets and who choose to drink and boat are much more likely to be involved in an accident — and possibly drown. Let's face it, drowning is preventable and there really isn't a good excuse for not wearing a life jacket.

The statistics tell the story:

- Although approximately 90 percent of Oregon adults buckle up when driving or riding in a vehicle, 90 percent of boaters do not wear a life jacket when boating. (Source: U.S. Coast Guard http://www.uscgboating.org/statistics/Boating_Statistics_2007.pdf).
- Wearing a life jacket would save the lives of approximately 90 percent of the people who drown in Oregon boating accidents every year. (Source: Oregon State Marine Board <http://www.boatoregon.com/OSMB/safety/Accidents.shtml>).

With such compelling figures, why then do we still face a safe boating problem? Some long-held misconceptions about wearing life jackets and drinking while boating keep people from taking adequate precautions. Here's the straight scoop:

- **Myth:** I can grab a life jacket in an emergency. **Fact:** Waiting to put on a life jacket until faced with an emergency is like trying to buckle your seat belt as you are heading into a car crash. Accidents typically occur quickly and unexpectedly, making it nearly impossible to reach for, let alone put on a life jacket. Like seat belts, wearing a life jacket needs to become a habit.
- **Myth:** If a boater is experienced or comfortable with their judgment and skills, they will know how to handle an emergency. **Fact:** Being complacent and having an attitude of "it won't happen to me," can invite the inevitable. First responders often hear survivors' accounts that reflect a high comfort level before an accident. It's important to think about what you would do if your boat capsizes, collides with an object, or if someone falls overboard. Are you prepared?
- **Myth:** Wearing a life jacket is hot, bulky, impedes recreational fun and ruins a good tan line. **Fact:** Newer life jackets are lightweight and more comfortable than ever to wear, including inflatables that can be worn around the waist and jackets that don't look like jackets at all!

- Myth: Excellent swimmers don't need to wear life jackets. Fact: An unexpected plunge into cold and often swift Northwest waters can incapacitate even the best swimmers from cold water immersion. Northwest rivers are swift with a strong undercurrent, easily taking people by surprise. If you're planning on taking a quick dip; from a boat or the shoreline, it's a good idea to wear a life jacket.
- Myth: It's okay to moderately drink while boating; besides, you only get arrested if you blow 0.08. Fact: Alcohol's impairs your judgment first, then your vision, balance and coordination. These effects are amplified on the water and can be observed below a 0.08% blood alcohol concentration (BAC), increasing the likelihood of a boating accident. Plus, boating under the influence of intoxicants (BUII) is illegal in Oregon, and officers can still arrest boaters based on observed impairment at levels below 0.08% BAC.
- Myth: As long as the boat operator doesn't drink, there's no harm if passengers have a few. Fact: Most boating fatalities occur from falls overboard. Intoxicated passengers and boat operators are equally at risk of falling overboard.

We want to ensure a safe boating experience for everyone this summer. If you head out to the water to cool off, go prepared. Bring plenty of water or other hydrating beverages, sun tan lotion and most importantly, your PFD!

About the author:

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