

BOAT

Pennsylvania

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VIEWPOINT

Personal Watercraft: A New Dilemma

The numbers are in. Over 270,000 boats were registered in 1988, an increase of more than 8 percent over last year's numbers. Over 12,000 model-year 1988 boats were registered, and already more than 500 model-year 1989 boats carry Pennsylvania registration numbers. These numbers will increase slightly over the next several weeks as returns from dealers trickle in, but the figures speak for themselves.

Boating is big.

Pennsylvania ranks 14th in the nation in the total number of registered boats, despite our relatively short season and the lack of really big boating waters. This is perhaps reflected in the large percentage of boats that are less than 16 feet in length.

The class of boats we call personal watercraft is experiencing tremendous growth. In 1987, 1,400 Kawasaki Jet Skis were registered. In 1988, over 2,000 of these motorcycles on water were registered. This is an increase of over 35 percent in one year and this increase is expected to continue in the future.

The Jet Ski is a fabulously exciting craft to watch and to operate. It takes athletic skill to operate one of these devices and it is a distinct thrill to watch someone who knows what he is doing.

Unfortunately, not everyone who rides a personal watercraft is athletic. More unfortunate still is that a large percentage of these operators are not boaters, or at least they do not recognize themselves as such. They do not understand right of way or courtesy on the water. They do not know the basic rules of boat operation. As a result, conflicts between this new breed of boaters and traditional boaters are on the increase.

Jumping Jet Skis is great fun for those who can do it. On the ocean, operators jump waves. On inland lakes, operators use the only waves available to them—the wakes of other boats. On the surface this seems to be innocuous enough especially to any Jet Ski operator who is not familiar with the operation of a traditional boat. They do not realize that any small, seven-foot boat flitting around a larger boat is an annoyance and is in fact dangerous. It's like a motorcyclist playing tag with an 18-wheeler. No cyclist in his right mind would do that, but it happens all the time with Jet Ski operators.

The Jet Ski is not a toy. It can be lethal. During the 1988 boating season, 13 people lost their lives as a result of boating accidents. Two of these were operators of Jet Skis. Serious injuries also were reported where Jet Ski operators ran into other boats or into each other. This is a large percentage, considering the total number of these boats that are on the water.

Inexperience, lack of training and lack of athletic ability are the primary causes of these accidents. One of the 1988 fatalities involved two rental craft. The second fatality occurred on a boat that was acquired by the operator only one month before the accident. Jet Skis are not to be played around with. They must be treated with the same respect any motorized vehicle is given.

If you drive a Jet Ski, drive it sensibly. If you observe a Jet Ski operating near your boat, keep a careful eye out for what it is doing. These craft are maneuverable in the hands of an experienced operator, but unfortunately most of our operators are not experienced and one miscalculation can place that boat right in the way of your boat.

No matter what you think of these boats or their operators, the last thing any of us wants to do is to kill or injure a fellow boater. So please be careful. Keep a good lookout and let's have a safe boating season in 1989.



John Simmons

Director

Bureau of Boating

Pennsylvania Fish Commission

John F. Simmons

Pennsylvania Fish Commission

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The covers

The bow deck on this issue's front cover was photographed in Erie by Paul Jenkins. For a similarly unique look at two new aspects of boating, turn to pages 8 and 25. Glimpse the past in pictures of paddlewheelers on page 16. If you trailer a boat, better check out page 12, and if iceboating gives you thrills and chills, turn to page 28.

The boat on this issue's back cover was also photographed in Erie by Paul Jenkins.