

A PROFILE OF RECREATIONAL BOATING IN THE UNITED STATES

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“There is nothing, absolutely nothing, half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.”

With apologies to Water Rat in Kenneth Grahame’s *Wind in the Willows*, there is nothing half so much worth the coastal planner’s attention than the future of recreational boating in this country.

To get a sense of boating’s future as we sail into the next millennium, it is important to understand the roots of a recreational activity that directly involved, as on-the-water participants, 75 million Americans last year.¹ Recreational fishing alone contributed more than \$108 billion to the economy in 1996, and supports 1.2 million jobs, creating wages of about \$28 billion. It is a huge industry, with U.S. anglers outnumbering golfers nearly 2 to 1.²

Another way to look at the significance of this pleasurable activity is that recreational boating comprises America’s largest fleet, dwarfing the total vessels in merchant shipping, commercial fishing, passenger traffic, the Navy, and the U.S. Coast Guard.

There are over 16,800,000 boats in use nationwide. With 75 million people cruising, sailing, fishing, water skiing, racing, camping, wildlife-watching or just exploring, it’s easy to see that boating is very much a social activity, and a real family sport.³ In fact, in a recent nationwide survey of marina customers, nearly 50% were reported to be families with children. The second largest group was retired couples or singles at 20%.⁴

The Yachting Misnomer

Despite the fact that 50% of all registered boats are less than 16 feet long, and 93% of all registered boats are less than 26 feet long,⁵ boating has always suffered from the “yachting” stigma. In the public’s eye, boating has been the exclusive domain of the rich. The person who probably had more to do with etching that erroneous view in the public psyche than anyone was J.P. Morgan, the great and certainly very wealthy yachtsman of the early part of this

century. When asked how much one of his legendary steam yachts cost, Morgan is said to have replied, “If you have to ask how much it costs, you can’t afford it.”

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Certainly when the 20th Century dawned, spending time in a boat for any other purpose than wresting a living from the water was unheard of. Boating for the middle class only arrived, like so many other leisure

pursuits, after World War II. Participation roughly doubled in each decade until the number of boats in use hit 13 million in 1985.

But Morgan’s legacy stuck and boaters were seen as “fat cats” in the 1980s, wealthy yachtsmen to be
 1998 Boaters and Boats in the United States:
 Population Estimates

Boaters and Boats	Number
People participating in recreational boating	74,847,000
Water skiers	10,314,000
All Boats in use	16,824,000
Outboard boats owned	8,300,000
Inboard boats owned	1,609,000
Sterndrive boats owned	1,673,000
Personal watercraft	1,100,000
Sailboats owned	1,669,000
Miscellaneous craft owned (canoes, rowboats, dinghies, and other craft registered by the states)	949,000
Other (estimated canoes, rowboats, etc. not registered by the states)	1,524,000
Marinas, Boatyards, Yacht Clubs, Dockominiums, Parks and other	10,320

Source: “Boating 1998” prepared by the National Marine Manufacturers Association, Chicago, IL
 The “in-use” figures are based on actual state and Coast Guard registrations and estimates of non-registered boats.

saddled with taxes disguised as “user fees” to help balance the federal budget. After a protracted struggle, cooler heads in Congress prevailed when they realized that boaters already had been paying their way for years through motorboat fuel taxes and fishing gear excise taxes.

Today these taxes go into the Aquatic Resources Trust Fund (Wallop-Breaux), which pumps about \$350 million annually into boating safety education, law enforcement, environmental protection, public access, and fishery restoration. As a result, there is hardly a stretch of water anywhere that hasn’t benefited in material ways from America’s boaters.

Boating Benefits

Alongside these economic benefits, recreational boating offers our nation’s citizens lifelong opportunities for healthy, outdoor, family activity. It provides an important cultural link to our nation’s maritime heritage, and a critical gateway for youth through such nationwide programs as Sea Exploring (Sea Scouts), Red Cross and YMCA water sports, and 4-H camps as well as countless local sailing schools, canoe clubs, and community boatbuilding programs.

It seems fair to speculate, then, that recreational boating may be the largest clearly defined constituent group for NOAA and its National Ocean Service, National Marine Fisheries Service, even its marine weather services, as well as for the U.S. Coast Guard, whether these agencies realize it or not.

Issues for the Future

As we think about the coast and coastal issues heading toward the year 2025, there are several core issues important to this large user group. Boaters count on being able to get to the water (access), being able to enjoy the water and related wildlife (natural resources), and having the time and desire to pursue boating for recreation (opportunity). These three elements constitute the base of possibilities for recreational boating into the next millennium.

Access

Boaters rely on being able to get to the water, and use the water for a variety of activities ranging from fishing and sailing to cruising and overnight boat camping. In order for boaters to peacefully co-exist with other user groups on our coastal waters, waterways must be seen as a common resource that is available to all. They must be protected as a public open space, able to accommodate a variety of users.

Access to these waters must be maintained through both public and private lands. Those lucky enough to own waterfront property should be able to launch their boat from their own yard, and those not so fortunate should have ready access to public launch sites and marinas open to the public. To insure that average citizens can get to the water, ramps, access points, boat parking facilities in the form of marina and transient dockage, moorings, and anchorages, as well as on-land dry storage and winter storage, must be available to the general public.

Once on the water, boaters rely on clearly marked, maintained, and dredged channels, along with accurate, updated, and available charts. In recent years, federal budget cuts have reduced the channel maintenance and charting abilities of the government, and recreational areas are often the first to suffer. Innovative ways of maintaining charts for the recreational boater may be necessary, including the use of trained volunteer labor for sounding harbors. Volunteer data collection may be the key to safety, when you realize that millions of recreational boats can lose their way, run aground, or hit bridges and buoys without updated charts.

Boaters use a variety of destination choices, ranging from developed city docks (Baltimore Inner Harbor) and historic maritime areas (Mystic Seaport), to islands (Catalina Island) and remote areas with diverse wildlife (Apostle Islands National Lake Shore). Freedom to explore the waterways is our birthright. To make it our legacy, we must make coastal stewards out of all citizens, educating all how to preserve those areas we explore.

Natural Resources

Like other recreational users of the coast, boaters rely on clean, unpolluted water. “Going boating” con-

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pires up images of relaxing in an aesthetically pleasing, natural area, with crisp, clear water, fresh air, and interacting with fish, birds, and other wildlife. No one wants to spend precious leisure time on a river with oil slicks, floating garbage, and dead fish. As a result, individual boaters and the marine industry as a whole have been increasingly involved in initiatives to clean up our waterways, restore aquatic habitat, and protect natural resources. They all rely on clean coastal waters that sustain an abundance of fish and wildlife, whether they are pulling fish out of the water for dinner, or swimming in the water, or just getting splashed with a rogue wave.

In order to improve coastal water quality, new methods of reducing both point and nonpoint source pollution will be required. This will be increasingly difficult as coastal populations soar by 2025 and put more stress on the coastal areas. With more potential polluters in the same coastal area, we'll have to do even more to keep pace with existing water quality issues, much less improve them.

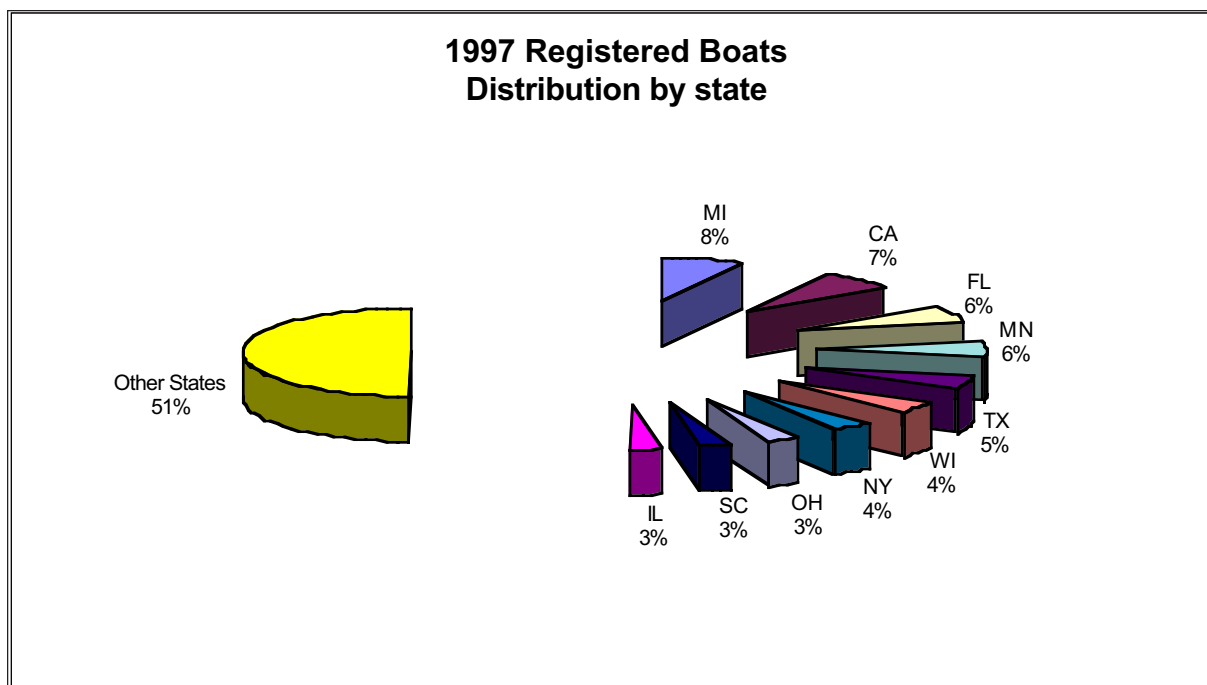
Flexible, timely management of fish and wildlife is required. Diversity and sustainability must be

embraced in this management as key ingredients for the long-term viability of our oceans. Both commercial and recreational interests must be brought in to the solutions to current overharvesting of fisheries, and bycatch must be better addressed. The introduction, spread, and control of alien species should also receive special attention, since they continue to threaten entire native populations and ecosystems, and pose grave consequences for recreational boating and fishing.

Opportunity

The water is clean, there are fish to catch, birds to watch, and the access ramp is right down the street. What's stopping the average citizen from taking to the water – from “simply messing about in boats?”

Access to a boat is probably the first thing. While there is approximately one boat in this country for every 17 people,⁶ many people may not have the resources to own their own boat. Those people that do buy a boat are often precariously on the edge of selling it, depending on variables in their own lives, costs, available free time, and hassles associated with owning the boat. Individual boaters must find a



Source: “Boating 1998” prepared by the National Marine Manufacturers Association, Chicago, IL.

This chart reflects the 12,309,724 boats registered in the states in 1997. The 10 states shown above host nearly half of all registered boats in the country. Note that 3 of the 5 states (CA, TX, FL, GA, VA) with the greatest rise in predicted population are already among the states with the largest number of registered boats.

balance between limited free time and the time it takes to do maintenance work before leaving the dock. In order for boaters to continue boating, boaters will have to feel that the “recreation” element surmounts the perceived obstacles to this use of their limited free time. These obstacles are often cited as costs, fees, government regulations, and maintenance.

No matter who owns the boats, it can be assumed that recreational boating will be only one activity among many at the water’s edge. Resolving user conflicts over the use of these waters will be a rising challenge in the next century.

Another challenge for the industry and for coastal managers may be how to address carrying capacity issues through better use of existing boats. Since most boats are used less than 10% of the time, getting more use out of one boat may be an option that works better for the boater and for the coastal environment. Encouraging timeshare boat owning arrangements and community boating and boat rental programs may help more people enjoy life on the water, without a correlated increase in infrastructure needs.

Alongside the needs of the individual, there are needs for some infrastructure to maintain safe boating standards. Most of these recreational needs piggyback well with existing commercial requirements. For example, maintaining adequate law enforcement, search and rescue services, weather forecasting and satellite navigation, and educational programs will be required to serve a growing, diverse boating population.

Challenges

The speakers at this workshop told us an indisputable fact:

The bulk of our nation’s population is heading for the coast.

They are going there for a reason. They want to be able to walk on the sand, to show their kids a sea bird, to watch the dolphins off the beach. They want to be able to swim, to fish, to boat, and to appreciate the waters of that coast.

They don’t want to walk a beach polluted by sewage outfalls or industrial waste. They don’t want to see a fish floating upside down in the surf. They don’t want to be afraid to touch the water.

We must remember these hard facts while considering the future of the limited natural resources on our coasts. *We must remember that the average citizen’s ability to interact with the water may win or lose that person’s active commitment to coastal water issues. Recreational boating plays a key role in this ongoing quest to create stewards of the coast.*

Notes

1. *Boating 1998*, National Marine Manufacturers Association, Chicago, IL.

2. “Fishing’s \$40 Billion Allure,” *USA Today*, February 16, 1999.

3. *Boating 1998*, National Marine Manufacturers Association, Chicago, IL.

4. “1998 Annual Industry Review,” *Boating Industry Magazine*, February 1999.

5. *1997 State Registered Boat Data*, U.S. Coast Guard, 1997.

6. U.S. Census Bureau, on-line information estimating the current U.S. population at 272,085,093 (www.census.gov).