



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Boating Safety

Location: DEM's Wickford Marine Base Facility
150 Fowler Street, North Kingstown

Date: Friday, May 22, 2009

Boating continues to be a popular past time for Rhode Islanders and the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management expects the state's waters to be busy during the upcoming Memorial Day weekend, the traditional start of the summer boating season. This week, May 16-22, is National Boating Safety Week, and an ideal time to remind boaters of the safety precautions they should follow to ensure a safe boating experience. Life jacket safety is the theme for this year's National Boating Week campaign.

While boating is meant to be enjoyable, it has the potential to be extremely dangerous. DEM's Division of Law Enforcement, which patrols the state's waters 24 hours a day, reminds boaters to follow marine safety laws and regulations to help keep the water's safe to ensure an enjoyable boating experience this summer. The Division offers the following safety reminders:

- **Wear your life jacket or personal flotation device (PFD)**

State law requires US Coast Guard approved life jackets for the following:

- children under age 13 in any recreational vessel under 65 feet in length while underway in Rhode Island waters, unless below deck or in a closed cabin.
- anyone being towed behind a vessel on water skis, a surfboard, a tube or similar device
- everyone on a personal water craft (jet ski)

Although the laws apply to groups, life jackets are the most effective way to save boaters' lives, and DEM encourages **everyone** to wear them any time they are in a boat. Life jackets should be properly sized for the intended wearer.

- **Keep a close eye on the weather.**

Before setting out, pay close attention marine weather forecasts. Take note of small boat cautionary statements, Small Craft Advisories, or Gale or Storm Warnings. While on the water, check NOAA Weather Radio for latest warnings and forecasts and watch for signs of approaching storms: dark, threatening clouds that may foretell a squall or thunderstorm a steady increase in wind or sea lightning flashes.

- **Bring proper safety equipment**

Boaters are required to have the following safety equipment on board: properly fitted lifejacket for each person on board, a sound-producing device (horn or whistle), fire extinguisher, throwable device (ring), visual distress equipment (flares or pistol). Make sure safety equipment is easily accessible, and that you know how to use each piece of equipment. In time of an emergency, seconds count, and you don't want to be searching for safety equipment or reading instructions on how to use them at such a time.

- **Avoid alcoholic beverages while boating**

Rhode Island law prohibits anyone from boating while intoxicated (BWI) and sets the blood alcohol limit .08% or greater. Penalties are set according to the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) that is detected.

Alcohol use affects judgment, vision, balance, and coordination. Reports suggest that alcohol was a contributing factor in about one in five boating fatalities. The effect of alcohol is increased by the natural stressors (wind, sun, vibration) placed on your body while boating. Also, dehydration from these natural stressors causes alcohol to be absorbed more quickly into your system. Research has proven that one-third of the amount of alcohol that it takes to make a person legally intoxicated on the road can make a boater equally intoxicated on the water

- **Complete a Boating Education Course** (or make sure the boat operator has)

Most reported incidents in 2006 involved operator-controllable factors. The primary causes of incidents were carelessness or recklessness, operator inattention, operator inexperience, and unsafe speeds. Boating education courses teach the regulatory and statutory rules ("Rules of the Road") for the safe operation and navigation of recreational boats. Boater education courses are now mandatory for all Rhode Island boaters born after January 1, 1986 who operate a boat with a motor greater than 10 horsepower, and for all operators, regardless of age, of personal watercraft.

More information about boating safety can be found on DEM's website at <http://www.dem.ri.gov/topics/boating.htm>

Interview: Michael Schipritt, an Environmental Police Officer in DEM's Division of Law Enforcement, provided an overview of safe boating laws and practices.