

The Necessity of Being a Responsible Boater is Now More Important than Ever.  
By Christian Miller

Now that the Memorial Day weekend is behind us many coastal residents are looking forward to heading out on the water for a day of fishing, water skiing or just a relaxing afternoon cruise. With the stress being placed on our aquatic ecosystems due to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill it is now more important than ever to be a conscientious boater. In order to be a good steward when you are on the water, there are a few items which should be considered.

By now, we should all be aware of the serious impacts petroleum spills can have on coastal and freshwater habitats. When fueling your boat in the water, use caution to avoid spillage and never leave the fuel nozzle unattended. Listen as you fill your tank, as there tends to be a gurgling sound just before your tank is full. If a spill occurs, notify marina management immediately and never use a hose to spray down spilled fuel and oil. Instead, use a rag to wipe down the vessel and have the marina operator dispose of the soiled rags properly. Also, bilge socks, which are made of absorbent material, can be placed in the bilge to remove oil. It is also important to keep your engines well tuned and regularly check seals, gaskets, hoses, and connections for leaks.

When it comes to cleaning your boat many products used to wash boat hulls and decks often contain toxic ingredients such as chlorine, phosphates and ammonia. It is always preferable to clean your boat when it is out of the water; however, if you are cleaning your boat in the water you should use cleaning methods that prevent or contain the release of pollutants to surface waters and use environmentally friendly cleaning methods and products, including baking soda, vinegar and lemon juice instead of toxic chemicals.

With the arrival of manatees back to the Mobile Bay area, please keep in mind collision with boats is the most significant human related threat to manatee survival according to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Boat propellers and wakes are also capable of damaging submerged aquatic vegetation and causing shoreline erosion. Seagrasses serve as a food source for many organisms, including manatees, and provide refuge and nursery habitat for many forms of marine life. Seagrasses also help maintain water clarity and reduce erosion by stabilizing the bottom with their root systems. Be observant and careful when you are on the water. Observe no wake zones, avoid grass beds and remember that wildlife is best viewed from a distance.

One way to ensure you are being a good steward is by using a designated Clean Marina. The Alabama-Mississippi Clean Marina Program assists marina, boatyard, and yacht club operators to protect the resources that provide their livelihood: clean water and fresh air. It is a voluntary program that gives managers the resources they need to minimize pollution. The program recognizes environmentally responsible facilities as "Designated Alabama-Mississippi Clean

Marinas.” This designation lets boaters know that these businesses adhere to, or exceed, program criteria to be good stewards of our aquatic resources. Each one of us must share the responsibility for pollution prevention, which for most people is as simple as changing a few small habits. By adopting clean boating habits, you will be helping to protect our aquatic resources for future generations.

To get more information on the program, or to locate a designated Clean Marina, visit the Mississippi-Alabama Clean Marina website. <http://www.masgc.org/cleanmarinas> For relevant information related to the ongoing oil spill pertaining to recreational boating visit the joint Gulf of Mexico Sea Grant website. <http://gulfseagrant.tamu.edu/oilspil>