



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Stay Afloat On New York's Waterways

JAMES L. SEWARD July 3, 2009

With summer here and long warm days ahead many people will be headed out on our numerous bodies of water to enjoy a day of boating. Whether it is a lazy day on a sail boat, an adventure in a canoe or an exhilarating afternoon water skiing there is no better place to enjoy yourself than on the waterways of upstate New York. Certainly though, many things should be considered before you set out.

Staying safe while on the water is a top concern and must be taken extremely seriously. Before even leaving the dock some very important pieces of safety equipment should be on board your vessel. First and foremost, you need a life preserver, also known as a personal flotation device (PFD), for each person on board. If you are aboard a motorized boat there are additional requirements like visual distress signals, fire extinguishers, appropriate running lights, anchor and line, and a horn or bell. Each one of these items serves an important purpose should you run into any type of distress on the water.

Along with the proper equipment it is also essential that you understand the rules of the nautical road. The rules are an internationally accepted standard and require that every operator conducts his or her vessel in a prudent manner, at a safe speed, while constantly maintaining a proper lookout by all means available. One thing all boaters need to learn are the required sound signals used when two vessels come near one another. Learning who has

the right of way under various conditions, operating under restricted visibility and how to read navigational signals are other important rules to know.

While many of these rules are specific to boating, there is one that carries over from the highways: operating a boat while impaired or intoxicated through the consumption of alcohol or drugs is a serious crime. New York law prescribes heavy fines, imprisonment and the suspension of operator privileges for boating while intoxicated. New York has also enacted a “zero tolerance” law aimed at stopping underage drinking. Anyone under 21 years of age caught drinking while operating a vessel may have his operating privileges suspended or revoked.

It is important to realize that on the water, even small amounts of alcohol may greatly impair one’s ability to function in three critical areas: balance, coordination and judgment. Environmental factors like glare, heat, vibration and engine noise can also slow reaction time. Alcohol may also give one the feeling that he and his boat can perform maneuvers beyond his limits. After a couple of drinks, inhibitions are reduced and recklessness takes over. The ability to process information from various sources is also depressed by alcohol and one could develop a tunnel vision perspective, thus blocking out critical information. The ability to judge speed and distance are also impaired. Plain and simple, alcohol and boating do not mix.

These are just a few items to remember while enjoying a day on the water, but there are many other things to keep in mind. One of the best things any boating enthusiast can do is take the New York Safe Boating Course, sponsored by the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. The course is designed as a comprehensive boating tutorial, teaching the fundamentals of safe boating operation and has been approved by the National Association of Boating Law Administrators.

Information on upcoming courses along with a complete New York State Boater's Guide, with all of the rules and regulations you need to know in order to boat safely and legally in New York State, are available on-line at www.nysparks.com. You may also call my office for additional brochures containing information on boat launching sites, stopping the spread of zebra mussels, how to register your watercraft and other boating tips.

Enjoy the summer and stay safe on New York's waterways.