2020 Boating Accident Statistical Report
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Law Enforcement
www.MyFWC.com
Officer Miguel Despian attended Florida International University to study Criminal Justice and in 2014 was hired by FWC. He spent his first two years in Naples and in 2016 transferred back home to Miami Dade county. Alongside educating the public, he enjoys patrolling the waterways and creating a positive impact in any situation. Each year he is asked by the principal at Doral Academy Elementary School to come back and give a presentation for Career Day. Throughout the presentation, Miguel interacts with around 130 kids. This year, he had the opportunity to bring two baby alligators, a six-month-old black timber wolf, and an all-terrain vehicle that is used in everyday patrol.

Miguel is also a primary field training officer (FTO). As one of the senior FTO’s, he takes this responsibility very seriously and it shows through the officers that he trains once they are on their own. He has also completed the training and holds the certifications for alcohol/drug impairment enforcement and Speed Measurement. He volunteers for every boating under the influence (BUI)/boating detail and will assist in any way possible. He has assisted in training other law enforcement departments such as: Miami-Dade P.D., U.S. Coast Guard Miami and Miami Beach P.D., on BUI, fisheries and boating laws.

Officer Despian has been at the forefront of the growing problem of illegal personal watercraft (PWC) livers within Miami Dade County. He has been able to identify major PWC rental companies in the area that are a part of the temporary certificate program and those that are not, tracking down owners, employees of PWC companies and rental locations. He has been involved in numerous livery violation details and assisted in a multi-agency detail that used undercover officers from other agencies to perform buy/bust operations. The operation identified numerous companies not complying with regulations and individuals operating illegal livers with their personal PWCs. He has created several other details focusing on BUI, boating safety and manatee zone enforcement and has encouraged the participation of federal and local law enforcement partners. He truly demonstrates a passion for boating safety enforcement, and it shows with his consistent and varied patrol efforts.

Officer Despian has embraced FWC’s mission statement and its core missions. He is one of the most well-rounded officers in South Region Bravo and is not afraid to step out of his comfort zone to gain experience and better himself. He is a hard-working officer with excellent morals and ethics and is a leader amongst his peers. His outstanding work performance and positive attitude have really made him a leader in the region. Other officers in the region look forward to working with and learning from him.

Theodore (Ted) Dawson became a boater while living in Chicago, he started his membership with the U. S. Coast Guard Auxiliary in 1967. Ted decided to move to Florida to enjoy year-round boating and in 2011 became the lead instructor of the Cape Coral Power and Sail Squadron.

Ted’s experience with the USCG and USCG Auxiliary has given him a unique insight into the mindset and habits of the typical recreational boater, allowing him to take a slightly different approach to the material in America’s Boating Course. Ted’s approach to teaching is to get away from trying to race through a bunch of slides, reading bullet points and teaching to the test. Instead, he takes a storytelling approach. Ted, like many of the top educators across the country, believes that students identify with stories and allows them to imagine how they would react in the situation. In addition to his personal stories, he talks about current news of local boating accidents that might help to bring the impact of the topic being discussed closer to home. These news reports and others Ted has collected over the years are now posted on the walls of the classroom so the students can read them before class or during breaks. He also has posted highlights from the annual state and national accident reports. He includes local statistics too. Images from the State of Florida’s Boating Accident Report going back to 2007 have been incorporated into a “welcome” presentation that plays on screen as students show up for the first class and get registered. The graphic with the actual location of each boating accident in Lee County gets a lot of interest from the students as they can see a consistent pattern of where accidents tend to occur each year. Ted doesn’t teach the class in a single 8 hours. His approach is to teach America’s Boating Course over a three-week period, in 5, two-hour sessions. This gives the students time to read the material, digest the evening’s lesson and seek clarification on items they don’t understand.

But that is not all, Ted opens the classroom an hour before class starts and invites the students to come early with their questions. During that time, he shares with them videos and presentations that support the points of each previous session. This gives each student 15 hours of exposure to the material, making it more likely they will remember what they learned.

Since Ted began teaching America’s Boating Course, he has graduated over 2,400 students. He teaches the class 9 times per year, each class averaging 30 students.
INTRODUCTION

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), powered by science-based leadership, is committed to creating a sustainable and healthy future for Florida’s fish, wildlife, water and habitat resources. The FWC serves Floridians and visitors alike in a variety of ways, most of which revolve around our mission of managing fish and wildlife resources for their long-term well-being and the benefit of people. The Division of Law Enforcement (DLE) is perhaps the most visible tool within the FWC’s “tool belt” used to meet its goal of providing healthy resources for safe, satisfied customers.

THE DIVISION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

Roles and Mission
The FWC is the only state agency in Florida tasked with the management of the state’s fish and wildlife resources. As a primary responsibility, the FWC’s Division of Law Enforcement focuses on enforcing regulations aimed at protecting and sustaining these resources both for their long-term well-being and the benefit of Florida’s residents and visitors, all the while blending in its unique and specialized public safety role. The Division’s mission is clear... “Protecting Florida’s natural resources and people through proactive and responsive law enforcement services.”

Responsibilities

The FWC Division of Law Enforcement provides protection to those who enjoy Florida’s natural resources, while also enforcing resource protection and boating safety laws. Officers patrol rural, wilderness, inshore and offshore areas, and where other law enforcement agencies do not routinely patrol. FWC officers have the authority to enforce all the laws of the state and are cross-deputized to enforce federal fisheries and wildlife laws.

While carrying out their broad responsibilities, FWC officers seek every opportunity to educate and introduce Floridians and visitors to the wonders of Florida’s fish, wildlife, and natural resources, as well as safe boat operation and safety equipment requirements.

The Division also provides general law enforcement services as part of Florida’s statewide emergency response network. Because of their unique jurisdiction and specialized training and equipment, FWC is also charged with protecting the state’s waterways and critical infrastructure during times of heightened security threat levels. As seasoned first responders, FWC officers are trained to move fast and efficiently.

Moving forward into the future, FWC will continue to pursue and apply advances in technology to improve response to both conservation and general law enforcement incidents. When duty calls, FWC will always be among the first to respond, providing aid as needed. Until then, FWC will continue to lead the way in natural resource protection, proactive boating safety law enforcement and education.

Uniquely prepared

On the water, in the woods and in the air, FWC law enforcement officers are uniquely situated and equipped to identify and respond to illegal activity and promote public safety, particularly in the maritime and wilderness areas.

Core Missions

The FWC protects Florida’s people and natural resources. The Division of Law Enforcement is an integral part of the agency and is vital in fulfilling the agency’s responsibilities. These core missions reflect the unique capabilities, training and equipment our personnel use to achieve those responsibilities.

Boating and Waterways:

Resource Protection and Access:

Environmental Protection:
State and federal environmental law enforcement. Cultural and natural resources protection and preservation. State lands and water quality protection. Investigations. Education and outreach programs developing the next generation that cares.

Public Safety:
Provide a safe experience for residents and visitors engaged in outdoor activities. Interagency support and coordination. Specialized response units. Disaster response. Search and rescue. Intelligence and security. General and specialized law enforcement services. Critical incident investigations.
Boating Accident Statistical Report

**Intervention equals prevention on the water**
FWC officers help to ensure Floridians and visitors are safe when they are on the water. The FWC accomplishes this through proactive law enforcement by initiating boating safety, fisheries, and hunting inspections and identifying and minimizing potential navigation or environmental hazards in the waterways.

FWC’s Boating and Waterways Section supports officers by coordinating statewide boating safety efforts. Some examples of support include education campaigns, ensuring waterway markers are accurate and maintained, permitting and marking speed-regulated areas, coordinating initiatives aimed at removing derelict vessels and improving public boating access.

With close to a million registered vessels, Florida leads the nation in that category. As a negative consequence of high vessel numbers and our mild climate, Florida also leads the nation in the number of boating fatalities annually. The vast size of our inland, coastal and offshore patrol areas combined with a significant population of avid and diverse boaters, presents a unique and daunting challenge for FWC and our local and federal maritime enforcement partners.

**Boating education is critical**
The 2020 Boating Accidents Statistical Report indicates there were 837 reportable boating accidents and 79 boating related fatalities in the calendar year. This total includes five missing persons who at the end of 2020 have not been located or accounted for and their circumstances suggest that death or serious injury has occurred. Many of the deaths were due to victims falling overboard and drowning. A large number of the deaths could have been prevented if the victims had worn life jackets. FWC continues efforts to reduce the number of boating-related fatalities through education about the importance of wearing life jackets while boating.

Florida’s current boating safety education law only applies to boaters born on or after January 1, 1988 operating a motorized vessel of 10 horsepower or greater. The face-to-face contacts by FWC officers and our partner agencies are a critical part of our outreach efforts and education to the boating public. These statistics show us that the boat operator most likely to be involved in a boating accident is a middle-age or older male who has boating experience yet has never learned the most important safety considerations by having taken a boating safety course. When officers observe boating violations or perform resource enforcement activities, they conduct boating safety inspections aimed at both identifying and preventing violations or accidents. FWC officers make boating safer and ultimately save lives.

**Safe boating is a choice**
Florida is a leader in promoting boating accident prevention. The FWC, in association with the National Safe Boating Council, Bombardier Recreational Products Inc., West Marine, and the USCG has launched a statewide boating safety campaign as part of a national initiative. The “Wear It Florida” campaign encourages boaters to wear life jackets anytime they are on the water and educates boaters about the ease and convenience of inflatable life jackets. The campaign is designed to reach the public through a variety of methods including media events, exhibits, personal contacts, social media, radio and televised public service announcements.

--- Division of Law Enforcement Values ---

**Integrity**
We value candor, honesty and the highest standards of ethical behavior and are committed to upholding our positions of public trust.

**Professionalism**
We value the skillful performance which demonstrates a clear sense of commitment and direction in an environment that encourages teamwork and innovation.

**Dedication**
We value the motivation and dedication with which our members serve the visitors and residents of Florida.

**Adaptability**
We value our unique capability to adapt and respond appropriately to diverse circumstances in all environments.
ABOUT THIS REPORT

The 2020 Boating Accident Statistical Report is compiled by the Boating and Waterways Section of the FWC’s Division of Law Enforcement. Most of the data contained in this report is gathered from boating accident investigative reports submitted by FWC officers and our marine law enforcement partners.

At the end of each calendar year, boating accident data is compiled and assembled into Florida’s annual report. The FWC’s Boating and Waterways Section analyzes this information and uses it to formulate proactive plans aimed at reducing the number of boating accidents and their related injuries, fatalities and property damage. This information is also reported to the USCG’s Boating Safety Division in Washington, D.C., to be included in the national database consisting of data from all U.S. states and territories.

The statistics reflect data from “reportable boating accidents” that occurred in Florida. Boating accidents must meet at least one of the five criteria below to be classified as reportable:

- A person dies.
- A person disappears under circumstances that indicate possible death or injury.
- A person receives an injury requiring medical treatment beyond immediate first aid.
- There is at least $2,000 aggregate property damage to the vessel(s) or other property.
- There is a total loss of a vessel.

The number of vessels registered in Florida increased slightly in 2020. With 985,005 registered vessels, Florida leads the nation in registered vessels. Additionally, it is estimated that up to one million non-registered vessels actively use Florida’s waters, and this segment of the boating population appears to still be growing. Our waterways show the strains of congestion as each year brings more residents and visitors together to utilize our abundant water resources and enjoy Florida’s boating lifestyle.

Officers investigating a boat crash that occurred in South Florida.
2020 SUMMARY

BOATING ACCIDENT REVIEW
- Florida leads the nation with a total number of 985,005 registered vessels in 2020.
- There were 836 reportable boating accidents in 2020.

REPORTABLE BOATING ACCIDENT
- Collision with vessel was the leading type of accident with a total of 224 (27%).
- Towed watersport activities were involved in 23 accidents, resulting in 9 fatalities and 37 injuries.
- Paddle/Human powered craft (canoes, kayaks, rowboats, paddleboards) were involved in 14 accidents resulting in 14 fatalities and 1 injured. (11 kayaks, 1 canoe, 3 rowboats)
- May was the month with the highest number of accidents (120).
- Monroe County reported the highest number of accidents and injuries (99 total accidents with nine fatalities and 52 injuries).

REPORTABLE BOATING FATALITIES
- 77 fatal accidents resulting in 79 fatalities.
- 46% of the fatal accidents resulted from falls overboard (36 accidents). Boaters falling overboard remains the leading type of boating fatality.
- The leading cause of death in fatal boating accidents was drowning with 42 fatalities (53%).
- March was the deadliest month in 2020 with 10 fatalities.
- Alcohol or drug-use is reported to have played a role in 23% boating fatalities.
- 76% (60) of the victims of fatal boating accidents were males.
- 60% (55) of the 91 operators involved in fatal accidents were age 36 or older.
- 75% (68) of all vessels involved in fatal accidents in 2020 were 21 feet in length or less.

REPORTABLE BOATING INJURIES
- There were 375 accidents that resulted in 534 injured persons. The rate of injury was 54 injuries per 100,000 registered vessels.

REPORTABLE PERSONAL WATERCRAFT ACCIDENTS
- Personal watercraft (PWC) accounted for 15% of all registered vessels in Florida.
- PWC were involved in 27% (227) of reportable boating accidents.
- Rented PWC represented 48% (147) of PWC involved in accidents.
- 44% (101) of PWC accidents involved a collision with another vessel.
- 38% of PWC accidents occurred in Miami-Dade (41), Pinellas (24) and Monroe (21) counties.
- 15 fatalities resulted from the 227 PWC accidents.
- 183 people were injured in PWC accidents.

BOATING EDUCATION STATISTICS
- FWC issued 74,376 Boating Safety Education ID Cards in 2020.
- 70% of the cards were issued to persons born on or after January 1, 1988.
- Of the 74,376 cards issued, 53,786 were to males, 20,590 were to females. An additional 3,254 cards were printed for lost, damaged and information changes.
- 69% of the operators involved in fatal accidents had no formal boater education.

Boating accident statistics for 2020 were compiled on March 1, 2021. Reports received after that date were not included in the following data. In 2020, there were five missing persons reported. There has not been any updated information as to their status as of the date of this report compilation. The five missing persons have been included in the fatality data.