

FIRST BOAT

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Technology Overload And Boating Safety

After several articles on the latest and greatest boating technology, Vin Pica takes a step back to the basics of safety of life at sea...

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Are you relying on your marine electronics appropriately? Photo © [Nautical Sites Media](#) taken at the 2011 NY Boat Show.

You've seen many articles and columns here about technology aboard*. And as functionality of cell phones starts to rival computers (did I say "rival" - I should have said "outpaces!"), we are right at the cusp of technology overload. This can't be good for safety of life at sea.

This column is about that...

US Coast Guard Advisory

On October 29, 2010, Rear Admiral Paul Zukunft, Assistant Commandant for Marine Safety, Security, and Stewardship issued an maritime advisory on the use of cell phones aboard. In part, Marine Safety Advisory 01-10 said, "The potential risk associated with improper use of cellular telephones and other devices in the marine environment while navigating or performing other vessel functions should be apparent to vessel owners and operators. Consequently, the Coast Guard strongly recommends vessel

owners and operators to develop and implement effective operational policies outlining when the use of cellular telephones and other devices is appropriate or prohibited.”

This is true across all jurisdictions, land, sea and air. And cell phones can certainly be game-changers (good and bad) for the mariner (see: [Cell Phones Onboard](#).) This situation has created a new class of problem: [Distracted Operations](#).

Information Overload vs Expanded Awareness

Even in my own operational facility, CGAUX 251384, I have 2 “desk mounted” radios (USCG requirement for an operational facility), and a spare handheld radio for mobile operations. All three are mounted overhead. In the “dashboard”, there is a multi-function screen through which is filtered real time GPS information, AIS, radar (overlaid on top of each other in a layered, color-coded fashion) and a forward-looking-infra-red camera in an adjacent window. I will admit this is right at the edge of my “comprehensibility.” If a crewman is asking questions, or more importantly passing information, while something critical is being presented either over the radio or on the screen, it is imperative to have the ability to parse information and/or the authority to delegate – and quickly. Now, with that said, the resultant river of data can, in the right hands, provide a heightened “situational awareness” that adds up to a safer vessel. This is in fact why I installed the gear. But the US Coast Guard’s Marine Safety Advisory 01-10 is a wake-up call to all mariners, this one included.

Head’s Up

Let’s think this through a bit. First, technology is neither a panacea nor a substitute for seamanship skills. Technology is there to make what was time-consuming (e.g., GPS charting versus pencil-and-parallel-rulers) easier and/or faster or to provide a quantum leap beyond human capabilities (e.g., radar.) **But all these tools are not worth their weight as ballast if the skipper doesn’t know what basic seamanship skills to employ with them.**

Secondly, you have to get – and keep – your priorities straight. When the cell phone rings, why answer it while underway? There is voice-mail, you know. And, it would be a simple procedure to implement within the household that if there was something urgent, call twice – if the same tel# comes up twice, you know to answer it now. And give someone the helm while you do.

Thirdly, when was the last time you took a boating safety class? There are plenty of good ones out there that can be taken right up to the level of an experienced skipper. No one knows what they don’t know – and the advanced classes are full of fellow skippers. Not everything worth learning is in the manuals. Passing time while accumulating the latest scuttlebutt is an ancient, honored and useful maritime tradition... From long before there was anything remotely called a cell phone...

* some prior articles on technology aboard:

[Getting Rescued With Rescue 21](#) (01/03/12)

[Your Radio: Shotgun Or Rifle](#) (12/27/11)

[Safety of Life At Sea: Your Radio](#) (12/20/11)

[VHF Basics: Sounding Smart on the Radio](#) (12/13/11)

[Cell Phones Onboard](#) (12/06/11)

[Prevention of Collision at Sea - Thanks to GPS](#) (09/21/11)

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you “get in this thing...”