

Life Jackets for Anglers

by Dan Martin

Boating Safety Education Manager

I was, and still am, a river bass fisherman. Back in the early 1970s, my first life jacket was a \$2 kapok orange yoke-type. I never wore the thing. In fact, I used to wedge it against my gas can so that the can wouldn't rattle and scare the fish when I was running my motor. It was legal, and on a couple of occasions I showed it to waterways conservation officers so they wouldn't bother me. I had all the typical excuses for not wearing a life jacket: It didn't fit well, and it was ugly and very uncool. Besides, I could swim, so why would I need to wear one?

On a fishing trip in the mid-1980s I had a close call. I was wading among the rocks, fishing for smallmouth bass, when I stepped into a hole in the river. I ended up trying to swim with my fishing rod in one hand with a stringer hanging from my belt (the stringer managed to wrap itself around my legs). I made it to safety but lost my rod. After that, I have always worn a life jacket on or in the water.

I use several models, depending on what kind of boating I am doing. The vest I use the most is the camouflage one I wear when I'm fishing from a boat or wading. It has four pockets and is adjustable so it fits over a coat or a T-shirt. The pockets come in handy for carrying a plug box, a pair of pliers and other useful items. The large armholes give me all the mobility I need and make this unit very comfortable. It is a foam vest. On several occasions the vest has kept me warm in an early morning breeze and toward evening as I waded the shallow Susquehanna River in the Harrisburg area. One of the best features about this vest is its

cost, about \$35, less than a third of the price of my last fishing reel. The very best thing about this vest is that it can save my life.

Safety

One of my jobs with the Fish & Boat Commission is to review all boating accidents. I have done this for the last

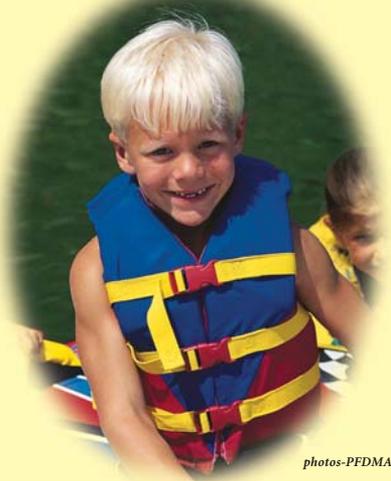
17 years. Since 1988, 221 people have died in boating accidents in Pennsylvania. Many were anglers. The vast majority of these people drowned. Some 80 percent of them were not wearing a life jacket at the time of the accident that resulted in their death. There is no doubt that most of these people would still be with us today if they had just worn a life jacket. These statistics do not include the anglers who drowned while wading or the people who simply fell in the water from the bank.

The single most important piece of equipment on a boat is a life jacket, and *it doesn't work if you don't wear it*. Also, as adults we need to set an example for the kids. My seven-year-old son, Joe, has his own, very cool PFD. He thinks life jackets are just like seat belts



Type III life jacket

in a car, and he is always pointing out to me those in boats who are not wearing their life jackets.



photos-PFDMA

Proper fit is important, especially for children, whose sizes may change from season to season. Do not try to put an adult-sized PFD on a child.

Cold facts

Cold water (less than 70 degrees) is one of the biggest reasons an angler can get in trouble when not wearing a life jacket. A sudden fall into the water often triggers a reflexive torso gasp. This gasp reflex is like stepping into a shower that has unexpectedly cold water. Gaspings is a very bad thing when your head is underwater, and if you are not wearing a life jacket, it is often fatal.

Another danger in cold water is hypothermia, the lowering of the body's core temperature, a dangerous condition. Cold water cools your body 25 times faster than air of the same temperature. A life jacket can keep you afloat and warm long enough for help to arrive.

The law

The law for life jackets (personal flotation devices, or PFDs) is simple. Every boat has to have one "wearable" PFD on board for each person. PFDs have to be the proper size and they should fit "snugly" so they don't come off in the water. Life jackets have to be approved by the Coast Guard (almost all of them are). They have to be in good condition (no rips, tears, missing buckles, etc.)

and "readily accessible." This means they have to be within arm's reach and ready to wear. The jacket is not readily accessible if it is still in its original wrapping.

Boats 16 feet in length or longer must also have at least one "throwable" device on board. Most boaters carry a seat cushion for this purpose. This has to be "immediately available," which means it must be within arm's reach. Most boaters sit on them. They are low-cost items, usually less than \$10.

Children 12 years of age and younger are required to wear a life jacket on all motorboats 20 feet in length or less and on all canoes and kayaks when the boat is underway. This includes drifting boats.

For more information on boating laws, visit the Commission's web site, www.fish.state.pa.us, and on the left side of the main page click on "Boating." The Commission will be glad to mail anyone a copy of the *Boating Handbook* as well. Email the Commission at ra-be@state.pa.us or call toll-free 1-888-PA-FISH-1.

Inflatables



The new inflatable vests are great for anglers and boaters. There are several kinds available. They are a bit pricey, but well worth it. They are more comfortable on a hot day than traditional foam vests, and they still provide a lot of flotation when inflated. There are suspender types, belt packs, belts

and combination foam-and-inflatable vests. All are Coast Guard approved. They are available with manual inflation only, or manual and automatic. The automatics are nice because if you fall into the water, they inflate themselves without the wearer having to pull the lanyard (ripcord). You can also pull the ripcord and inflate them as you would inflate manual models. The safest models are the suspender types because you don't have to put the unit over your head after it inflates. Our officers wear the suspender inflatables and they love them. After use, the unit has to be rearmed with a new CO2 cartridge, available from the manufacturer.

Other PFDs

A lot of the manufacturers offer lighter-weight life jackets with the angler in mind. Many have web, mesh or suspender tops, keeping you cool. Life jackets seem to come in every color and pattern. You can get a camouflage float coat or jacket that is ideal for duck hunting and other cold-water sports. Paddling vests are now available for anglers. The unit I have has a pocket and has more flotation than the typical fishing vest. Paddling PFDs are designed for use in swifter or rougher water, where more flotation is needed. The more flotation, the higher your head will be held out of the water, and I want a lot of me sticking out of the water so I can breathe!

Finally, life jackets make great gifts because they show you care. The holidays are coming and even though it's the "off-season," at your local boat dealer, outfitter or sporting goods store you can find a nice life jacket for that special someone. Another good way to find the perfect life jacket is to shop online. Visit the Commission's web site, www.fish.state.pa.us, and click on "Boating." Under "Safety & Education" click on "PFD Information." There is a list of all PFD manufacturers that I could identify. Stearns, Extrasport, Mustang and Suspenders all produce angler vests or inflatables. You can even get a PFD for your pet. Most companies will let you buy online. ☐