# Boating Safety as it Co-exists with Wildlife

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*Abstract:* Because of the nature of our work, fish and wildlife departments have traditionally been involved in boating safety. Even though many of the states have separate water patrol departments whose primary duties are policing the waterways, game agents find that a substantial amount of their time is spent providing public services on the water. This reality has forced many of our states to begin boating safety programs within their enforcement ranks and to accept these tasks as routine duties.

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In the beginning, it proved to be a fairly easy assignment where we were used as a supplement to other state agencies and the Coast Guard. Then, the bulk of our work dealt with search and rescue and the traditional summer patrols in areas popular to boaters. This procedure actually complemented the wildlife agent because it involved work during the slow violation season for wildlife offenses.

But as we soon found out, recreational boating was to grow into a program of its own. Many of our agencies now find that the total boating program can substantially dilute the availability of manpower and equipment for wildlife enforcement efforts. The duties of the modern game warden have in fact become two-fold: marine officer and wildlife enforcement officer.

Realizing that the primary duties of the enforcement agent is the assurance of compliance to conservation laws, where does it leave boating safety in the rank of priority? To most conservation officers the choice would be obvious, we should fulfill the objective of our job description as wildlife and fish protectors. This is as it should be. However, who is to be held accountable for public safety on our waterways, search and rescue, accident investigations and special marine events? We are.

The resulting paradox is to fulfill the needs of a demanding public in two specialized fields. One is conservation, which comes naturally to most agents;

the other is boating safety, which usually has to be forced upon them. The officer, as in most occupations, learns to flow down the path of least resistance but where he can gain the most recognition. Naturally, his personal ideas, training, and peer pressures will allow him to gain a higher sense of value fulfilling the primary duties of the job. But in this case, we are still left with the secondary task of boating safety. We are left with a job which at best is ungratifying to the officer as a service rendered.

Recently, many states have begun to review their roles in the area of boating safety to find which direction they desire their program to move. Many are undertaking this area as they did the "game warden image" several years ago, which is to professionalize and to instill a sense of pride in our duties. The dividend here is the development of the total officer where training in boating safety enforcement shares an equal role with that of fish and wildlife enforcement. This procedure is proving the most cost efficient method of approaching the dual role.

Other states have tried to train a small group of officers to specialize in the field of boating safety. This method, although very proficient when a localized problem exists, cannot handle a total program on a statewide level. This type program usually receives much criticism and rejection from the regular field personnel, who feel their identity is being threatened by boating officers. It also removes the identity of conservation from the boating officer which places a competitive barrier between two individuals who are working essentially for the same goal.

Regardless of the methodology used to administer this program, we are still confronted with the responsibility of its existence and the problems associated with boating safety.

If the question is "Can boating safety programs survive within the structure of game and fish?", my opinion would be yes. However, I believe it is vital that the responsibility on the field level be shared equally among the officers. Each officer should be trained as an individual unit able to perform the dual role without the necessity of specialized people. However, this concept will work only after we have convinced our field officers that boating safety is an important part of the duties we perform.

In the past several years, we have made great strides in proving our professional abilities as enforcement agencies of wildlife and fish and the consensus from the general public has become that of support. This same public, which praises our authority in wildlife enforcement, often questions that authority to enforce boating regulations. (More often they ask why we are checking such petty violations when there are so many major wildlife violations being committed at that exact time?) As a general rule, the person who complains the most about the lack of enforcement in boating safety is the first one to cry when it is applied.

The actual enforcing of boating safety regulations can become very difficult for many officers. This field does not allow the officer to identify the

violator as most of his other duties. Checking a family out for a boat who have forgotten one personal flotation device just doesn't seem as beneficial to his image as catching an outlaw shocking fish. As an immediate comparison, the fish shocker was more valuable in the idea of conserving fish. But in following the oath of conserving resources, what greater resource does each state possess than the people who occupy it? Even in simple economic terms, what duty that we perform is more costly than having several boats drag for a drowned victim for several days? This costly operation may have been prevented had we approached the family out for a boat ride with the same enthusiasm as the fish shocker.

In realizing that the idealistic and realistic approaches of boating safety are separated by available funds and head count, many of our departments hope only to maintain programs as they exist; but, the real secret to the success of the boating safety program doesn't rest with additional money or equipment. It deals with the proper attitude of the officer and the acceptance of the fact that boating safety is an important part of the duties he performs. Boating safety is not measured statistically by the number of citations that were issued on a given Saturday afternoon, but by the number of lives that were saved because a group of law enforcement officers performed their duties in such a professional manner as to gain the respect and compliance of the public.

The bottom line of our participation in boating safety is that most states are involved to some degree. In many cases, this wasn't a voluntary action; but, nevertheless, we must proceed. The future of boating safety, as it co-exists with our conservation program, will always follow in the foot steps of fish and game enforcement, but hopefully, it won't be treated any less professional.