



BAY AREA WATER TRAIL CREATES OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES FOR BOATERS

San Francisco, Calif. In September, 2005, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill establishing the San Francisco Bay Area Water Trail. The purpose of the Water Trail is to create a network of access sites enabling people in non-motorized small boats such as kayaks to enjoy continuous, single and multiple-day trips on San Francisco Bay. As the Water Trail evolves, the expanded recreational opportunities may result in more challenges for those concerned with maritime safety.

While participation in paddle sports and other recreational boating has increased, it has not been without cost. According to the California Department of Boating and Waterways, in 2004, the last year for which statistics are available, California ranked second nationally in the number of accidents and boating fatalities. This fact underscores the need for recreational boaters to be alert to potential danger on the Bay. It's easy to be complacent on the water, so here are a few things to keep in mind.

Traffic: Most importantly for the recreational boater – and particularly for paddle sport enthusiasts – to remember is that they are not alone on the water. Typically 300 to 400 commercial ship transits occur on the Bay each day. Boaters encounter a variety of vessels, most far larger and faster than their own. Cargo ships and tankers cannot maneuver or stop quickly and can create wakes which may capsize

nearby small craft. Boaters may encounter tugs pushing or towing barges, docking vessels or providing escorts for tank ships. Additionally, numerous high-speed ferries transit the Bay. A thoughtful boater should give wide berth to these vessels.

Security: Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, numerous measures have been taken to enhance the security of our waterways and maritime facilities. Boaters should be aware and keep out of federally mandated security zones that exist around some ships, facilities such as refineries and bridge structures.

Visibility: Visibility is a major safety consideration for all mariners. Most kayaks and canoes are small and difficult to see for those operating large, commercial vessels. Inclement weather and poor visibility, frequently encountered in the Bay Area, add to the problem. Boaters operating at night are particularly at risk. A kayak is very low to the water and readily blends in with its surroundings. While many kayakers may use a headlamp to help them see what lies ahead, this is ineffective in illuminating them for other vessels not approaching from directly ahead. While a headlamp satisfies the lighting requirement for paddle craft under Navigation Rule 25, an all-around white light would significantly enhance its being seen.

Navigation Rule 9: When conflicts occur between commercial and recreational vessels, the results can be dramatic. In July 2004, the car carrier Pacific Highway struck the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge while maneuvering to avoid a sailboat. As a result, the bridge sustained over one million dollars in damage and damage to the ship included a six-inch gash in its hull. Thankfully this was not a tank ship and no oil or fuel entered the Bay. The sailboat operator was cited and fined for violating Navigation Rule 9: impeding the passage of a vessel that can safely navigate only within a narrow channel or fairway. Not all recreational boaters are familiar with Rule 9, but they should be. The majority of deep draft channels and

adjacent waterways in the Bay Area are designated as narrow channels or fairways. So you must give way in those areas.

Education: Fortunately, there are places in the Bay Area where boaters can turn to for help. Several organizations are dedicated to non-motorized boating. Groups such as Bay Area Sea Kayakers (BASK), Bay Area Whaleboat Rowing Association (BAWRA), California Dragon Boat Association (CDBA), and the Western Sea Kayakers (WSK) are all excellent sources of information. The Harbor Safety Committee of the San Francisco Bay Region holds monthly public meetings on maritime safety issues. The California Department of Boating and Waterways oversees a comprehensive statewide program that emphasizes safety. Lastly, the U.S. Coast Guard has numerous assets available in the San Francisco Bay Area including Vessel Traffic Service San Francisco.

The San Francisco Bay Area Water Trail Act is a significant step for recreational boating in the area. As commercial and recreational traffic continues to increase on the Bay, the potential for conflict also increases. But through careful planning and the fostering of an educated, responsible boating community, the needs of all may be met in a safe and environmentally conscientious manner.

“The creation of the Bay Area Water Trail is a fantastic endeavor for everyone from the experienced sailor to the first-time paddler to enjoy the beauty of San Francisco Bay,” said Captain William J. Uberti, Sector Commander for Coast Guard Sector San Francisco. “However, with more people enjoying the Bay, the risk of accidents increases. San Francisco Bay is one of the busiest waterways in the country, with commercial vessels restricted to narrow channels because of their deep drafts. So, I highly encourage all boaters to take measures, including boating safety classes, to ensure the safety of themselves and others. With greater knowledge and appreciation among boaters, we can all have a great time sharing the Bay.”

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