More on Wake Boats

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Rarely has an issue involving Michigan lakes stirred up as much controversy and anger over the last few years as so-called "wake boats" (also sometimes referred to as wave boats, wakeboard boats, wake-surf boats, bladder boats or ballast boats). Both this magazine and the Michigan Lake Stewardship Associations (formerly, the Michigan Lake & Stream Associations) ("MLSA") have received a great deal of public input regarding wake boats, both pro and con. Even though I have written two fairly recent articles for this magazine regarding wake boats (the Fall, 2013 article entitled "Of Mosquitoes and Killer Bees" and a more recent article titled "The Killer Bees Appear to be Winning – An Update regarding Wake Boats/Bladder Boats" in the Fall, 2017 issue of the magazine), readers still request more information about the potential negative impacts of wake boats.

Many riparians are outraged at what they perceive as significant negative impacts on both water safety and the environment from wake boats. Many riparians insist that the huge waves produced by wake boats are destroying their shoreline and sea walls. A significant number of riparians are also concerned about safety given that the large waves created by wake boats can roll around moored boats, break mooring lines, and create turbulent conditions in near-shore areas. They argue that wake boats should not be allowed on smaller or narrow lakes, and that wake boats should be required to remain a significant distance from shore on bigger lakes when the wake boats are producing waves.

Both this magazine and MLSA have also heard from owners of wake boats. Some of those owners have been reasonable advocates for their position and have suggested courtesy and thoughtfulness as a way of overcoming any perceived problems created by wake boats. They point out that few if any definitive scientific studies have been done to demonstrate conclusively that wake boats harm the shoreline, destroy sea walls or hurt the environment. They also argue that some of the shoreline damage that is occurring is due to high water rather than wave action created by wave boats. Other advocates of wake boats have not been as polite. They accuse the people complaining about wake boats of being uninformed and oppose any further governmental regulation that would "take away their property rights."

It is true that very little scientific research has been done regarding the negative impacts of wake boats, as wake boats are a fairly recent phenomena, at least on a large scale. A study done on the Chesapeake Bay area in 2017 by the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee was fairly critical of wake boats. Of course, some of the complaining riparians assert that scientific proof is not needed as they have personally seen the large waves created by a nearby wake boat smash into the shore and thrash around moored boats. Nevertheless, more scientific and empirical based objective studies regarding the physical impacts of wave boats would be helpful.

It does seem self-obvious that wake boats probably are not appropriate for small or narrow lakes. By definition, if a lake (or portion of a lake) is no more than 200 to 300 feet wide, a wake boat operating in the center of that narrow area can still throw huge waves within the normal 100 – 150 foot setback from shore. One can only imagine what would happen if a new truck were designed aerodynamically such that when it is lawfully operated on a public road, the shock waves knock over mailboxes, fences and landscaping items adjacent to the road. The public outcry would be deafening and undoubtedly there would be legislation enacted immediately prohibiting or regulating such truck design. Many riparians (particularly on smaller lakes) will appreciate that analogy.

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Clearly, it will be difficult to regulate wake boats or even ban them from smaller or narrow lakes for two basic reasons. Number one, the boats are fun. Second, a huge amount of money is involved. New wake boats typically start out with a price tag of $60,000 to $90,000 and can go much higher. As more than one person has said, wake boats have virtually rejuvenated the boating industry.

The physical damage caused by wake boats is largely a function of how close to shore their operator uses the wave-making ability and the depth of the lake where the boat is used. The further away from shore, the less shoreline damage. Distance (particularly over 200 to 300 feet from shore) allows the energy within a wave to dissipate before reaching the shore and minimizes the damage. Although one can easily visualize waves above the surface of the lake, wake boats also cause a wave effect under the water. Damage may be done to the bottomlands of a lake (including destroying critical fish habitat) if the wave feature is used in portions of a lake less than 15 to 20 feet deep.

Just as one would normally not drive a high-speed Ferrari in a small residential neighborhood or use cigarette boats or a large cabin cruiser on a 20-acre lake, is it really appropriate to use a wake boat in a small lake or close to the shoreline in a large lake? Many riparians believe that common sense dictates that wake boats should not be used in small or narrow lakes.

A wake boat is not an essential item. Instead, it is but one of many types of watercraft. Unlike many other sports, there are many alternatives to using wake boats – conventional power boats, pontoons and other boats.

Undoubtedly, the public outcry regarding the large waves created by wake boats will only increase over time.

If you would like to share your experiences or views on wake boats (whether "pro" or "con") in a respectful way, please send a letter or email to MLSA at info@mlswa.org. MLSA or this magazine might use some of those comments in a future issue of the magazine.