

BOATER EDUCATION IN THE I & E DIVISION

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Of all of the challenges that face I&E people in the southeastern states, none is greater than Boater Education and in particular Boating Safety.

Louisiana is unique in many respects as the I&E division does not yet exist, the Information Section operates as a separate entity from the Education Section. Our Information Section does the same things that other Information Sections do, handles news releases, produces a magazine and also does a beautiful job of film production. Our Education Section presents wildlife programs to groups, builds and maintains exhibits at festivals, fairs and conventions and presents programs on hunter safety and boating safety.

The programs on boating safety can consist of from a few minutes to a few hours, depending upon the needs of the group and the time slot available to the Specialist, all the way to a 16 to 20 hour course on boating safety called "The Boater Performance Course".

Boating Safety is also taught by the U.S. Power Squadron, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and occasionally by the Louisiana State Police. The first 2, the Power Squadron and the Coast Guard Auxiliary are both volunteer groups. The main thrust of their work is teaching courses in small boat handling after working hours. Some insurance companies will provide a small discount to boat insurance policy holders upon presentation of a diploma from these courses. These courses primarily consist of slide presentations, an occasional demonstration, and cover almost the entire spectrum of boating from knot tying through radio procedure. They are programmed toward the family recreational boater, the person with a medium to large boat whose primary interest is in boating, as opposed to one whose boat is a conveyance, a means to get to a fishing spot or a duck blind. The family recreational boater is generally a safer boater than the conveyance or sportsman boater. On the one hand boating is his "thing" on the other, the boat is the means by which he can achieve his "thing". Somewhere in the middle of all of this is the waterskier who is unpopular with both groups.

The differences between the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and the U.S. Power Squadron programs and those presented by the Education Section of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is that ours can be and are presented during working hours, as well as after hours, to schools, civic clubs and other interested parties. We also emphasize actual demonstrations rather than explaining a series of color slides, which are mostly self-explanatory anyway, and we concentrate on hands-on activities.

We provide all participants with our booklet "About Louisiana Boating", which explains the basic boating laws and minimum equipment requirements for boating in our state. This booklet is written very simply and concisely in a question and answer format that allows the boater to equip his boat with the proper equipment depending upon the class designation into which his boat falls. The equipment requirements vary from class to class of boat so we do not court confusion by long winded descriptions of class differences, after all the boater is primarily interested in *his* boat and the answers are in his book.

The presentation should follow some logical order and should involve activity by some members of the audience. First the need for boater education should be identified. In Louisiana last year some 73 boaters lost their lives in 71 accidents. This can be compared to hunting with roughly an equal number of participants where less than a dozen died from wounds received in the act of hunting. Then the group is informed as to how they can make themselves safe while they are boating by one or more personal flotation device demonstrations and other safety equipment demonstrations using participation by members of the group. Audience participation helps relax the group and piques their interest. With children, volunteers for assistance are never difficult. With adults sometimes they are a bit inhibited at first, but always come around with a little friendly persuasion. Once you achieve participation in an activity the audience is *yours*, so long as you do not let them go. The hands-on participation, even though you are in a contrived situation, is the key to meaningful, lasting learning. The group is also told that the safety of the waters of the state is up to them, or, "up to you". We, as

an agency do not have the personnel and funds to provide an agent or education specialist for every boater every time they use a boat. Ultimately, the boaters themselves or, "you as a boater" must help. You must conduct yourself as a safe boater and by all means report anyone who is flagrantly unsafe, to us, or to another proper authority.

Alcohol consumption is discussed and there may be a temptation to turn the program into a temperance lecture, but this should be avoided. However statistical information is viable provided you do not allow yourself to become bogged down in it to the point that it becomes meaningless. A positive you-can-do-it attitude should be another key to holding the audience's attention.

The Boater Performance Course is among the very best available courses in the boating field. It can last from 16 to 20 hours or more and covers all facets of boating in a hands-on activity from beginning to end. It is the only course that requires the pupils to actually operate boats in the presence of the instructor. It requires a tremendous amount of preparation, and not every group has the time allotted to complete the course successfully, nor does the instructor often have enough available time to present the course in its entirety. Funding for the Boater Performance Course can also be a problem. Information regarding this course may be obtained from Dr. Marvin Reichle, Department of Health and Physical Education at the University of Houston, or from Dr. Mike Davis, H. & P. E. Dept. at Tulsa University.

Finally as the population of America continues its shift toward our area we can continue to expect more boaters on our waters and more accidents. Boater Education is the best weapon we now have at our disposal to combat this trend.