

“Three Fishermen die in Rice Lake Mishap” – A response by John Gullick

Let me start by expressing my deepest sympathies to the families and friends of those who died in last weekend's incident. I say incident because the dictionary defines “Mishap” as an unlucky or unfortunate accident. Unfortunate yes but this was not an accident. It was predictable and preventable. There is a reason that four people made it to shore and three did not. It was reported that the three who died were not wearing PFDs (Personal Flotation Devices) or lifejackets and the four that made it safely to shore were.

A few years ago the Canadian Safe Boating Council contracted with SmartRisk to produce a report on deaths related to recreational boating. A few key facts emerged. Some were already known and have been talked about for years. Some were new.

You can learn more about this report by going to www.csbc.ca and reading “Will it Float?”

What we know:

Every year in Canada 150 -200 people die in incidents related to recreational boating.

Over 85% of these people were not wearing their PFD or lifejacket.

Over 45% were also alcohol related.

Over 65% of these deaths occurred within 15 meters of safety.

Most of these incidents occur in small open boats under 6 meters in length.

We are now beginning to learn more about cold water immersion and the effects of cold water shock. Canadian waters are generally very cold. Even in the height of summer cold water lies not far beneath the surface. When a person enters the water unexpectedly they experience an immediate gasp reflex. Also, during the first three or four minutes, the body is struggling for control. This happens regardless of a person's swimming ability. It is not until after those first few critical moments that one can attempt self rescue. If this gasp reflex occurs when their head is underwater it is likely they will drown. How many times have we heard “My partner was there on deck one minute and the next they were gone. I never saw him alive again.” A sad but true situation that occurs all too often and is usually caused by what we now know as cold water shock.

Have you ever tried to put on a life jacket or PFD when you are already in the water, even if you were expecting it? This task is very difficult in the best of circumstances. Just imagine what it is like if you are gasping for air and struggling for control.

PFDs or lifejackets work when we are wearing them. Just go back to the report that the four who made it safely back to shore were wearing PFDs.

Three years ago most members of the Canadian Safe Boating Council signed a declaration that they would wear their PFDs onboard their own open vessels under six meters in length while underway and would ask all other passengers to do the so as well. Is it time that Canada required all its boaters to do the same? Is it time for mandatory PFD/lifejacket wear in all open boats under six meters in length while underway? I pose this question in the hopes it will generate some meaningful discussion. I would be very interested in readers' responses.

I would like to close by saying that boating is a diverse recreational activity enjoyed by millions of Canadians from coast to coast to coast. It can be an extremely fun and safe experience if people make some informed choices.

- Get training from a recognized boating organization to ensure you are a competent boat operator who knows the rules and respects the rights of others.
- Don't drink and boat.
- Use environmentally safe boating practices.
- Wear your PFD or lifejacket in open vessels while underway.

John Gullick is a past chair of the Canadian Safe Boating Council, Chair of the Peterborough Dragon Boat Festival and a member of Canadian Power & Sail Squadrons, the Canadian Coast Guard Auxiliary and the Trent Severn Antique & Classic Boat Association. His safe boating tips regularly appear on CHEX Television during the boating season.