

THE TREAD LIGHTLY!  
GUIDE TO RESPONSIBLE  
PWC USE

**INTRODUCTION**

*We did not inherit the Earth from our parents,  
We are borrowing it from our children.  
-Native American Proverb*

For many of us, enjoying the outdoors has become a major form of recreation. There's nothing more enjoyable than "getting away from it all." Personal Watercraft (PWC) allows users the opportunity to explore hidden coves and seldom-seen waterways, deserted islands and wide-open spaces, narrow channels and the swells of an ocean. Whether cruising around on a local lake for an afternoon or tackling a multi-day adventure in an exotic locale, PWCs can take you places traditional boats cannot, in ways limited only by your imagination.

PWC can tow water-skiers and wake boarders. They range from single-person stand-up craft capable of a multitude of maneuvers, to stable, comfortable, four-person cruisers. They have become a key component to water activities. But wherever you go and however you use PWC, you carry a responsibility to both your neighbors and your precious water resources.

Throughout the **Tread Lightly! Guide to Responsible Personal Watercraft Use**, you will learn to prepare for responsible enjoyment of the water's splendor and the excitement of PWCs. This guidebook will make your riding as enjoyable as possible. It will help you avoid having a negative impact on nature and those around you, ensuring future opportunities for PWC use.

**WHAT IS TREAD LIGHTLY!?**

Tread Lightly!<sup>®</sup> is a national nonprofit organization with a mission to proactively protect recreation access and opportunities in the outdoors through education and stewardship. Tread Lightly!'s educational message, along with its training and restoration initiatives are strategically designed to instill an ethic of responsibility in a wide variety of outdoor enthusiasts and the industries that serve them. The program's goal is to balance the needs of the people who enjoy outdoor recreation with our need to maintain a healthy environment.

In 1985, the U.S. Forest Service launched the Tread Lightly! program as a means of addressing concerns about the impacts from increasing numbers of visitors to the great outdoors for recreational purposes. In 1990, to maximize the program's effectiveness, management responsibilities were transferred to the private sector, making Tread Lightly! an apolitical, nonprofit organization. Tread Lightly! is now the nation's signature ethics message for recreationists that use motorized and mechanized vehicles in their outdoor pursuits.

Tread Lightly! has become an ethical and educational force in bringing together and unifying a broad spectrum of stakeholders including agencies, industry, media, conservation and enthusiast groups, and concerned individuals who share a common goal—to find a balance between humans and nature.

Our federal partners in spreading the message of responsible and ethical use of the outdoors include the National Park Service, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, and the Army Corps of Engineers.

The message is simple: conserve our environment! Make the commitment to follow Tread Lightly! principles as summarized in the Tread Lightly! Pledge:

**Travel Responsibly**  
**Respect the Rights of Others**  
**Educate Yourself**  
**Avoid Sensitive Areas**  
**Do Your Part**

These are the basic tools for responsible recreation. In the following pages you will find in-depth information on how to Tread Lightly! by minimizing your impacts on land and water with your PWC. By practicing these principles and suggestions provided in the guide, you will help protect natural resources and preserve access to public lands.

## **TREAD LIGHTLY! ON WATER**

These are the basic tools for responsible recreation. In the following pages you will find in-depth information on how to Tread Lightly! by minimizing your impacts on waterways and shorelines. By utilizing these principles and the detailed suggestions provided in the guide, public and private waterways are more likely to remain open for recreation and enjoyment.

**TRAVEL RESPONSIBLY** on designated waterways and launch your watercraft in designated areas.

### **The Fundamentals...**

- Travel only on waters that are open to your type of PWCs.
- Understand and practice proper techniques related to navigation on waterways.
- Always operate your watercraft at a safe speed.
- Wear a personal flotation device (PFD) and make sure that you have one available for each person on board.
- Have the required safety equipment in good working order and onboard every time you get underway (audio signaling device, flares (where appropriate), PFDs)
- Comply with all signs and barriers.
- File a float plan with the appropriate parties before getting underway
- Always travel with a partner. Traveling solo can leave you vulnerable if you have an accident or breakdown.

## NEGOTIATING WATERWAYS

Water recreation is a fun and exciting way to experience the great outdoors. Motor powered vessels offer an opportunity to travel waterways with speed not offered by their human powered counterparts. Still, these machines require smart use to minimize impact on water resources and other users.

- When riding make sure that your automatic engine stop lanyard is attached to your PFD, wrist, or clothing.
- Keep your distance and avoid swimmers, water-skiers, and all other boat traffic.
- Never jump a wake.
- Make sure you obey “no wake” zones.
- If crossing a wake, cross at lower speeds and keep a close lookout for skiers and towables.
- Comply with all signs and barriers. This includes speed limits, no-wake zones, and underwater obstructions.
- Because boats don’t have brakes, keep your distance and don’t follow boats closer than 300 feet.
- If you fall off your craft, always reboard from the rear.
- Do not attempt to ride at night. PWCs are not equipped with lights.
- If you see a red flag on a tower at a marina or harbor, it signifies a small craft advisory. Take action to move toward shore.

### *Trailing Watercraft*

- Make certain your trailer lights work and your watercraft is secure on the trailer before you travel to your destination.
- Balance your load—including items stowed inside your boat. It also helps to empty water and fuel tanks before traveling long distances.
- Make sure your boat is securely tied down to the trailer.

**RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS** including anglers, swimmers, skiers, boaters, divers and others to allow them to enjoy their recreational activities undisturbed.

### **The Fundamentals...**

- Show consideration to all recreationists on and around the waters.
- Be courteous to other boaters while in boat ramp areas.
- Keep the noise down—especially around shore.
- If crossing private property, be sure to ask permission from the landowner(s).

Respecting the environment and the rights of other users ensures future access to the water and shines a positive light on boaters and PWC users. Oftentimes, the opinions others have of your sport may be based upon contact with a rider or two. Much of water etiquette boils down to common sense. Treat others on the water with respect and courtesy. Of course, in addition to common sense, there are important navigation rules you must be familiar with. Collisions are

the most common type of PWC accident, and knowing a few basic rules of the water greatly reduces the risk of accidents. Be a good ambassador for your sport, and make sure that those you encounter are left with a positive image.

- PWCs should stay clear of other boats including those not under command, with restricted maneuverability, fishing boats, and sailing vessels.
- Navigation rules do not bestow right of way, but provide a code of conduct to either give-way (stay clear) or stand-on (keep course) preventing collisions on waterways. Boaters should always take into consideration specific circumstances when navigating waterways.
- When overtaking a slower vessel, do so with as much room as possible to avoid rocking the other boat with your wake.
- When anchoring boats don't get too close to other boats. Changing winds and currents can swing boats, causing anchor lines to tangle and boats to bang against each other.
- Always offer help if you see another boater in distress.
- Noise travels faster over water. Keep the noise down especially near shore side residences, campgrounds, and picnic areas.

#### **Launching and Retrieving Watercraft**

- The launch ramp is only for launching and retrieving your watercraft.
- Launch and retrieve your watercraft as quickly as possible.
- Prepare your watercraft including loading supplies prior to entering the launch ramp.
- After retrieval, wipe down your boat and prepare it for travel once you have cleared the launch ramp.
- Courtesy docks are available for loading and unloading; they are not for long term docking.

**EDUCATE YOURSELF** by learning rules and regulations, planning for your trip, taking recreation skills classes, and knowing how to use and operate your equipment safely.

#### ***Preparation***

- Boating rules may vary from state to state. Regulations such as operating age and distance from other boats, swimmers, and the shore often differ, so you must know local ordinances before you go. The Personal Watercraft Industry Association (PWIA) model legislation recommends a minimum age of 16 for drivers. In states where children under 16 are allowed to operate watercraft, adult supervision is recommended. These laws apply to all inboard boaters including PWCs.
- Weather, particularly over open water, can change quickly. It's crucial you get a weather forecast before setting out for the day. This will allow you to dress and plan accordingly. Also, keep a close eye on the skies when on the water. While riding, watch for increasing winds, darkening skies, lightning, and thunder. When faced with adverse weather, return to shore. If caught in bad weather and faced with threatening waves, reduce speed and approach waves at a 45-degree angle.
- Modifications to your craft may reduce safety and reliability and may make the vessel illegal to use.
- Make sure you have enough fuel and oil for your entire trip. Waterways aren't like the open road, and fueling opportunities are far less frequent. Think ahead; fill up on gas and

oil before leaving, bring extra fuel if necessary, and know where potential fuel stops will be along your route. A good rule of thumb is to use no more than one-third going and one-third coming back; that way you'll have one-third in reserve in case of an emergency.

- Know your machine and study your manual! Jumping on and taking off is a lot more fun than reading the Owner's Manual first, but you'll have more fun and fewer problems in the long run if you take the time to understand your machine's operating characteristics by reading the information the manufacturer has provided. Be sure you are completely familiar with the controls and operation of your watercraft, and be comfortable performing basic maintenance.
- The best teacher is experience. Learn from someone very familiar with your type of watercraft, and, if possible, take a boating education class. Your local dealer, state Department of Natural Resource (DNR), or Coast Guard (800/366-BOAT) will know of low-cost or free classes in your area.
- Maintenance is vital to keep your machine running trouble-free. Even casual inspections before and after you recreate can prevent problems.
- More involved maintenance should be done on a regular basis. If you are uncomfortable performing any of the suggested functions, have your local dealer tend to these tasks. It will be worth it in the long run.
- Pack a tool kit and carry a towrope in case you or another boat needs a tow.
- Licensing regulations for PWC vary from state to state. Check with your local dealer, enthusiast groups, or state department of recreation for the laws in your area.
- Consider purchasing PWC insurance.
- PWCs come with a standard tool kit. While not fancy, the tool kit includes plug wrenches, screwdrivers, other wrenches, among other tools: everything you need to complete a minor fix.

### ***Basic Water Safety***

- Use the buddy system; never swim alone.
- Swim when a lifeguard is present.
- Follow all posted rules. If no rules are posted, use common sense.
- A PFD is recommended for inexperienced swimmers when around the water.
- Swimmers with limited water experience should stay in water less than chest deep.
- Know the water you are in and all possible dangers associated.
- Do not swim if there are indications of bad weather.
- Do not dive headfirst unless the area is clearly posted for diving.
- Learn to swim. Seek out your local partners in the community that offer swimming lessons.

### ***Safety***

Boating is meant to be fun. You can keep it that way by using common sense and following a few simple guidelines.

- Don't start your engine if you smell gas vapors. Check the engine compartment, and identify where the smell is coming from (i.e. fuel line, gas tank, engine). In addition, it's never a good idea to smoke near your watercraft.

- Always carry a U.S. Coast Guard approved, working fire extinguisher with you when boating. It's the law, and all watercraft have specific places to store the extinguisher. Periodically, check the canister to be sure it is still pressurized.
- It is essential that you know distress signals and warning symbols. Local clubs, dealers, or the Coast Guard can provide you with this short list. You should also carry on board, a whistle, flares (which are particularly useful when riding on a large body of water), a distress flag, or a brightly colored cloth.
- Be aware of your surroundings at all times so you can react and respond in time to avoid accidents.
- Be sure to teach new users how to ride/drive the watercraft, and better yet, see that they take a boating education class.
- You must report all accidents within 10 days when property damage exceeds \$500. Fatalities and missing persons must be reported immediately, and formal reports are due within 48 hours. To know whom to report to, be familiar with the entity that manages the waterway and numbers to call in case of emergency.
- Stay within your ability. It is natural for people to want to push their limits, but remember you are on a high performance vessel capable of high speeds in an environment that can change suddenly and without warning. Beginners should always start at low speeds in un-crowded areas and gradually work their way into more advanced riding.
- Ride in control. PWCs have become more powerful each year and can now cross a lot of water per second. Racing should be saved for sanctioned events.
- Know and observe all speed limits; it's your responsibility.
- Remember that you must apply throttle to steer. If you try to steer without depressing the throttle, the craft will continue in its current direction.
- Know your PWCs load and towing limits, and do not go beyond the established weight limits.
- Many PWCs are capable of pulling a skier. In addition to the driver and skier, you should have a "spotter," someone who sits on the back of the PWC and monitors the skier.
- Pulling a skier requires a towrope of reasonable length. A good rule of thumb is to stay at least twice the length of the rope away from any object or potential hazard.
- Be aware of all traffic and objects in your area. The sun can often distort or disguise objects, so pay attention to what is going on around you. Because of a PWCs small size, swells, obstructions, and other boats can affect sight lines, so approach other objects with caution. Do not operate directly behind other vessels and do not turn sharply so that other boaters cannot avoid you.
- Riding a PWC can be strenuous and tiring, and the wind and sun quickens fatigue. Use sun block and take frequent breaks. When you are tired, you are more susceptible to accidents.
- Be sure to keep your lanyard attached to your wrist, PFD, or clothing as appropriate. It's smart, and it's the law.
- You and your passengers should wear a Coast Guard approved Personal Flotation Device (PFD) which is acceptable for PWC use. All PFDs contain information regarding the type of PFD it is. Based on Coast Guard statistics from the early 2000s, approximately

three out of four boat drowning victims were not wearing a PFD, and the vast majority of accidental boating deaths were due to drowning ([www.uscgboating.org/statistics/accident\\_stats.htm](http://www.uscgboating.org/statistics/accident_stats.htm)). As a PWC user, you are far more likely to fall into the water than any other boater.

- No boater spends more time in the water than a PWC user. Falls can be a fun, sometimes a welcome part of riding. However, reboarding can be difficult, especially in deep waters. Always reboard your craft from the rear, and ride carefully and slowly in traffic to avoid unwanted spills that may make reboarding difficult.
- You and your passengers should also wear appropriate protective clothing, such as wetsuits. You can receive severe internal injuries if you fall into the water or are near the jet thrust nozzle. These activities may force water into body cavities. Normal swimwear does not prevent water from entering body cavities. Wetsuits can also help to protect against hypothermia and abrasions.
- You may want to consider sunglasses or goggles, as they can protect your eyes from the wind, water, and sun. However, you might find that they are distracting or distort your vision.
- Water gloves and footwear (booties) are also recommended. Gloves can help keep blisters at bay and protect you from cuts and bruises. Booties help protect feet from injuries caused by underwater objects.
- Make every effort to ride with a partner, even if that person is on a different kind of boat. Not only is there fun in numbers, but also riding with at least one companion is essential to your safety. The buddy system is vital to assure quick assistance should problems arise. If your group only has one boat, stay within eyesight of shore.
- PWC are not equipped with lights. Therefore, do not attempt to ride at night.

### *Survival in the Water*

Boating is a safe, fun activity, but as with any sport, potential risks are involved. Knowing what to do in case of an emergency could save a life.

- Knowing first aid is not the law, but it is a smart idea. Being familiar with resuscitation, heat exhaustion, hypothermia, and how to treat a wound can be invaluable.
- If you fall in cold water, reboard your vessel as quickly as possible. You lose body heat 25 times faster in water than from air of the same temperature.
- Any exposure to water that is colder than your core body temperature (98.6 degrees Fahrenheit) can eventually elicit symptoms of hypothermia. Riding in water of less than 70 degrees greatly hastens the risk; so always wear a wetsuit or dry suit in these conditions. Signs of hypothermia include shivering, dizziness, confusion, drowsiness, numbness, weakness, and impaired judgment and vision. Get any victim of hypothermia out of the cold and into dry, warm clothing as quickly as possible.
- Do not give the person with hypothermia anything to eat or drink unless he or she is fully conscious, and NEVER give the victim alcohol. Warm the victim's body slowly. After full consciousness is restored, feed the victim warm liquids and/or soup.

**AVOID SENSITIVE AREAS** and operating your watercraft in shallow waters or near shorelines at high speeds.

- Always launch at a designated boat ramp. Backing a vehicle on a riverbank or lakeshore can damage the area and leads to erosion.
- Always travel slowly in shallow waters and avoid waters less than 2½ feet deep.
- High speeds near shorelines lead to large wakes, which can cause shoreline erosion.
- Sensitive areas to avoid include seasonal nesting or breeding areas.
- Avoid disturbing historical, archeological, and paleontological sites.
- Avoid “spooking” wildlife you encounter and keep your distance.
- When anchoring, choose areas with no aquatic vegetation which can be damaged by dragging anchors.
- Motorized and mechanized vehicles are not allowed in areas designated Wilderness.

**DO YOUR PART** by leaving the area better than you found it, properly disposing of fuel, oil and waste, avoiding the spread of invasive species, restoring degraded areas, and joining a local enthusiast organization.

- Pack out what you pack in.
- Carry a trash bag and pick up litter left by others.
- When filling up your boat take every precaution not to spill into the water.
- Observe proper sanitary waste disposal or pack your waste out.
- Following a trip wash your gear, watercraft, and support vehicle to reduce the spread of invasive species.
- Don’t mix driving with alcohol or drugs.

### ***Waste Disposal***

- Use marina pump-out or dump stations to remove sewage. If you don’t have an installed toilet use a portable toilet or on shore facilities.
- Keep your trash on board and discard on shore in garbage containers. Never dispose of fishing line, cigarette butts, or other garbage into waterways.
- Recycle whenever possible. If a marina does not recycle encourage them to start a program.
- Dumping plastics in navigable waters is illegal in the United States. Marine animals sometimes confuse plastics for food or get entangled in it. Both are often fatal. Plastics can also entangle propellers or clog intakes, damaging watercraft.

### ***Fueling PWC***

- When filling your craft with gas and oil, take every precaution not to spill into the water. You may think a few drops don't matter, but if all boat users shared that attitude every time they filled up, the damage would be significant.
- Use a fuel collar or bib when filling up to catch drips and overflow and prevent backsplash.
- Be prepared; carry a spill kit, which includes absorbent pads, socks, and booms.
- Keep your engine tuned to prevent fuel and oil leaks.
- Do not add soap to disperse fuel and oil spills. It only increases damage to the environment.

### ***Invasive Species***

Aquatic nuisance species are becoming a costly problem in our waterways. These non-indigenous species threaten the health and diversity of the aquatic ecosystem.

- Make sure to remove all plant material from watercraft, motor, trailer and other gear and dispose on dry land in a garbage container.
- Drain livewells, bilge water, and transom wells at the boat launch prior to leaving.
- When you get home, wash your boat, gear, and trailer with hot water.
- Flush water through your boat motor's cooling system and other parts of the boat that normally get wet. If possible, let everything dry for five days in the hot sun before using your boat in another body of water.
- Empty bait buckets on land, never into the water.
- Never dip your bait or minnow bucket into a lake if the bucket contains water from another lake.
- Never dump live fish or other organisms from one body of water into another one.

### ***Fishing***

- Never discard fish entrails in lake shallows or any area where others might come across it. It is unacceptable to bury it near the lake or stream or burn it in camp. Suitable alternatives include, bagging and packing out entrails, disposing of it in water at least 25 feet deep, or burying it 100 yards away from any lake, trail, or camps.
- Avoid using lead weights, which, if ingested, are toxic to wildlife.
- Use only artificial lures. Live bait has the potential to accidentally introduce exotics and cause more damage to fish when being released, as they often take live bait deeper.
- If practicing catch and release use barbless single hooks to make release easier. Return fish quickly, handling them with a wet hand to minimize effects to the protective coating on fish skin.
- Minimize fishing during spawning periods.
- Release smaller fish as they are forage for many residents of the ecosystem. Larger and older fish are often the best producers, collect more contaminants, and are less healthy to eat—also making them good choices for release.

Finally, join a local club! Clubs are a great way to meet people with similar interests, pool resources, and share experiences about trips and riding. They often organize or provide information about service projects around your favorite recreation spot. Contact your local dealer for information on boating and PWC clubs in your region.