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A popular bumper sticker seen around Texas reads: "I'd rather be boating."

Perhaps that statement to the world that the driver prefers operating a boat to driving a car needs some qualification. At least for most of us a more realistic message would have to read:

"I'd rather be boating if the boat is a worthy vessel."

"I'd rather be boating if the waters are calm and other boats are under control."

"I'd rather be boating if the boat operator is competent and sober."

No matter how heavy or fast or entangled our present traffic situation, it can't compare to the danger and stress encountered on popular Texas reservoirs late on Sunday afternoons. A lake full of inebriated, sunburned boaters frantically casting for one more "keeper," revving their motors for another race, or striving to accomplish a slalom ski feat can cause sane boaters to wish they were back on North Freeway.

Nevertheless, water sports are the number one outdoor recreation choice of Texans. More than a million of us will float, cruise, race, sail, or fish the 1,259,320 surface acres of Texas reservoirs and the 80,000 miles of rivers this summer. We will participate in these activities from the more than 546,040 registered motorboats and the uncounted numbers of canoes, kayaks, sailboats, rowboats, or whatever else will float.

There's a good chance we will be sharing our favorite water spots with more boats this year than last. While recreational water has increased little in the state, the number of Texans and boats continues to increase every year. If this year follows the pattern set for the past five years, boat-related accidents and drownings will also increase. The highest number of boating fatalities in Texas--119--occurred in 1979.

Instead of resorting to a bumper sticker announcing "I'd rather not be boating," however, you can at least make sure that your boat and your passengers are as safe as possible.

According to Coast Guard figures, more than half of all boat-related fatalities could have been prevented by either action or inaction on the part of the boat operator. As a boat operator, then, you can greatly reduce the danger to your property and passengers by (1) knowing and obeying water safety laws and (2) operating your boat safely.

Water Safety Laws

If new boaters, as well as oldtimers with bad habits, would learn and practice safe boating laws, the number of accidents and drownings could actually decrease in the future.

Texas laws pertaining to boat ownership and operation are combined in the Texas Water Safety Act first passed by the state legislature in 1955. The act covers requirements of boat registration, equipment, and operation in the state and is enforced by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). This agency trains and stations game wardens in each county and in ten regional offices throughout the state. Any law enforcement officer in the state, however, may enforce water safety laws. Game wardens are regularly assisted by county sheriff departments and U.S. Corps of Engineers lake rangers as well as some city lake patrols.

The TPWD also carries out its responsibility for promoting "recreational water safety" through an educational program. The agency distributes over 600,000 bulletins each year to help boaters understand their legal responsibilities and to point out ways to reduce the dangers of boating. TPWD personnel hope to reduce boat-related accidents and fatalities in the state through education and enforcement.

Water safety officers issued the most citations in 1980 to boat operators not having a Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device (such as a life preserver, ski vest, or buoyant cushion) for each passenger. Other common violations regarding equipment had to do with operating a boat without lights after sunset and operating a boat without a fire extinguisher. Boaters cited for any one of these violations paid fines up to \$200.

Expired or invalid registration certificates cost 760 boat operators citations and fines in 1980. Most registration violations had to do with improper display of registration numbers on a boat's hull or inadequate proof of registration on board the boat. Every motorboat operating on Texas waters must be registered with the TPWD and must display registration numbers on its hull. Registration must be updated every two years and must be changed within 15 days of a transfer of ownership.

Boat operators in the state were also often ticketed in 1980 for operating at unsafe speeds, in unauthorized zones, or while intoxicated. Any one of these activities could have cost a guilty operator as much as \$500 and a trip to the county jail.

Operating a boat while intoxicated is an especially serious offense according to the TPWD Safety Education Division. Experts there estimate that drinking and drugs are a

factor in 50 to 60 percent of all water fatalities in the state. The true number of fatalities involving drinking and drugs cannot be determined, however, because not every water-related victim is given a blood test.

The number of citations for operating a motorboat while intoxicated is low in relation to the number of operators actually under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Law officers agree, however, that the ice chest full of beer can be the most dangerous part of the boat. Beer consumption--or any other alcohol or drug consumption--slows reaction time, reduces coordination, impairs sight, and gives overconfidence. This combination in a boat can result in suicide and/or homicide.

Safe Operations

No one launches a boat to intentionally kill, hurt, or frighten others. Few boaters, if any, intend to take death-defying chances or threaten passengers' lives. Many do take chances, however, with their property and passengers because they do not know how to safely operate or how to properly equip a boat.

Literally anybody can legally operate a boat. Because there are no license requirements, minimum age, or competency requirements to operate a boat, a recreationist assumes that a boat is easier to handle than a car. Quite often he has a much more casual attitude when operating a boat than when driving a car. Rather than respecting a boat's power and danger, he thinks of his boat as a toy--something to help him relax.

In many cases, however, boats are harder to operate than cars because they have no brakes and because they are influenced by wind and wave actions

Four of the five major causes of boat accidents could be avoided by action of the boat operator. These causes include:

- 1. Fires caused by spills or fumes during refueling.
- 2. Capsizing caused by overloading or improper loading.
- 3. Capsizing because of ignoring weather warnings.
- 4. Accidents because of failing to observe forward dangers.

The fifth major accident cause is passengers falling overboard. This cause might also be prevented by the operator, but let's give him the benefit of the doubt. He probably had already said "If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times to sit down while the boat is underway. Of course, the operator may find himself in the water if he sits on the back of the seat or stands while the boat is in motion.

No matter how careful you are, you and your boat could be involved in an accident. "How well you handle an emergency, according to Jeffee Palmer, TPWD Water Safety Division could mean the difference between drowning and surviving."

Palmer coordinates training programs for public schools and other groups to teach the dangers and emergency measures in boating. She also works with other organizations

teaching water safety in Texas. These groups include the U.S. Coast Guard American Red Cross, and U.S. Power Squadron.

As more Texans learn and appreciate the responsibilities of safe boating, perhaps more of us can truly say:
"I'd rather be boating."

Questions and Answers for Better Boating

How safe are you and your boating friends? This depends upon how well you know and follow safe boating laws. Whether your boat is a 40-foot inboard or a homemade raft with a trolling motor, you should be able to answer the following questions:

Questions:

1. Does your boat need registration numbers? Why?
2. Is that raft with a trolling motor considered a motor boat?
3. When must you have lights on your boat?
4. What causes more equipment loss than any other boating mishap?
5. What causes more fatalities than any other boating accident?
6. When does your boat need a rearview mirror?
7. When should an accident be reported to the authorities?
8. What should you do if you find yourself in the water either from falling overboard or your boat capsizing?
9. What type and how many life preservers should you have for passengers in your boat? For children in your boat? For skiers towed by your boat?

For answers to these questions, please see below. For answers to other questions on safe boating regulations you may call the TPWD's toll-free number (1-800-252-9327) during office hours. You may call one of two 24-hour TPWD centers in Austin (512-475-4828) and in Pasadena (713-477-9941) for questions requiring immediate answers after hours and on weekends. For boating emergencies, call your local sheriff's office.

Answers

1. All motorboats operating on public waters in Texas must be registered with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). The numbers placed on your boat's hull serve the same purposes as a car's license plates.
2. A motorboat is any vessel (yacht, sailboat, canoe, raft) propelled by machinery no matter whether that machinery is permanently or temporarily attached.

3. If your boat is away from the dock between sunset and sunrise, no matter how bright the moonlight, you must have lights.
4. Fire causes the most equipment loss. This is why all motorboats should carry one or more Coast Guard-approved fire extinguishers in operating condition and in a convenient location.
5. Capsizing is the number one killer of boat passengers. The three major causes of capsizing are (1) rough waters, (2) overloading, and (3) inexperienced operator. Do you know the limitations of your boat and how to handle it in rough waters?
6. The law requires you to have a rearview mirror if you are towing a skier. A safe boater will, however, have both a rearview mirror and an alert observer.
7. You must report any accident involving your boat if there is a death or injury or damage in excess of \$100
8. Don't panic if you fall into the water. Move slowly to conserve energy. Hang onto anything that floats--preferably a Coast Guard-approved flotation device. Stay close to the boat unless it is in danger.
9. Texas law requires that you must have on board a Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device (PFD) for each passenger in your boat. A PFD can be a life preserver (the bright orange vest), a life vest such as a ski vest or float coat, or a throwable device such as a buoyant cushion with straps or a ring buoy. Children 12 and under must WEAR a life preserver. Skiers do not have to wear a Coast Guard-approved PFD (ski belts, for instance, are not approved by the Coast Guard), but there must be one in the boat for the skier.