

Safety, caution and prevention key when boating

When it comes to any form of outdoor recreation, nothing can replace these three elements. Early this winter, the Traverse City area was rocked by the news of the

three snowmobilers who, despite all being experienced in using their machines, met with a tragic fate on the ice of Long Lake. Their deaths underscored how critical it is to be mindful of safety, even

if you are skilled at your choice of sport, and especially if you are a novice.

Michigan currently leads all of the states in the country for the number of boater registrations. Many in the boating industry believe that the events of Sept. 11, 2001 have had considerable impact in families choosing to spend more time together with pastimes like boating that all members of a household can enjoy.

In 2003, it is expected that more boaters than ever will take to the waters. All of which means that many boaters will be behind the wheel of a watercraft for the first time, in addition to the number of veteran boaters, which is believed to be close to one million nationwide.

Taking the proper safety steps and checks for another season of boating begins with fundamentals. It only takes a few hours for new or long-term boaters to take a class to learn or review proper boating procedures to ensure that safety and etiquette aren't

left onshore. And it takes just about as much time to check your boat's safety equipment to know with certainty that everything is working and up-to-date.

Jeff McNamara of Murray's Boats and Motors in Traverse City said that without a doubt, safety is the most "critical" aspect of boating, and one that has to be taken with the utmost seriousness by every person on board a boat, whether they are operating it or not.

"Like in most other situations, safety in boating is 99 percent common sense and 1 percent how you prepare under pressure," said McNamara. "There are so many resources available to learn and practice what you need to know, from classes to the Web site, magazines, other literature and much of it is free to the public, so there's really no reason for not learning everything you can to be on the safe side."

McNamara said that if there is one single message he'd like to communicate about

boating safety it's that drugs and alcohol do not mix with driving a boat, just as is the situation with any other sort of motorized vehicle. Nearly half of all fatal boating accidents are alcohol-related, as are a considerable number of drownings that take place every year.

Next on McNamara's list is stressing that all boats, canoes, and kayaks more than 16 feet long must have one wearable personal flotation device (PFD) per person aboard, and at least one throwable flotation device. According to AAA Michigan, in 1998, 20 of the 25 persons killed in boating accidents were not wearing a PFD. Crafts under 16 feet can carry one wearable life jacket for each person on board if the boat is not used on the Great Lakes or connecting waters, including rivers. McNamara also notes that life jackets are now being manufactured to be lighter-weight, less bulky and more comfortable, which he feels will be a fac-

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