

RECREATIONAL ACTIVITY RESTRICTIONS FROM WAKE BOATS

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Environmental impacts aside, there is another significant negative effect experienced as a byproduct of the wake surfing sport. It's time to take a close, objective look at the true impact of wake surfing on other forms of water recreation.

What follows needs to be said once and remembered throughout the reading of this article. The overarching assumption in all of what follows is that the negative experiences described are unintended consequences from the sport of wake surfing. To the vast majority of those who participate in wake surfing, this will likely be the first time they've heard of any such negative experiences that others are having after their waves have been surfed upon and after their music has been heard by boat occupants and the surfer. Perhaps this lack of knowledge is as understandable as it was to me as a young competition slalom and barefoot skier. I learned from parents who explained what happened when our ski boat went too close to fishermen. I learned from a Marine Sherriff what could happen from getting too close to a swimming raft. I learned from a parent who explained to me that perhaps our next-door neighbors didn't want to carry on a conversation with their guests while my radio was blasting music, annoying them, and interrupting their conversation. I didn't know any of this, but as soon as it was explained I understood it, and from then on I paid attention to how my actions affected others on and around my lake.

Further, certainly what is written here has not been experienced the same by all people on all lakes where wake boats are present. Of course not. Each lake and each lake community is different. People are different. Those who may disagree with or are put off by this article will have different frames of reference and are free to disagree for any reason, however all of what is written here was repeatedly experienced or observed of others' experiences, covering many years by a watchful eye with decades of lake living.

On our nine lakes of observation, we determined that wake boat wakes and the associated loud noise from very powerful sound systems have a direct and significant if not suppressive negative affect on other forms of personal water recreation, making those activities unpleasurable or unsafe, and causing the restriction of those activities only to times when wake boats are not present. Like natural shorelines, which experience their share of well-documented damage being indefensible from wake boat waves, people recreating on lakes have never seen such large high-energy engineered waves before, completely different from other waves generated by wind or other watercraft for that matter. We're disoriented, don't know how to cope with them, and we are taken by surprise when we encounter them.

With all due appreciation and well-deserved respect to recent analytical studies of wake boat waves as well as recently proposed laws increasing wake boat operational distance from objects to 500 feet, we found, in our personal experience, that wake boat wave energy maintains an energy significant enough to adversely affect the following recreational activities from far greater distances than 500 feet.

Regarding wake boat suppressive effects on other recreational activities, here are some examples from our findings:

1. Fishing: Wake boat waves make it impossible to anchor as the high peak, wide trough wave causes fishing boats to dip very low and rise very high in succession while moving laterally. This jerking motion can pull the strongest anchor set. Those who have historically stood up to fish are forced to sit down or fall, risking injury. On low profile fishing boats like bass boats, jon boats, or flats boats, waves frequently come over the sides or the bow, flooding floors and soaking equipment. These fishing boats were not designed for taking on wake surfing waves.

2. Kayaking: All but the most expensive sea kayaks were not designed for wake surfing waves. If you face them, they will destabilize the kayak and come over the deck and into the cockpit. Take them on the side and you may flip over or take on water. The highly experienced kayaker with a seagoing kayak can navigate wake boat waves safely, but other less experienced users will struggle.

3. Stand-up paddleboarding: Only the most skilled paddle boarder can stand up when hit by wake boat waves. Most fall when they are surprised by a wake boat wave, or sit down or jump in the water upon seeing the waves coming, having fallen before when attempting to ride them out.

4. Canoeing: Once again, except for the very experienced, the novice or family canoeists find canoeing unpleasurable and unsafe due to the canoe's even higher center of gravity than the kayak.

5. Recreational sailing: Wake boat waves knock the wind out of sails and rock sailboats violently making sailing intermittently impossible, but overall unpleasurable and unsafe. Waves come over decks and sides of even larger sailboats, but for smaller sailboats the experience can be much worse.

6. Sailboat racing: Same as above, but wake boat waves against the bow can actually make a sailboat go backwards. Racing in these waves again knocks the wind out of the sails causing them to violently flap, eliminating the possibility of keeping a racing sail trim. Many racing tactics in sailboats require standing up, especially when changing course. Wake boat wave energy can knock even the best sailors down, risking serious injury. Sailboat racing clubs are limiting or canceling light air races due to wake boat waves.

7. Small boat running at speed: Watercraft such as small aluminum boats, CraigCats, custom-made hydroplane type boats, low-sided boats such as bass boats, small Boston Whalers, etc., while operating at faster speeds can literally be launched airborne or plunge bow first into these unique long-trough, high-peak waves. This is further evidenced by jet skis that commonly follow wake boats just for the purpose of launching themselves airborne off powerful, engineered waves.

8. Cruising: For those of us who like to go out on the pontoon boat or other type of boat to relax with friends over drinks, snacks, or even dinner, a whole outing can be ruined by a series of wake boat waves. Often these waves will rock the slow moving or stationary boat so violently that water will come over the sides or onto the deck of a loaded pontoon boat, soaking the passengers and/or their belongings. Dinner and drinks are knocked off tables or seats and drinks will spill out of glasses, even in cupholders. Anyone standing up while serving others, talking, or changing seats can be knocked off balance or even knocked down, risking injury.

Having given abundant examples of how wake boat waves have negative effects on other lake recreational activities, let's move on. There is another form of recreational suppression from wake boats: the noise generated from them.

Wake boats are equipped with very expensive sound systems, some in excess of 1,000 watts of power, which have the capability of reaching 130 decibels. This is the same as a gunshot near the ear or a jet engine at takeoff. These directional speakers are mounted high on a gantry, rear facing, and designed for the person in tow to hear loud music clearly over all other sounds at over 75 feet away.

Wake boat operators and surfers may not be considering the projected collateral damage from these powerful sound systems after the sound travels past the person in tow, sometimes with objectionable lyrics. This sound can travel over three quarters of a mile and can be heard on shore, through screens and into houses where normal conversations with family or friends are interrupted. There are times when lakefront owners cannot get away from this penetrating sound, even by shutting doors, windows, turning on A/C and a loud TV; the sound penetration from the wake boat sound system can still be heard through windows, and over all of the sound-generating items in the house. At times we have seen lakefront owners leave their homes for the day, waiting for evening to return in hopes of a more peaceful atmosphere.

Loud music generated from wake boats negatively impacts the following sample of many popular historical water recreation activities:

Quiet boat cruising, kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding, canoeing, fishing, swimming/wading, Frisbee or volleyball in the water, playing with small children on the beach, generations wading together, recreational sailing, sailboat racing, nature/bird watching, eating a meal or drinking a beverage while drifting or cruising on the lake, sitting in the house or on the deck or shore peacefully looking at the lake, reading near the lake, sunbathing, beachcombing, shoreline exploring, hiking, and family get-togethers or parties. All are affected by the overbearing imposition of loud music generated from wake boats. The reader may recall even more activities than these examples.

There is data to support this. A door-to-door survey was conducted on one of the nine lakes observed. Fifteen lake residents were polled (admittedly a small sample but certainly more valid than just one lake resident's opinion) and the data showed the following: 73% said the noise was "very bothersome", 0% "bothersome", 27% "somewhat bothersome", and 0% "not bothersome". Said by one person surveyed who likes to sit in their front yard under a shaded tree and read, "It's just awful."

As to the severity of negative experience, I recall a personal one. On a quiet evening I was fishing with my preteen grandson and granddaughter in the same location on the lake that five generations had fished as a family tradition. There was plenty of laughter, kidding, and many fish caught, and it had a deep meaning for everyone to be there. Soon, a wake boat came by maybe a couple of hundred yards away, with very loud, crystal-clear music blaring. Not just any music, but with sexually explicit lyrics heard for what felt like an eternity. Our boat went from laughing and kidding around to an awkward quiet. I hoped against hope my guest and grandkids hadn't heard it. More quiet awkwardness. Attempts to restart the kidding and laughter were to no avail. The boat made another circle coming toward us again and we could hear the music building and I got the feeling everyone was holding their breath.

Finally, my grandson said, "That's the boat with the inappropriate music."

"Yes, and I'm sorry about that," I said, the hope that he hadn't heard it now dashed.

We continued to catch fish. Then, my attempts to change the awkward silence unnoticed, my grandson said “Papa, can we leave?”

“Yes grandson, we can leave,” I said, with heartbreaking frustration of this first-time event in five generations—and under my watch. My progenitors would be devastated to see this. I felt like I let them down. I never considered anything would cause a 13-year-old boy to want to leave when the fish were biting. Maybe I shouldn’t have taken my family fishing knowing a wake boat was on the water and this could happen. Maybe I should have just accepted the restriction of my sport instead of daring to fish during a time when wake boats were active. And restriction is certainly the right word. We will come back to that. With fish still biting, we pulled anchor and left, the boat ride back still quiet and awkward.

I find it hard to understand how we got here. Did it happen so gradually we didn’t notice? Do we even care? Why is one water recreational activity allowed to so fully dominate, render unpleasurable, or make unsafe and therefore restrict so many other water recreational activities? Further, think about this: no other recreational activities have any effect whatsoever on the wake surfing enthusiasts. They are free to recreate at will, anytime, unaffected by any other sport. This simply doesn’t make sense.

Further, around the perimeter of my home lake there are over a thousand people living in cottages, year-round homes, etc. While wake boats circle the lake with powerful sound systems projecting up to three quarters of a mile with sometimes highly vulgar lyrics, we find that five or so people are unrestricted in imposing this overbearing sound on over a thousand people. I say again, this simply doesn’t make sense, and I can’t understand why it’s accepted.

We may say there should be no restrictions on wake surfing, as those who enjoy that sport have a right to enjoy it on our public waters without any restrictions. For a moment, let’s agree with that. However, if one sport demands and enjoys no restrictions, then how do we then explain this to the dozens of other lake recreational activities that are currently being directly restricted by that sport? Referring to a general culture of fairness, does that seem fair? Is this the “sharing” of our lakes? Who is settled with, and accepts this situation?

Let’s be absolutely crystal clear; we may never see new laws and ordinances successfully enforced that restrict the recreational activity of wake surfing, which would then allow other people to enjoy the dozens of other recreational activities freely and unrestricted. However, until that time, we must fully accept that dozens of those popular lake recreational activities will continue to be significantly restricted and, in some cases, prevented by the sport of wake surfing. This restriction of historically popular lake recreational activities has been, is, and will continue to consistently occur until something significant is done about it.

At the end of the day, one of the best outcomes we can hope for is for some new awareness among the wake surfing community of these unintended restrictions they are placing on other forms of recreation. Perhaps in the future, wake boat enthusiasts would consider modifying their behavior by navigating hundreds of yards further from other people, even in the center of the lake completely away from others. Perhaps the wake boat industry will come up with solutions such as engineering a wave that quickly loses energy after being surfed on, or waterproof Bluetooth headsets for the surfer and those on the boat to enjoy their personal music genre as loud as they want without affecting others. There must be some solutions here. Engineering brought us these problems; engineering can solve them.

One can also hope for the attention of associations, townships, and other government officials to create and enforce sensible regulations of the one sport of wake surfing, which would cause the restoration of the public's unrestricted enjoyment of the dozens of historically popular lake recreational activities. There must be a solution here, also.

Until then, many of us will have to enjoy our recreational activities only during our restricted non-wake surfing times. If that's where we're at, so be it. I'll take the restricted time of my favorite lake recreational activities any day over ever going through the same heartbreakening experience of hearing those deeply gut-wrenching words... "Papa, can we leave now?"