

Nautical Newcomers: How the Pandemic Has Changed Recreational Boating

Rachel Ameen · Currents, 2022

Leisure boating, much like life, has always entailed a certain amount of risk, risk that has considerably increased since the onset of COVID-19. The greatest danger to recreational boaters, at least in coastal New England, has historically been the harsh currents and severe riptides of the Atlantic and its tributaries. However, since the start of the pandemic, a new danger has eclipsed the familiar maritime hazards, causing headaches—and too often, collisions—within small mainland ports: amateur boaters.

“They don’t know what the f*ck they’re doing,” complains Scott, a longtime boater and MA resident, of the COVID-induced influx of new boaters. Every summer, Scott and his wife Christina sail along the Merrimack River from their home in Gloucester to the river’s mouth, stopping at ports along the way to shop, eat, and sightsee. Their plans were much the same during COVID-19, but since summer of 2020, faced levels of congestion and irresponsible vehicle operation at never before seen levels. Now, Scott has taken to making obscene hand gestures at the obvious amateurs, much to their dismay.

“When COVID hit, everyone had to social distance, and a bunch of people went out and bought a boat. And everyone that bought a boat did not have a captain’s license and had not ever been on the water before,” says Christina on the nautical newcomers. “They were pretty clueless, and they didn’t know the proper channels or etiquette. Many of them don’t have a chart plotter or a depth finder, so they can’t even tell where it’s shallow and where it’s not. We’ve witnessed all kinds of incidents over the past 18 months—boats running aground, hitting docks, people hitting the gas instead of the brakes...it’s been unbelievable.”

Christina and Scott’s concern with this new inexperienced population is echoed by boaters, fishers, and harbor masters all along the coastline, and not just in New England. The pandemic saw a massive uptick in recreational boating accidents everywhere. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Coastguard’s joint-annual report on Recreational Boating Statistics, fatalities had only increased 3.2% from 2018 to 2019, but increased an unprecedented 25% from 2019 to 2020. Of these deaths, 77% occurred on boats where the operator was not trained in boating safety instruction. Only 12% of fatalities took place on vessels where the operator had received a nationally approved boating safety education certificate in cases where this data was known. The Recreational Boating Statistics report notes similar extreme increases in accidents and injuries, with the most common causes being operator inattention, operator inexperience, improper lookout, excessive speed, and machinery failure. Not unlike terrestrial vehicle operation, alcohol consumption is a considerable contributor to accidents, and responsible for 18% of boating fatalities.

Don't drink and drive!

The above statistics highlight the importance of proper safety training and licensing procedures. While all coastal states (except for Alaska, weirdly) require some form of licensing and safety training for the operation of recreational boats, there is some flexibility on how to meet this requirement. While an extensive hands-on safety workshop with a trained instructor is, of course, preferred, many coronavirus-era nascent boat-owners were able to complete an online training and become certified without real-water experience. While there have not yet been any peer-reviewed academic studies examining recreational boat licensing procedures in the time of COVID, there is likely a connection between ineffective online training courses and irresponsible boat operation.

COVID-19 inspired the pursuit of many hobbies—remember the sourdough bread mania—and for affluent coastal U.S. residents, the pandemic seemed like the perfect time to their ultimate nautical fantasies. Boat sales across every category increased significantly in 2020 and show no sign of slowing in 2021, with manufacturers and dealers celebrating record profits while simultaneously struggling to meet the heightened demand. Experienced boaters and newcomers alike are now subject to long wait times, competitive harbor space booking, overwhelming congestion, and backordered equipment. At the peak of the pandemic, these issues were compounded by government office closures and funding cuts. Although the vaccine has elevated these to a degree, marine vendors, port communities, and related businesses are still facing staff shortages, supply chain shortages, and heightened harbor traffic.

These shortages and delays that characterized the new normal seem unlikely to improve anytime soon. Wait times for would-be boat owners can currently stretch to 2023 for new vehicles ranging from yachts to small vessels. Even the demand for used boats has skyrocketed, but for many marinas, boat sales are down because supply is so outmatched by demand.

“We don't have any boats for sale.” The words of this one marina operator, Kal, disappoint the roomful of aspiring kayak owners that has gathered inside his business' small shop. Despite the yard deceptively full of kayaks on racks on full display to passing cars, this marina cannot part with any of its crafts. Formerly, the marina operated with a steady stream of vessel turnover, receiving trade-ins, new orders, and donations frequently. “We aren't getting any used crafts in from people, and we can't consistently get new ones in. Our normal suppliers are out of stock all the time. Most of these people aren't going to find a boat to buy this season, even if they're willing to spend a lot of money,” Kal predicts after the throng of disappointed patrons has dispersed somewhat. Some stick around to ask about rentals, but the marina is booked solid through the end of the summer.

So what does all of this mean? Well, that depends largely on whether you're planning on buying a boat. If you are, perhaps reconsider. If you're determined, you might be able to turn the recreational boating business boom to your advantage, with some patience. Paul, a seasoned harbormaster, is skeptical of the longevity of the pandemic interest in boat ownership. “How long do you think

they'll stick with it? I don't know. Boating is an expensive hobby, and we're already hitting dock capacity every season." The harbor he is referencing has, over the last several years, stopped berthing fishing vessels almost entirely and now caters exclusively to a clientele of recreational boaters. There is dock space available for season-long rentals used by local boat owners, and for short term space used by tourists passing through by water. Securing space can be competitive, and prices are soaring for even the least desirable dock space.

"Plenty of people who bought boats at the start of the pandemic weren't able to get a dock for them, weren't able to get them in the water. So they think, okay, I'll book early next season! But then everyone is booking early, and they're realizing how much it costs to store and move and maintain a vessel like this," Paul muses while observing the congested water from his harbormaster's office. "I don't think all of them will stick with it. It won't take long of owning boats and not being able to use it to convince some people to stop owning them."

Boat owner Christina echoes Paul's sentiment: "Our dock fees, our winter storage fees have all doubled since COVID. These new boaters don't realize this is \$20,000 hobby. We're just lucky we have a place to store our boats. People who aren't ready for that are going to sell their boats. This will go on for another year or so, then you'll see the market flooded, and you'll have your pick of some beautiful boats for below market price."

The economic implications of COVID-19 upon recreational boating are as of yet understudied, but very well could shape the leisure boating industry for a long time to come. Already, Christina indicates one pandemic inspired phenomena in the world of nautical leisure: "Boats named Corona. We've seen so many. We saw one boat called the Socially Distant, they were clearly new boaters and kept hitting the dock wall. They must have hit it four or five times." at this, Christina laughed, "Scott shouted at them that they should have named their boat the Amateurs or the Rookies instead."