



Did You Know? These Simple Boating Practices Can Protect Our Lakes and Wildlife

With summer upon us, area property owners are getting ready for visits from friends and family who look forward to enjoying the crystal clear water in our spring-fed lakes and rivers. We call our waterways Eau Claire for a reason, and the last thing we want to do is turn this wonderfully clear water to pea soup green. It can happen faster than you think when lakebed sediment is disturbed by motorized boats and watercraft, releasing phosphorus and other nutrients into the water.

Think of sediment as a large sponge not to be disturbed. It stores large amounts of phosphorus. When stirred up, that phosphorus is released and it becomes suspended in the water, dispersing nutrients that spur algae growth. It's a perfect recipe for turning our nice clear water into pea green soup.

Boating Best Practices

We can reduce sediment disturbance and thereby minimize algae blooms by following four simple practices:

1. When leaving your dock, power up at least 200 feet from shore.
2. Take off perpendicular to shore rather than parallel.
3. Respect no-wake zones and power down when coming near other boats, especially smaller craft.
4. Operate the newly popular "wake boats" – which can create wakes as high as 4 feet and can scour the bottom in water depths of 20 feet – at least 700 feet from shore and in water depths greater than 20 feet.

Following these practices and asking visiting friends and family to do so will reduce sediment disturbance, as well as shoreline erosion. These four simple practices are also a matter of boating courtesy – courtesy to swimmers and fellow boaters, especially those in smaller crafts such as anglers, paddlers, and stand-up paddle boarders.

Boating and AIS

After enjoying a day on the lake, be mindful that boats play a role in spreading Aquatics Invasive Species (AIS). Almost all local aquatic invasive species, both plant and animal, are brought in by ships emptying their ballast tanks into the Great Lakes. Smaller boats then transport AIS from the Great Lakes to inland waters, and then from inland lake to inland lake.

To prevent or at least slow the spread of AIS, the law requires you to INSPECT, DRAIN, AND DRY. Current Wisconsin law prohibits any boat from leaving the landing with lake water on board. To comply, wake boats have a tough challenge. Their ballast bags, which are used to pitch the boat sternward and create wakes large enough for wake riders to “surf” them without a towline, are all but impossible to fully drain and dry. Cool technology, big problem.

The only way to ensure that there are no living invasive plants in the ballast bags is to perform a complete decontamination process. This process is beyond the capabilities of most boaters. It’s not simple, it’s not convenient, and it’s almost never performed.

Many western states with few bodies of water have ballast tank decontamination equipment and personnel that decontaminate wake boats before they enter the water. But with our many lakes in the Midwest, we don’t have the luxury of staffing every landing with qualified decontamination experts, nor do we have the equipment to do so. Because ballast bags on most wake boats cannot be drained completely and are impossible to inspect, current Wisconsin law is routinely ignored, and our lakes are paying the price.

Some people have concluded that the only effective method to prevent the spread of AIS from wake boat ballast tanks is to restrict those craft to a single body of water. Because many wake boat owners keep their boats on one lake all summer long, they argue, this restriction would not pose a particular hardship.

A group of concerned citizens has introduced a proposal in Wisconsin, modeled after a current law in Vermont, to create a “home lake rule” for wake boats. The “home lake rule” would require wake boats to either (1) stay on one body of water all season or (2) prove these boats were properly drained and decontaminated by a certified decontaminator before launching on a different water body.

For more information, see Paul A. Smith’s January 27, 2024 article in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel at <https://www.aol.com/wisconsin-residents-pushing-home-lake-182849211.html>

Boats and Loons

But enough about laws and regulations. How about them loons? Aren't they awesome creatures?

If you care about loons (and who doesn't?), be aware that this time of year is when those lovely nighttime singers and wing whistling flyers are hanging out on their nests incubating their eggs. Their rear-positioned legs may enable them to swim underwater swiftly enough to overtake their prey, but their unusual anatomy also means they can hardly walk on land, so they waddle mere inches above the waterline to nest on low-level shorelines – shorelines where loons are extremely susceptible to wave action.



Loon nests are commonly found in bays with natural undisturbed shorelines. Boating that causes even moderate wakes can wash over and flood their nests. Please take special care when approaching those low-elevation, slight-slope shorelines. Once loon chicks are hatched, they stay with their parents, never returning to the nest. Recreational boat wakes can cause chicks to become separated from their parents, so be on the lookout for loon families and give them a wide berth of 200 feet when you are out on the lake.

If you spot a lone loon chick, contact Kevin and Linda Grenzer of [Loon Rescue Inc.](#) by phone at [\(715\) 966-5415](tel:7159665415) or [\(715\) 453-4916](tel:7154534916). Get their advice as every situation is different.

Do your part to protect and preserve the precious attributes of our Eau Claire Lakes area and remind visiting friends and family to do the same.