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BOAT

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The Keystone State's Official Boating Magazine



VIEWPOINT

Thoughts on Combining the Fish and Game Commissions

Boating is increasing in popularity and the number of registered boats has increased five-fold since 1964. Today, Pennsylvania ranks 14th in the nation with over 250,000 registered boats. It has been estimated that the number of unpowered boats is about 100,000. Factoring in these boats, our national ranking reaches 8th behind only the big boating states of California, Florida, Texas, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, and Wisconsin.

In recognition of this growth in prominence of boating, the Commission has supported a name change to "The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission." We believe that the inclusion of the word "boat" in our title better reflects the Commission's duties and responsibilities mandated by law.

However, most of you by now are aware of a study currently conducted by the



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Joint Legislative Budget and Appropriations Committee. This study is intended to determine whether or not there would be significant savings in revenue or improvement in services with a combined Fish and Game Commission.

"Wait a minute", you say, "I thought there was only one Commission now." Many people have the same misconception. The fact is that the Fish Commission was formed as an independent agency more than 125 years ago. The Game Commission came along a few years later.

The Fish Commission's original mandate was to restore American shad to its historic range on the Susquehanna River. This goal was expanded over the years and responsibilities for boating were added at various times and consolidated with the enactment of the Boat Law of 1964.

The reasons for including the boating program with the Fish Commission's other responsibilities become apparent when its other water-related responsibilities are considered. Its law enforcement officers were already on the water and familiar with the safe operation of boats. A water resource-oriented education and information staff was already in place. Land acquisition for access areas had been conducted for a number of years. And in the early years of the boating program, the majority of boats were used almost exclusively for fishing.

Most of these same reasons support the continued inclusion of the boating program under the Fish Commission.

What could happen to the boating program if a combined Fish and Game Commission became a reality? Of the three sports, hunting, angling and boating, boating is the only one that is still growing. An estimated 2.5 million Pennsylvanians participated in boating last year. About 1.2 million people bought fishing and hunting licenses. This would lead to the conclusion that boating is the more important of the sports but a look at the combined budgets for fishing, boating and hunting places the situation in a different perspective.

The Game Commission has an annual budget of over \$35 million. The Fish

Commission spends \$18 million on its angling programs. The boating program is funded at an annual figure of \$4 million. I believe that this is grossly under-funding a program that is as large and important as ours. But without raising registration fees or finding some other means of funding the program, no additional revenue is available.

It should be apparent that the Boat Fund would be far behind hunting and fishing activities in priority. Despite sincere efforts of the managers of a combined agency, boating could take only its proportional share of importance.

For the boating program, little could be gained from a merger. The programs of the Fish Commission are different from anything that the Game Commission does.

Talk of a merger always assumes that the participants of the respective sports are the same people. It assumes that all boaters are fishermen or hunters. Some boaters may be fishermen and hunters but certainly not all are. More and more, we are finding that boaters are boaters first and fishermen second. The boat has become the center for family recreation.

We all have a variety of recreational pursuits, but that does not mean that we want them regulated by the same agency. We want our sports regulated by the agency that can give us the best possible return on our investment. Since the Commission was given the responsibility for boating, the boating community has fought for the recognition that it deserves and has received a program that is well-respected across the country. The emphasis of a combined agency would have a dramatic impact on how the Commonwealth resources are managed and allocated for different uses. Where would boating be?

The study by the joint committee provides us with the opportunity to express our opinions and have a direct impact on the future of the boating program. I am confident that the study results will share my belief that boating belongs with the Fish and Boat Commission and not with a Fish and Game Commission. What do you think?

John Simmons

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The covers

This issue's covers shows world-class personal watercraft operators negotiating the race course during an event on the Susquehanna River at Harrisburg, held July 2-3. The race is part of the International Jet Ski Boating Association tour. Chris Lauber took the photograph. If you're thinking of buying a personal watercraft, be sure to check out the article that begins on page 6. Runabout owners can find some useful information in the article starting on page 16, and sailors can find some heads-up docking ideas on page 14. Paddlers can take their turns with the feature beginning on page 20.