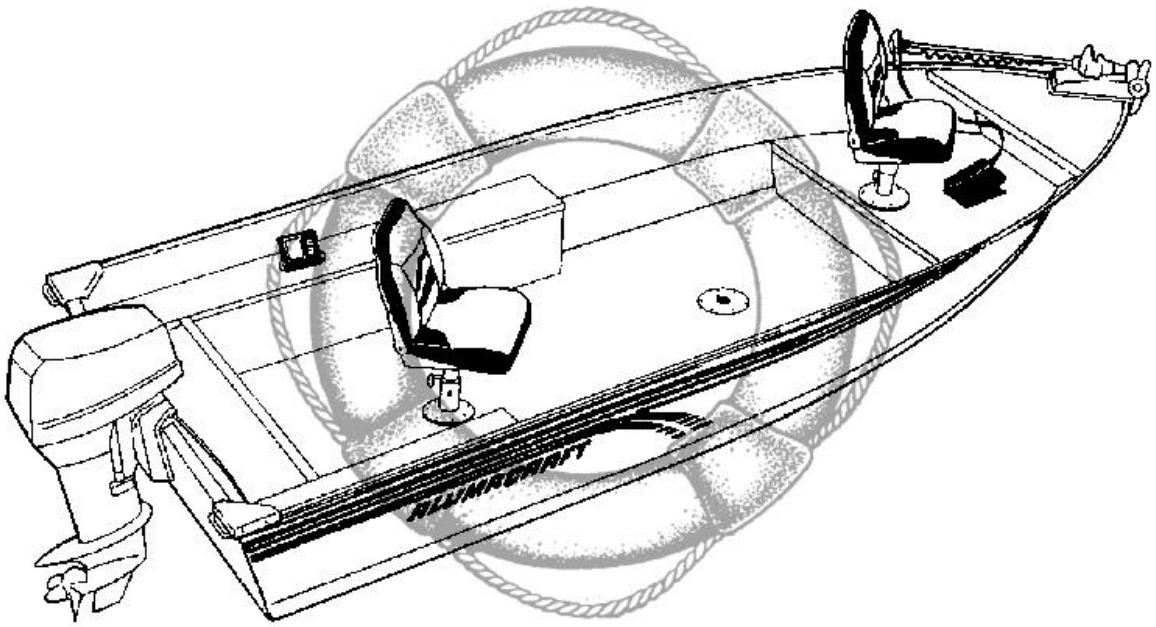
Boating Safety Programs in Alaska: Suggested Implementation for the Community of Valdez



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Introduction

Boating in Alaska does not fit neatly into the nation “recreational” definition. Many people involved in Alaska boating safety have begun to use the term “noncommercial” boating. Noncommercial boating denotes the use of watercraft for many uses that operators would not consider recreational. Alaskans utilize boats to gather food (hunting, fishing and plant gathering), for basic transportation, to haul firewood or building materials and earn a living.

Alaska holds the dubious honor on having the greatest boating related death rate for the entire nation. This claim is supported by data collected by the United States Coast Guard and the Center for Disease Control. Anecdotal support is provided by the State of Alaska and regional health providers. This research project is divided into four separate areas. These are to document support for the claim that there is a boating accident problem in Alaska, descriptions of boating safety programs currently in use throughout the state, a summary of the safety lessons learned and a suggested plan of action to support boating safety in the community of Valdez.

The Alaska Boating Accident Problem and Statistics

United States Coast Guard National Data

Nationally the United States Coast Guard (USCG) accounts for boating accidents and information on related safety programs. Federal regulations require the formal reporting of the loss of life or treatment of injuries required beyond basic first aid caused by a boating accident, accidental damage to a vessel of more than $500 or the complete loss of a vessel. The latest statistical summary of this information was prepared for the 1998 boating season. The Coast Guard recorded 8,061 recreational boating accidents. These accidents accounted for 815 fatalities and 4,612 injuries. 574 boaters drowned and it is estimated the use of personal floatation devices (PFD) would have prevented 509 of these deaths.

Boaters in cold water (below 60 degrees Fahrenheit) have a greater risk of death if they are involved in an accident. Factors include hypothermia and reduced numbers of potential rescuers out on the water in the fall and winter. Alcohol use was reported in 27 percent of the accidents. Due to the self-reporting format of boating accident reports, this is assumed to be a low figure. The Coast Guard estimates that boat operators with blood alcohol level above .10 percent are 10 times more likely to be killed in a boating accident.

Seventy-three percent of all accidents involved operator errors. These include reckless operation, use of poor judgment, excessive speed,

inexperience and inattention. Twenty-seven percent of reported accidents were caused by environmental or equipment factors. These include poor weather, rough seas and hull failures. Vessels less than 26 feet in length accounted for nearly 96 percent of the accidents. Open motorboats and canoe/kayaks accounted for 656 of the 815 (80%) of the boating fatalities that occurred in 1998.

United States Coast Guard - Alaska Data

Alaska forms the 17th District of the United States Coast Guard, with its headquarters located in Juneau. Up until this year, the 17th District was responsible for numbered registration of small boats in Alaska. This function has been assumed by the State of Alaska. Accident statistics are still

recorded by the USCG in Juneau. For the same year of 1998, Alaska contributed 38 fatalities to the national count.

As a function of the number of vessels registered in the state, this is a ratio of 160.4 deaths per 100,000 boats. There were 23,689 noncommercial vessels registered in Alaska in 1998. A record was set for boating fatalities in Alaska during 1998. The five-year average (1993-1997) for Alaska was 64.7 per 100,000 vessels, which is still a substantially greater number than the national average for the same period of 6.7 per 100,000 boats. All of the fatalities that occurred in 1998 were involved with open types of boats, like skiffs or canoes. PFDs were worn in only three of the 1998 reported fatalities.

Ms. Sue Harris heads the Recreational Boating Safety Office for the 17th District. Ms. Harris is recognized throughout the state as a leading advocate and expert of boating safety issues. Ms. Hargis points out one problem with accident statistics in Alaska, it is that the state has a low boat registration and accident reporting compliance rate. This makes comparisons to other state programs more difficult. Alaska's experience is that the causes of boating accidents mirror national trends. Related factors include the use of open boats, failure to use PFDs, alcohol use, and operational error. The greatest difference is that cold water will make any boating accident much more dangerous for those involved in it.

Center for Disease Control and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

The National Center for Disease Control (CDC) tracks drowning deaths throughout the nation. Unintentional drowning in the United States reached 4,406 deaths in 1998 and eighteen percent of these occurred from boating accidents. Drowning is the second leading cause of accidental death in children. Alaska had the highest rate of drowning in its population of 7.41 deaths per 100,000 people. There were 47 drowning reported in 1998, with 48 percent caused by boating accidents.

Factors addressed by the CDC include alcohol use, knowledge of weather conditions and the use of approved PFDs while boating. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has an office in Alaska. While the normal role for NIOSH is the study of occupational safety, Ms. Jennifer Lincoln of the Agency's Anchorage office points out that NIOSH also monitors noncommercial boating in Alaska (533). Often Alaskan families will utilize commercial vessels for noncommercial uses like hunting and gathering. Alaska NIOSH has conducted two studies surrounding the effectiveness of training offered by the Alaska Marine Safety Education Association (AMSEA). Details are included in the second section discussing AMSEA programs. Ms. Lincoln concurs that Alaska has a huge problem with boating accidents, especially within the state's commercial fishing industry.

Existing Boating Safety Programs Operating Within Alaska

Alaska Marine Safety Association (AMSEA) – Established in 1985 as a non-profit marine safety organization, AMSEA is based out of Sitka, Alaska. It is self-described as a "community-based information and training network," and is known throughout the state for its "hands-on" method of marine safety training. This group's stated goal is to reduce death in Alaska caused by drowning and hypothermia.

One AMSEA program trains commercial fishing vessel captains in conducting safety drills as required by the federal government. The AMSEA program is more involved and longer than required by the federal law. NIOSH conducted a retrospective study of the effectiveness of the AMSEA method. The conclusion was that AMSEA training had an impact on reducing fatalities in the commercial fishing industry (Perkins 2).

AMSEA also conducts training courses for teachers and students in Alaska's public schools. These classes include information on the steps necessary for survival in the water, the use of personal floatation devices and survival suits, and hypothermia protection. AMSEA classes put the students into the safety equipment and then into the water. The experience gives everyone real, practical experience with the safety gear. AMSEA even provides an extended survival course that teaches the necessary skills and then concludes with a night spent alone at a remote location.

Alaska Office of Boating Safety – Alaska was the last state to adopt a boating safety program and assume boat registration required to qualify for federal boating safety funding. The Office of Boating Safety is a political subdivision of the Department of Natural Resources – Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation. The Alaska Department of Public Safety and Department of Natural Resources have established guidelines for the report of boating accidents. A statewide *Alaska Boating Safety Advisory Council* was appointed by the Governor and began meeting in December of 1999. The mission of this office is to cooperate with other agencies in promoting boating safety programs throughout the state. Jeff Johnson, Alaska Boating Law Administrator, points out that since the State of Alaska is still developing programs, it is very important for all agencies involved with boating safety not to duplicate their efforts. Mr. Johnson sees the Office of Boating Safety as a clearinghouse that helps bring people and safety resources together.

The Alaska Office of Boating Safety has already become involved in a number of safety programs. Providing lifejackets for *Kids Don't Float*, publishing the Alaska Boater's Handbook, providing public service advertising, distributing informational posters and establishing a boat registration program are a few of the programs currently underway.

Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation (BBAHC) – A unique idea they currently support is the sale of float coats at greatly reduced cost to people living in area. Working with the regional Native Corporation, float coats are purchased directly from the United States General Services Administration and sold to residents at the lower federal cost. Other village corporations in the state have begun to offer similar opportunities.

Kid's Don't Float was developed by community groups in Homer, Alaska to help reduce drowning of school-age children. This program provides personal flotation devices for loan to children at harbors and docks. A number of agencies contribute PFDs and promotional information to the program. These include the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Coast Guard Auxiliary, Southeast Alaska Regional Health Center, BoatsUS Foundation, Alaska Office of Boating Safety, Alaska Safe Kids and the 17th District of the United States Coast Guard.

The *Kids Don't Float* program also provides safe boating and PFD education for public schools. One focus point is promotion of peer-to-peer education. The program educates children as trainers that can return to their schools to promote the program.

PFD Ice Cream Coupons - McDonald's of Alaska and the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company provide local port and harbor departments coupons that are redeemable for ice cream cones. Harbor personnel can issue a coupon to any child found to be correctly wearing a personal floatation device. Valdez Small Boat Harbor has cooperated with Alyeska Pipeline for several years and has expanded the number of coupons produced each year for the program.

The Coast Guard Recreational Boating Safety Program provides a voluntary vessel examination that insures compliance with federal and state safety requirements. The Vessel Examiner is specially trained and a member of the US Power Squadron or the US Coast Guard Auxiliary. The vessel safety check is used as an opportunity by the qualified inspector to discuss the use of marine safety gear, local conditions and help answer other boating questions. Items checked include fire extinguishers, personal floatation devices and visual distress signals. Inspections are not related to any law enforcement action. Citations cannot be issued as part of this program. Operators that successfully pass the inspection are given a decal to display prominently on their vessel. Program goals are to reduce accidents and injuries by promoting the value and utilization of safety equipment.

Lessons Learned

Preparedness and marine safety training have proven their worth for many Alaskan boaters. Ms. Esther Combs, a student in the UAF College of Rural Alaska, had a personal experience with boating safety.

Esther and her husband took a float trip on the Chickaloon River a few years ago. The river guide accidentally struck a bridge abutment with their raft and all nine of the passengers were thrown into the river. Glaciers feed the Chickaloon River and its waters are very frigid. Esther and the group were wearing commercial life jackets and had a rough trip down the river. Eventually they reached a shore near the confluence of the Matanuska and Chickaloon Rivers. Another raft from the same guiding company was able to return and assist the stricken passengers.

Esther and the group were able to change into dry clothes and build a warming fire. Esther said what saved them was the big, puffy lifejackets and an orientation briefing provided by the guiding company at the beginning of the trip. A less prepared group could have suffered a much different fate.

The passengers on the raft provide a practical demonstration of the lessons that can be learned from successful marine safety programs in Alaska. These can be summarized as:

- Education and distribution of current weather information provides important insight to help people decide if and when to travel.
- Small, open vessels are a major factor in fatal boating accidents. Typically these vessels do not carry sufficient safety equipment.
- Immersion in cold water greatly reduces a person's chance of surviving a boating accident. Proper equipment use and survival training are shown to improve the odds of returning from a boating trip.
- Operator education is paramount to the safe and successful operation of boats in Alaska's severe climate. Lessons in boating safety are transferable between commercial and non-commercial users.

Suggested Guidelines for Valdez and Prince William Sound

- Safety training programs that focus on hands-on experience need to be provided within the community. AMSEA trained instructors need to be identified and an effort made to utilize their experience. Efforts are underway to make classes provided by the Coast Guard Auxiliary more hands-on as well. Currently the USCGAUX is prohibited from conducting training in the field.
- USCG Valdez Marine Safety Office should establish and maintain a community-wide training schedule. There are many excellent opportunities for education in training courses routinely conducted by

local agencies throughout the year. Boaters interested in additional training miss this opportunity for lack of community networking.

- Continue support of the Alaska Boater's Handbook and the supplemental addition for Prince William Sound. Provide the handbook at public facilities and distribute it gatherings like the *Fairbanks Outdoors Show*. Develop a supplemental addition for kayakers in Prince William Sound, based on work described in the pamphlet The Rules for Sharing the Waterways Safely in Prince William Sound and Guidelines for Operation of Kayaks in VSBH.
- Continue support of the *Kids Don't Float* program. Maintain current PFD stations at the harbor and city dock. Consider additional locations for PFD distribution. Provide public recognition and positive feedback to program supporters.
- Valdez Small Boat Harbor receives and monitors boater float plans for trips taken into Prince William Sound. The harbor has an incentive program that gives away a float coat in a drawing each year. Participants who close their float plan with the harbor have their names placed in the drawing. Valdez Small Boat Harbor should continue with this program and facilitate the filing of float plans.
- Open a dialogue with the Valdez Native Tribe and encourage cooperative projects with in the greater Valdez community.

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  <http://www.uaf.edu/seagrant/amsea/>

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  <http://www.alaskaboatingsafety.org/>

- BoatU.S. Foundation for Boating Safety and Clean Water
  <http://www.boatus.com/onlinecourse/>

- Seventeenth Coast Guard District Boating Safety Program
  < http://www.uscg.mil/d17/d17rbs/d17rbs.htm>

- Coast Guard Auxiliary – Information for Safe Boating
  < http://www.cgaux.org/cgauxweb/public/pubframe.htm>

- U. S. Coast Guard – Office of Boating Safety
  < http://www.uscgboating.org/default.asp>

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