

Wild Perspective

Most of you know that West Virginia has an abundance of boating opportunities from whitewater rafting trips to sternwheeler cruises. But you may not know that last year West Virginia had the most boating fatalities per registered boat in the country. So what is wrong?

Perhaps it's the misconception of what boating safety really is. When most people think about boating they envision an open motorboat speeding down the water pulling a water skier or two. But what about the lone canoeist paddling down a quiet stream, or the whitewater enthusiast kayaking the Gauley River, or even the bass fisherman out early morning on the lake with the fog still rising off the water? These folks are boaters too and also must practice safe boating.

The DNR gets calls every day from individuals wanting to know what type of equipment they need on their boat to be legal. It is not about legalities, it is about saving lives! For example, we all know that life jackets are required for everyone on board. The boat owner purchases these life jackets and places them on the boat safely stored in a bin where they will be safe from damage or wear. Then when disaster strikes, there is no time to get to those jackets.

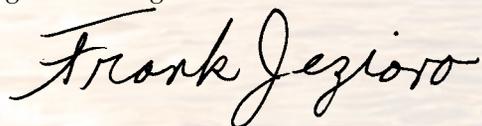
It's hard to turn your friends away from a boat ride. The next thing you know, you have several guests on your boat, maybe too many. Add loaded coolers, a grill, a full live well and a full tank of gas and your boat is overloaded. The slightest shift of weight can capsize your boat. Those big, ugly capacity plates by the throttle are there for a reason. By the way, were you able to get to your life jacket as you were falling off the boat? Weight shift also applies to small boats — even those little paddle boats.

Whitewater rapids are a rush to shoot, but are no place for a novice without guidance and assistance from an outfitter or seasoned boater. It takes training, skill and a lot of experience to master the rapids in a kayak, yet many a kayaker has been beaten by the river. Know your limits!

Unfortunately it seems that a cooler of beer is required equipment for any boat trip. "We're going up to the beach and drink but we won't be operating a boat." That is a classic statement. How are you going to get back to the marina or ramp? How are you going to get home? On-water stressors such as the motion of the water, sun glare and motor noise also factor into the influence of alcohol. These stressors can actually intensify the alcohol affect.

I encourage everyone to take a Boating Safety Education Course, not because it is a requirement, but because it could save a life — perhaps your child's. Make it a family affair. But just don't memorize the information taught. Ask why the rules are the way they are.

The DNR offers traditional Boating Safety Education classes free of charge, and several on-line courses for a small fee. For information go to www.wvdnr.gov. Have a great boating season, and be careful.



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