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Education essential to safety and law enforcement on Lakes

Spending a day with the DNR at Okoboji

By Russ Oechslin Journal Correspondent

WAHPETON, Iowa -- As thousands of boaters and recreation lovers converge this weekend on the waters around the Iowa Great Lakes at Okoboji, some area residents say they are more concerned for their safety in an area that has grown more congested each year with boat and watercraft traffic.

A year ago this August, an early morning accident killed a Perry man, and a June 6 hit and run accident still is unsolved. Those accidents received heavy media coverage, and have led to a number of changes, including a decrease in night time speed limits, greater law enforcement and more education of people who spend time on the water.

"People who live here want enforcement. That was where the nighttime speed limit request originated," said Department of Natural Resources law enforcement officer Gary Owen.

Education is key to boating safety and law enforcement on the lakes, Owen said as he wheels his 25-foot Lakes Patrol boat around the waters of south West Lake Okoboji.

In his 25 years with the DNR, Owen said there's no question the number of boats on the Iowa Great Lakes has increased. "But how do you measure?" he asked. "It's not just the registrations at the local courthouse, but boaters from elsewhere in Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, Minnesota, and even other states."

Within minutes of explaining the distance some people haul their boats; Owen stopped a boat piloted by Keith Schlaht, of Denver, Colo., to make a check of life jackets for the six children on board from Sioux Falls and Denver. After show of equipment, the seven went tubing.

The Coast Guard requires only that life jackets must be accessible to all passengers. That could mean wrapped in plastic somewhere or stowed in a

compartment. Owen is more direct: "Wear 'em," he said, adding he thinks the Legislature should mandate life jacket use.

Any DNR officer can stop and inspect any boat, any time to check for registration and safety equipment.

As for the nighttime speed limits, he says "We're probably making one or two stops each night and find people who are unaware. They are very accepting," he said.

The nighttime limit is important because there is a natural impairment of depth perception at night.

Last summer the nighttime hit-and-run accident that caused the death of Sioux City physician Michael Brosnahan, was partly "an issue of night and distance, and I think alcohol, as well," Owen said.

The ability to see lights is important. Doubling the reaction time, "at 50-60 miles an hour it doesn't give you much time" to slow down or change course.

A great day on the Lakes

Wednesday morning was a great time to be boating on East and West Okoboji. Blue skies broke through a haze blown from fires in Canada. The air temperature was just over 70 degrees. And while skiers and fishermen were on the water of both lakes, boat traffic was light -- even for a mid-week morning.

Six days before the July 4 holiday, when the scene would change dramatically, Owen talked about the DNR's safety, law enforcement and education.

Leaving the Gull Point Lakes Patrol station, Owen pulled aside three fishermen. One of them was a retired DNR officer who served in Ida and Sac counties, home of Black Hawk Lake. Jim Wallace, who was fishing with Don Cook and Mike Wattier, told Owen they hadn't found much that morning, but caught five walleyes the night before.

Owen continued across West Lake, watching for problems on calm waters.

"Dickinson County is the only rural county in the state that's growing," he explained while approaching Smith's Bay, where East meets West. "The demand for dock space is up. The ramps and parking lots are full each weekend."

One weekend count of boats passing under Highway 71 from one lake to the other, he said, saw between 600 and 800 crafts per hour. "And speed there is restricted to 5 mph -- a no-wake speed that makes control difficult. Boats don't steer like cars. Boats pivot," he demonstrated, passing under the bridge.

In addition to the increased number of boats, Owen reported that in the last 25 years "there's no question that boats have also gotten bigger and faster, as well. Twenty to 25 years ago 18 feet to 21 feet was a big boat. Now they're 23 feet to 26 feet and do up to 50 mph or more."

While on a mid-week morning that speed may be safe on West Lake, it isn't on weekends with heavier traffic. And at night, the new 25 mph speed limit is still fast enough to allow a boat to plane, Owen said.

Both speed and following distance are important to control of a boat, Owen added. "There are no roads, and no brakes. Code requires boats in close proximity to remain at least 50 feet from each other -- double that if they are traveling at less than 5 mph.

"Then there's action/reaction time. Seeing and perceiving is one process. Then acting on that -- deciding and reacting -- is another. The three-quarters of a second reaction time is doubled with alcohol," Owen said. Depth perception is affected by alcohol consumption. Sun and wind can have the same effect.

Several recent accidents happened in daylight, with low traffic on the lakes. "Accidents are happening where they shouldn't have happened -- not in lively traffic areas. It's difficult to see what's going on here," Owen said.

The DNR officer applauded the efforts of Oak Hill Marina in promoting a safety program for novice boaters -- especially "Women making waves," a half-day class for women who haven't had experience at the helm. The need for this kind of class became more apparent, Owen noted, when Sioux Cityans Dianne and Terry Foister rescued Robert Fitzgerald last month after a hit-and-run boater left him to die in the water.

Dianne Foister admitted having problems controlling the boat while her husband jumped into the water to rescue Fitzgerald. She decided at that point she should learn more.

Another program saw every seventh-grade student in the Spirit Lake schools and every seventh- and eighth-grade student in the Okoboji district take a safe-boating course. The course is required of all boat operators ages 12 to 17. The class sanctioned by the National Boating Law Administration is also available online.

Patrols doubled, fines increased

This year Owen's seasonal staff has more than doubled, going from five to 11, with funding from the Legislature and \$32,000 in private funding, to cover the part of the season prior to today when the state's new fiscal year begins. Part of the funding is to prevent spread of Eurasian Milfoil and Zebra Muscles to area lakes.

Each officer is trained in detection and spends part of each shift explaining the problem to boaters as they put their craft into the water at the area ramps, while also doing an inspection, before taking off on patrol.

In addition to controlling invasive species, Owen is scheduling his crew to be on the water well until nearly dawn many days, where they had to punch out hours earlier in previous years. Owen can now have six boats in the water at the same time on a weekend like this.

Just after entering East Lake Okoboji, Owen spied a dog swimming to the middle of the lake. After offering to help get the dog back to shore, Taylor Taylor told him her black lab, Beau, was chasing ducks. No rescue was necessary. Beau was soon back on shore on his own.

After leaving the dock at the Ritz, Owen explained he sees a gap in respect for boating laws. While youngsters start out mindful of regulations, somewhere between the ages of 18 and 25 too many become irresponsible.

"The county is unified on enforcement of alcohol laws, especially," he said. "If a driver is under 18, he or she is referred to the juvenile authorities. Between the ages of 18 and 21 it's a scheduled \$200 fine for the first offense.

That's quite a penalty. And it's imposed by the Legislature. It's clear the Legislature is taking a stiff approach. It used to be just a small fine."

Crossing West Lake Okoboji enroute back to Gull Point, Owen noticed two fishermen apparently stranded. Harlan and Derek Niemeyer of Doon, Iowa, had planed to give rides to children from Hope Haven after a little fishing. Instead they accepted a tow back to Emerson Bay.

"There's no towing service out here," Owen said. "That can be a problem."

Like a good Boy Scout, Owen added, "It's all in a day's work."