

# WCO Diary

by WCO  
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**Summer is fast approaching,** which means boaters will soon be heading for open waters. As a result, my law enforcement efforts will shift from trout streams to boating safety. This change in focus doesn't depend only on the number of boats on the water. The change is also triggered by the time of year when they begin to launch.

Experience has taught me that the first month of the boating season yields the greatest number of boating safety violations. A combination of cabin fever and new boat ownership places both experienced and inexperienced watercraft operators in a state of anticipation that tends to cloud sound judgment. Recreational boating is generally viewed as just that—"recreational." Certainly, boating should be enjoyable, but it must be tempered with safe practice, an understanding of the law, and knowledge of one's limitations.

It's easy for a watercraft operator to be lulled into a false sense of confidence and security on the water. Unlike driving an automobile, there are no paved surfaces, no lanes of travel, no seatbelts, and usually no speed limits. Furthermore, there are no headlights, no turn signals, and no breaks. Because these conditions apply to automobiles and not to boats, operators must be more aware and more safety-conscious while operating watercraft. Lacking the traffic controls we obey every day on our highways, our waterways present a boating environment laden with potential hazards that contribute to preventable accidents and injury.

Every year I stop hundreds of boat operators for safety violations. In

many cases, these operators do not appreciate the dangers associated with their actions. Common responses to my boating enforcement efforts are, "This is harassment" and "Can't you find something more important to do?"

These comments only reinforce my belief that many boaters view their pastime as purely recreational, having no legal or personal consequences for poor or irresponsible judgment. However, when I explain the similarities between automobiles and boats in terms of the rules of the road, many people begin to understand my concerns.

For instance, I might ask an operator, "Would you leave the wheel of your automobile while driving down the highway to read a newspa-

per in the back seat? No? Then why would you leave the controls of your pontoon boat while under power to read a newspaper on the bow deck?" "Would you park your car in the middle of the road at night and turn off all of your lights? No? Then why would you drop anchor and not display an anchor light? You wouldn't want someone to collide with you because they couldn't see your boat, right?"

I could continue, but you get the point. This concept can be used with most boating safety situations, including required equipment, operation in controlled or restricted areas, and so on.

Because most boat operators also drive cars, the automobile analogy works well to bridge the difference in thinking between safe boating and safe motor vehicle operation. Most people say they are very safety-conscious when behind the wheel of a car. My goal, then, is to get them to think the same way about boating.

Launching a boat during the first few warm weeks of summer is understandably a long-awaited event. You'll drive your car with boat in tow to your favorite lake or river access and do so safely, as you always have done. However, your responsibilities do not end at the dock. Check your boat for seaworthiness and required safety equipment. Refresh your knowledge of state and local boating laws and regulations, and abide by them. Be sure to start slowly to reacquaint yourself with your boating skills and your watercraft's performance. Remember that boating is only as safe as you are willing to make it. □

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Photo: Art Michaels