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VIEWPOINT

Mandatory Education

Every once in a while the question of mandatory education comes up. Proponents have argued that mandatory education will result in safer and more courteous boaters. Education helps, but unless attitude change is part of the educational process, little will be accomplished.

Most mandatory education proposals seem to target the 12- to 16-year-old operator. There are many reasons for this. Youth are a captive audience and this makes it easy to get them into a class. Youth can be told to go to a class. Parents and law makers can say "Look what I've done to make the waters safe." Unfortunately, the statistics do not suggest that this age group is the major problem. They know that if their father catches them clowning around, they will lose the privilege to operate the boat. Most kids know this and act accordingly. Our experience has been that if people begin to boat when they are young and are taught proper values and respect, they grow up to be responsible adult boaters. Mandatory education for youth usually does not address this adequately.

Our surrounding states, however, apparently think differently. New York has had a mandatory education requirement for its youth for several years. Last year, Maryland began a progressive system in which all motorboat operators born after January 1, 1972, must complete a boating safety education class. During the first year, the law affected only 16-year-old operators. Each year the age goes up one year. Eventually all boaters will have to carry a Boating safety certificate to operate a motorboat on Maryland waters.

In 1989, New Jersey will require youth between the ages of 12 through 16 to have a certificate of boating education prior to operating a motorboat.

What does this mean for Pennsylvania residents? With New York and Maryland the answer is clear. If your sons or daughters want to operate a motorboat in these states, they must complete a course of instruction. New Jersey law is a little more difficult to call because of the joint water of the Delaware River. The New Jersey attorney general has ruled that all youthful boat operators must have a certificate in their possession regardless of where they live or register their boat. This includes all portions of the Delaware River east of the centerline, which is the recognized border of the two states. New Jersey's enforcement officers will exercise good judgment in enforcing the provisions of this law in questionable situations. They will also enforce the law if it is apparent that the operator of a boat intended to be in New Jersey waters. If your children could intentionally or accidentally operate a powerboat in New Jersey waters, they should obtain a boating safety certificate.

There are several options for obtaining the necessary certification. All U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and Power Squadron courses will be accepted. These courses are taught across the state, usually in the winter and spring. Call toll-free, 1-800-AUX-USCG for the course information.

Both New Jersey and Maryland will accept the Pennsylvania Boating and Water Safety program taught in many school districts. This hands-on course is taught in 17 districts during the school year as part of their aquatic education programs. 22 youth camps teach the program during the summer months as part of water safety programs. This course is not as widely distributed as it should be because of the volunteer nature of boating education in Pennsylvania. Its use is spreading, however, as a result of the need for certification in our surrounding states. Last year over 2,300 students were certified in Pennsylvania's program. To obtain a mandatory education certificate, a student successfully completing Pennsylvania's course simply has to forward a copy of the course certificate to the appropriate state.

The Pennsylvania Fish Commission has not supported mandatory boating safety education as the appropriate method of reaching its goals of safe boating. Pennsylvania has one of the best voluntary safety education programs in the country. Even though it reaches only a small portion of the estimated 2.5 million boaters in Pennsylvania, it has been successful. The Commission is working toward expanding the program to all school districts so that anyone who wants more training can get it easily. For more information on this program and to help get boating education in your schools, call 717-657-4540. Safe boating education is something we have to do together.



John Simmons

Director

Bureau of Boating
Pennsylvania Fish Commission

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John F. Simmons".

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The cover

This issue's front cover, courtesy of the American Water Ski Association, shows the fun and excitement of kneeboarding. For practical information on water skiing, see page 10. If you trailer a boat, don't miss the details in the article on page 16, and if you're a paddler, see how your etiquette measures up with the information of page 13. If sailing is your thing, you might want to cover yourself with the project on page 8, and for a look at a unique navy, turn to page 4.

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