

Big Ships. Little Boats.

Better Understanding for Better Boating

In the summer months, thousands of recreational boaters in craft of all sizes, maneuverability, and speed share the coastal waters with commercial vessels and fishing boats. Areas around Portland, Penobscot Bay, and Eastport have deep draft channels where you may encounter deep sea vessels and large tug and barge units. With such a wide variety of commercial and recreational craft sharing our waters, knowledge of local traffic patterns and practices can ensure your safety and enjoyment. We're all out there together -- if we take the time to understand each other, we'll all be safer for it.



Probably a little too close for safety.
Photo by Gregg Bolton.

Rules of the Road: When in doubt, yield to common sense.

When out on the water, always assume that a larger vessel is more difficult to maneuver and that its deep draft confines it to mid-channel -- where the water is deeper. Tugs, tows, fishing vessels, ferries and other large, deep draft, commercial vessels have the right of way over all other vessels, including sail boats.

Visibility: You may see them, but do they see you?

Small craft are often difficult to see both by eye and radar. And while bright colors and reflective material can help, they're no guarantee that you'll be seen. A safe approach is to assume that another vessel has not seen you. Be cautious. Be safe. And if at all possible, avoid operating in restricted visibility or at night.

Wake: It's your responsibility... wherever it goes.

When operating a motor vessel, you are responsible for the effects of your wake, wherever it goes. For that reason, you should be aware of boats, docks and ferry landings that may be affected as you pass by. Most harbors maintain a speed and wake limit; it's your responsibility to observe them. Remember that your wake will travel ahead of you even after you've slowed down to headway speed.

VHF Radio: If you were listening, you would know.

Commercial vessels announce their intentions on channel 13 (nationwide) when approaching busy harbors and when getting underway from berth or anchorage. Monitoring this channel is an excellent means for small boat operators to avoid larger

ships. Only in an emergency should you contact the pilots of commercial vessels on this channel to alert them of your intentions.

Tugs & Tows: We've all got a lot on the line.

While it's important that you take the time to learn the lights and day shapes for tug and tow, a safe rule of thumb is to assume that a tug and nearby barge are connected by a hawser. For that reason alone, you should never attempt to pass between them. Beware -- while shifting its tow, from the hawser astern to a side or end tie, a tug will have little if any control over its barge! Stay far away.

Lobster Boats: Always at work. Sometimes hard to figure.

Lobster boats can present other boats with a variety of potentially dangerous situations. These boats will often travel in erratic courses, from buoy to buoy. And, while working on a trap, especially a string of traps, a lobster boat cannot maneuver at all. Lobstermen working on a trap may also have their attention focused on the next buoy, rather than nearby traffic, which is why staying clear of their boats is perhaps the best advice.

Ferries: Generating Wash Currents.

Ferries, while big and stable, are very vulnerable to wakes while at dock loading and unloading passengers and cargo. To compensate, the ferries will usually hold themselves against the dock at the landing by staying in gear, generating strong wash currents. They can also generate strong prop wash while maneuvering into and away from the ferry landings.

Deep Draft Vessels: Stay clear. Period.

It is unsafe to assume that because a vessel is at anchor that it is stationary. Large vessels at anchor may veer unexpectedly under the influence of wind, current, or an unseen, assisting tug. Great care should be taken when operating in their vicinity. Large vessels passing through a bridge must "set up" well before they pass through the bridge and cannot maneuver during transit of the bridge. To avoid serious incident and injury, boaters are strongly encouraged to stay clear of the bridge during this process. Also, tankers at berth are surrounded by floating booms whose anchoring systems may extend several hundred feet out around the vessel. Stay clear!

Suggestions for Small Vessels

When leaving a berthing area and entering a channel that has a large vessel in it, sound your horn.

When possible, keep in shallower areas outside of a deep draft channel. Very shoal draft craft, such as rowboats and kayaks, can avoid almost all other traffic by navigating near the shoreline.

Assume other vessels have not seen you or cannot see you unless you are in communication with them. Operate defensively.

When operating a motor vessel, be aware of the effects of your wake... wherever it goes. Know the rules of the road, including lights and sound signals. Five or more short blasts of the horn mean danger. Be careful.

Familiarize yourself with the operating practices and traffic patterns in your boating area so that you can anticipate and avoid encounters with larger, less maneuverable vessels.

These safety tips have been adapted from the "Big Ships. Little Boats." brochure produced by the marine community in Portland Harbor. Copies of the brochure, which has detailed suggestions for Portland Harbor, are available at the MITA office in Portland.