BOATING SAFETY

Florida received an unwanted recognition for having the most number of boating accidents in the United States. Spring break is coming and many families are planning water related vacations. Don’t be one of the statistics.

According to the 2002 Boating Accident Statistics Report, the most recent information published by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida ranked third in the number of registered recreational vessels, behind Michigan and California, with a total of 961,719. Unfortunately, there were 1159 accidents reported, putting us at the top of the list based on US Coast Guard Office of Boating Safety information.

Osceola County had almost 8300 registered boats including 1068 personal watercraft (PWC). There were only 5 reported accidents in the same time period, giving us a rank of 26 of 67 Florida counties. Of those, 3 involved PWCs. Fortunately, there were no fatalities. However, accidents are listed by the county they are reported in and we know boaters travel to other areas to play.

Records show that the primary cause of accidents statewide was careless/reckless operation and violation of navigational rules. If you don’t know them, you cannot obey them. Education is important.

While the majority of the accidents involved operators with more than 100 hours of on the water experience, 31% of the operators had less. Nearly 25 percent of the accidents involved operators age 22 to 35 and 13 percent were age 21 and under. Almost 82 percent of the operators involved in accidents had no instruction.

Education is a proven way to reduce accidents and in Florida, it is the law. Anyone age 21 and under who operates a boat with a motor of 10 horsepower or more on state waters (not private lakes or ponds) must pass an approved boating education course and have in their possession a boating education ID card. The cards are good for life and cards issued by other states are accepted in Florida.

Parents should be aware that it is illegal in Florida for youth under age 14 to operate a personal watercraft (PWC) and anyone knowingly allowing an under-aged person to use one can be charged with a second degree misdemeanor. Anyone renting a PWC must be at least 18. Rental companies (liveries) are required to provide on-the-water demonstration and a checkout ride. It is unsafe and illegal to weave through congested boat traffic, jump vessel wakes or follow too closely. Unsafe operators will be charged with a first degree misdemeanor.

Liveries must provide pre-ride safety instructions and must see the boating safety identification card before renting boats to anyone 21 or younger. It is the renter’s responsibility to be sure the required safety equipment is in the boat so don’t assume the livery has everything in the boat.

To reduce the chance for accidents, expensive repairs, injury and death, boating safety awareness is critical. There are now many ways that youth and adults can learn to be safe. Stores offer videos with PWC purchase; Power Squadron and Coast Guard Auxiliary offer one day short courses or more extended 8 night classes that go into more depth for casual as well as serious boaters. There are also online programs that meet the boating safety requirement. Be aware that the online courses do not meet the requirement for those sentenced to take a boating safety course as a result of a law enforcement violation citation.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has a link to online classes as well as classroom courses. Go here and under the boating tab, click the education button. Those interested in a boating
safety course can call the toll free BOAT US Foundation Courseline at 1-888-3336-BOAT.

Orlando Sail and Power Squadron is taking names for their next 8 night course and is interested in offering it as well as a one day short course in Kissimmee. Please call Gene Grant at 407-425-5736 if you are interested. Members in the organization can take advanced classes such as weather, marine electronics, engine repair and plotting that are very informative. Have fun and learn from others at meetings and outings on the water.

If you boat, take a class and boat smart and boat safely.

The next Environmental Forum Series will be offered March 18 at the Extension Services Office at Osceola Heritage Park at 7 pm. The topic is "How does SAVE Osceola affect Agriculture’s bottom line?" The forum series is a monthly environmental education program offered to help inform the public on key environmental issues. Panelists present information and take questions from the audience. Call 321-697-3000 or check the calendar at SAVE Osceola for future topics.

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