

Getting Out on the Water - Good Boating Practices



Recreational boating provides relaxation and enjoyment for thousands of residents and visitors. It contributes to the economy by providing jobs in boat manufacturing and service. Unfortunately, boating also contributes to the pollution of local waters. All of us - especially boaters - have a lot to lose if the quality of our waters deteriorates. As a boater, there is much you can do to help protect the waters that bring you so much pleasure.

Maintaining Your Boat

Many of the cleaning, dissolving, and painting agents used for boat maintenance are toxic to marine and aquatic life. A few simple precautions can prevent these chemicals from harming our coastal ponds, sounds, and harbors.

Bottom Paints

The more traditional copper and tributyltin (TBT) bottom paints that were used to prevent fouling cause environmental damage. "Fouling" refers to the whole host of organisms that can attach to and grow on the hulls of boats, affecting their performance. TBT has been shown to damage our shellfish populations and has been banned nationally. Other environmentally friendly alternatives are now available. These work by producing peroxides that kill the fouling organisms while they are still microscopic. The peroxide quickly breaks down into water and oxygen, so it is safe to use and does not hurt the environment. When scraping the boat bottom, catch the scrapings with a drop cloth. Use sanders with vacuum attachments and sweep up any scrapings or dust that may escape your drop cloth. Bring them to your next hazardous waste collection day.



Cleaning Your Boat

Rinse and scrub your boat with a brush or power washer after each use instead of using soap. If your boat is stained, use phosphate-free soap or laundry detergent, or any of the alternatives suggested in Chapter Five on hazardous waste. When possible, avoid products that remove stains and make your boat shine. They are extremely toxic. As a rule, avoid any products with a "Toxic" warning on the label; they can kill marine life if washed overboard or accidentally spilled into the water.



Bilge Wastes

Bilge water presents a major challenge for boaters. Since bilge water often contains oily wastes, boaters are often tempted to add detergent to it and pump it overboard. The detergent, already harmful on its own, breaks the oil into small floating droplets spreading the area of impact to the larval stages of the many marine creatures that inhabit the surface water. This practice is not only environmentally damaging, it is illegal and punishable with a State fine of up to \$10,000 and local fines up to \$200 per offense.

Is the best solution to take the oil/water mixture to the oil recycling container at the local marina? Unfortunately, no: the signs indicate “Oil only - no bilge wastes.” What can a conscientious boater do? First, fix any leaks that might contribute oil to the bilges. Next, before pumping the bilgewater overboard, capture the floating surface oil with oil-absorbent pads, paper towels, or old nylon stockings. A product called a “bilge sock” can be used to sop up oily bilgewater. Bilge socks are available at local marinas.

Fuel

The traditional method for determining a full fuel tank is watching for fuel spilling from the tank over-flow vent. Fuel overflows are dangerous to people and toxic to fish and other aquatic life. Small fuel spills are subject to State fines up to \$25,000, federal fines of up to \$5,000, and local fines up to \$200 per offense. Several commercial products are available from marine supply stores to help you prevent these overflows. The simplest is a container that attaches to the fuel vent to capture overflows. A more sophisticated tank vent surge protector works with automatic nozzles to shut off the fuel flow when your tank is full and with non-automatic nozzles that gurgle when it is time to stop pumping. Another similar product changes pitch when the tank is full. Even small spills need to be wiped up immediately to keep them from reaching the water.



Sewage

Human waste contains disease-causing bacteria and viruses that compromise safe public swimming and contaminate shellfish beds.

Sewage is a source of nutrient overload in coastal salt ponds, bays, and inlets. Nutrient enrichment “fertilizes” the waters and contributes to algae blooms and oxygen depletion, which kill marine life.

Be responsible with your waste. It is *illegal* to dump untreated sewage into the water, and violators are subject to a State fine of \$2,000 and local fines up to \$200 per offense. Even so called “treated sewage” from boats contains nutrients and bacteria. It is illegal to dump “treated or untreated” sewage in specified “No Discharge Areas,” (NDA), for both recreational and commercial boats. Stage Harbor is currently designated as an NDA; an application for designation of Pleasant Bay waters is in process. Information is available from the Mass. Office of Coastal Zone Management (CZM), <http://www.mas.gov/czm/nda/index.htm>. If you have a toilet on your boat, it must be equipped with a Marine Sanitation Device (MSD). Acquaint yourself with the use and maintenance of the type of MSD on your boat. If your boat does not have an installed toilet, consider using a portable toilet. The Town of Chatham and most marinas have dump stations to empty portable toilets. Town dump stations are available at various Town landings, including the Fish Pier, Old Mill Boat Yard and Ryder’s Cove.

Regardless of what type of MSD your boat has, sewage pump-out stations or portable pump-out units should be used to empty holding tanks when moored or docked in marinas and harbors. This service is FREE in many harbors. When cruising, check with the local Harbormaster to find the nearest pump-out facility. The Town of Chatham maintains a pump-out station at the Harbormaster’s office in Stage Harbor. Various portable pump-out facilities are also available (call 508-945-5185 for details and scheduling).



Trash

Trash is the most visible pollution in our waters. Designate a storage area on your boat specifically for trash and regularly take the trash to shore for proper disposal. Beverage cans, Styrofoam cups, plastic bags, fishing line fragments, and other debris can trap, injure, and kill aquatic life and birds. Most of this debris doesn't disintegrate; instead it remains in the waterways for years and continues to kill wildlife, foul propellers, and clog engine-cooling water intakes. It is illegal to dispose of any trash in navigable waters and within three nautical miles offshore. Federal violations are subject to substantial civil penalties and/or criminal sanctions, including fines and imprisonment. Local violations are subject to fines up to \$200 per offense. Call the Coast Guard or the local Harbormaster if you see any boat, commercial or recreational, dumping plastics or other trash overboard.



Erosion

Boat wakes contribute to shoreline erosion, especially in narrow streams and inlets. This loss of land is a problem for Cape towns and also affects boaters. Eroded sediments can cause unwanted shoals and shallows, cut off light to underwater life, especially plants, and create tremendous problems for aquatic ecosystems. The extent of shoreline erosion caused by boat wakes depends on the wake's energy. This energy is based on four factors: distance from the shore, hull size, speed, and water depth. The closer to the shore, the greater the hull size, and the shallower the water, the more damage a boat wake can cause. To minimize shoreline erosion, boats should reduce wakes within 500 feet of the shore. Excessive wakes are prohibited within 150 feet of any shore being used as a swimming area; violations are subject to local fines. Many habitats near the shore, and the animals and plants that inhabit them, are sensitive to disturbance. Boaters, skiers, and jet skiers should avoid speed and excessive traffic in these fragile areas. Erosion from boat prop wash (agitation produced by the boat's propeller while the engine is in gear) is very often seen along docks and piers. If the boat is run in gear while tied up, sediments are stirred up and washed away, creating an artificial dredged area beside the dock. As these sediments resettle, they suffocate marine life in the surrounding area.



Docks and Piers

Excessive numbers of private docks collectively have negative impacts on our coastal bars and ultimately depreciate the value of waterfront homes. They may impair water circulation, alter bottom sediments, shade eelgrass and restrict access to shellfish beds. Rather than imperil the water body you live on with a new dock, consider sharing a communal pier or keeping your boat on a mooring. Further, many docks and piers are constructed with pressure-treated wood. The toxic materials used to help the wood last longer in the marine environment leach out slowly over time, killing marine plants and animals. Alternatives such as heart wood and many new plastic construction materials should be considered for new structures, repairs or replacements. Keep in mind that boats tied to docks can cause sediment changes that can destroy shellfish habitat.