Best Practices for Boaters during COVID-19
California State Parks
Division of Boating and Waterways

The California State Parks Division of Boating and Waterways (DBW) works with cities and counties throughout the state to promote safe and clean boating access. During the COVID-19 pandemic, DBW advises boaters to follow public health guidelines consistent with the [Governor's Stay-at-Home Orders](). DBW has identified a set of COVID-19 boating safety best practices for boaters based on state and national guidelines. The following best practices are dynamic and DBW urges all boaters to know and follow local restrictions in addition to customary navigation rules.

Physical Distancing and Boating

- Follow state and local guidelines for outdoor recreation. Check with local marina and yacht clubs for additional guidelines.
- Only boat on waterways close to home.
- Pack food, water and other things you may need as restaurants and marina stores may not be open.
- Maintain a safe distance of six feet or more at the fuel dock, sewage pumpout, dump station or while loading up at the marina. If you cannot maintain a safe distance, leave the area and return when it is safe to do so.
- Wash hands frequently or use hand sanitizer, after touching items such as a marina gate, fuel pump or sewage pumpout.
- Limit the people aboard your boat to those in your immediate household.
- Do not raft up with other boats.
- Follow state and local guidelines for face coverings.

Safe Boating Practices Before Heading to the Water

Take a safe boating course and get your California Boater Card.

- Even the most experienced boaters can learn from safe boating courses. California and U.S. Coast Guard boating accident data show that states with some form of boating safety education have fewer accidents and fatalities than states without any boater education requirements.
- DBW maintains a [list of safe boating courses]() approved by the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators and the state.
- As of January 1, 2020, all operators of a motorized vessel on California waterways who are 35 years of age and younger are required to carry a lifetime California Boater Card.
- The card is proof of successful completion of an approved safe boating course.
- The California Boater Card program is being phased in by age with all boaters being required to carry the card by 2025.

- For more information about the California Boater Card law, visit the [California Boater Card website](#).

Inspect your life jacket.

- Check the label to make sure the life jacket has a U.S. Coast Guard approval number, is the appropriate size, and is the right type of life jacket for the intended boating activity.
- Life jackets are sized by weight and chest measurements. An adult-sized life jacket is not suitable for a child, as the life jacket may be too large and may ride up around their face or even slip off. A life jacket too small for the wearer may not provide enough flotation to keep a person afloat. Always check the fit of the child's life jacket before entering the water.
- Ensure there is no physical damage to the flotation, fabric or buckles. Flotation can break down over time and should be evaluated before use.
- For inflatable life jackets, follow the manufacturer's recommendations for maintenance on the inflator technology and inspect the bladder by manually inflating the life jacket using the inflator tube to make certain the life jacket holds air.
- More information on [life jackets here](#).

Make sure you have the right safety equipment on board.

- Schedule a vessel safety check with your local U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary or U.S. Power Squadrons.
- Download a virtual vessel safety check and inspect your boat yourself.
- Schedule a [vessel safety check or to download the virtual safety check form here](#).

File a float plan before each boating trip.

- Share a float plan with a family member or friend with the details of your trip in the event of an emergency.
- Download a [free float plan here](#).

Check the weather.

- Know the latest weather forecast prior to going out, and check regularly for changing conditions.

Download helpful boating applications on your phone.

- Boat CA is a free iOS and Android mobile app that shows you boating facilities, life jacket loan stations, laws, boat registration and more.

- Pumpout Nav is a free iOS and Android mobile app that shows you where the nearest sewage pumpouts and dump stations are located.

Safe Boating Practices While on the Water

- Always wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved life jacket. Find a [life jacket loan station here](#).
- Carry all required boating safety equipment such as flares, navigation light, a horn or whistle, and a first aid kit.
- Obey all navigation rules.
- Never boat under the influence.
- Do not boat while distracted.
- Travel at safe speeds.

Tips for Cleaning Life Jackets

- Hand wash or sponge down life jackets in warm, soapy water. (Do not submerge inflator on inflatable life jackets.)
- Follow by rinsing life jackets with clean water and hang to dry.
- Clean buckles, zippers, other hardware and hook/loop fasteners (e.g. Velcro®) with a 60 – 90% alcohol solution.
- Do not dry-clean, machine launder, use chlorine bleach, or apply direct heat to a life jacket.
- Always store life jackets in a warm, dry, well ventilated place out of direct sunlight.

Clean and Green Boating Tips

- **Prevent the Further Spread of Aquatic Invasive Species.** Aquatic invasive species, such as quagga and zebra mussels, can create havoc in the aquatic environment and damage motor boats. To prevent the spread of these mussels and other aquatic invasive species, people launching vessels at any waterbody are subject to watercraft inspections and are strongly encouraged to clean, drain and dry their motorized and non-motorized boats, including personal watercraft, and any equipment that contacts the water before and after use. For free prevention resources, including a boat cleaning guide book and inspection/cleaning checklists, please visit [DBW's website](#).

- **Plan Ahead. Dump at the Pump!** It is illegal to discharge untreated sewage anywhere in lakes, rivers, reservoirs or within the three-mile territorial limit for coastal waters. Never discharge treated sewage into "restricted waters" such as a marina, swimming/wading areas, a sanctuary, poorly flushed areas, lakes, reservoirs, freshwater impoundments or into federal No Discharge Zones. Use [sewage pumpouts,](#) dump stations, or [mobile-pumpout services](#). Download the free [Pumpout Nav app.](#)

- **Stow it, don't throw it.** Keep your trash on-board. Never throw cigarette butts, fishing line or any other garbage into waterways. Take advantage of shore-side facilities to recycle plastic, glass, metal and paper. Used fishing line can be deposited at fishing-line recycling stations. Used fishing line that ends up in waterways can entangle and kill wildlife and cause boat damage.

- **Turn in a vessel before it pollutes.** Proper disposal of an unwanted vessel is a vital part of clean and responsible boating. Because there are several environmental hazards associated with old vessels, including used oil, solvents and used batteries, it is important that all vessel owners properly dispose of their vessels at the appropriate time. There are several options for proper vessel disposal: the no-cost Vessel Turn-In Program, landfill disposal, recycling and/or dismantling. Visit DBW's website for more information.

- **Recycle, Collect, Report.** Take the necessary steps to perform spill-proof oil changes and recycle your used oil and oil filters. Always use oil absorbents and dispose of them as a hazardous waste by visiting your county household hazardous waste collection center or marina offering this service. Remember to never use soap to disperse fuel and oil spills; it increases harm to the environment and is illegal. View oil and fuel clean boating videos. Report ALL oil and chemical spills to the local marina, the National Response Center (800-424-8802) and the California Office of Emergency Services (800 OILS911).