

# A matter of life vests and death

Orlando Sent Orange 8-30-90

## Orange Marine Patrol checks boats for safety

By Mary Brooks

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

Orange County Deputy Bob McDaniel of the Marine Patrol says he has the best job in the world.

But the county's 30,000 boaters could make his job easier by doing just one thing — wear life jackets.

"This is the single, biggest lifesaver," said McDaniel, who has worked for the Orange County Sheriff's Office since 1985.

"Within the last five years, at least 10 fatalities in Orange County could have been avoided if they had their life jacket on," he said.

Orange County has more than 672 public lakes that cover at least 8 acres. The number of registered boats in the county is up to 30,000, after increasing at an average of 2,000 each year. That, McDaniel

said, means the advent of mandatory boater training could soon be at hand.

McDaniel and two other deputies patrol the Conway chain and other waterways in east Orange, along with 23 miles of the St. Johns River. Four other deputies work the Butler chain of lakes and Lake Apopka. The county also has eight reserve officers and a 20-person underwater search-and-recovery team.

The Winter Park chain of lakes is patrolled part time by five Winter Park police officers. On Lake Maitland, Winter Park shares the patrol with the Maitland Police Department, which has one full-time officer who puts in about 20 extra hours a week on the city's lakes.

"We're out there basically to make sure everybody has a good time and nobody gets hurt. We check mainly safety violations," said Winter Park's patrol supervisor.

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GEORGE SKENE/SENTINEL

McDaniel checks boat of Scott Kennedy (middle), Scott Greenhalgh.

City of Winter Park  
Lakes

Local History Room  
Winter Park Library



# Patrol cracks down on boaters who speed

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**PATROL** from I-1

sor, Sgt. Rex Straw.

McDaniel said the failure to use life jackets is just one example of the biggest problem he encounters on lakes: a lack of education.

"You can buy a 20-foot boat capable of going 80 mph and you don't have to know the first rule of being on the water," he said. "What's our saturation point? Sooner or later there are going to have to be some changes.

"Boating relies on operator discretion. There're no signs out here to give you a clue. It's you and him [the other boater] and the knowledge that you have."

So McDaniel and other marine deputies use inspection stops and other opportunities to prescribe a little preventive medicine. McDaniel carries a canvas bag that is stuffed with pamphlets on boating and water safety.

"Our unit is geared toward educating the public more than just

writing a high volume of tickets," he said.

McDaniel's unit issues an average of 45 citations a month for violations such as failing to have life jackets and other equipment, improper registration and other documentation, erratic driving and operating the watercraft while impaired by alcohol.

The marine unit also investigates boat thefts and other water-related crimes.

There were 25 accidents in 1989 on the county's lakes, with two fatalities in southeast Orange alone. This year, as of July 21, that section of the county had one fatality and four accidents, McDaniel said.

On any fair weather weekend, between 200 and 300 boats use the Conway chain.

With the ever-growing lake jams, the marine patrol has had to make some changes to keep the waterways as safe as possible. That includes cracking down on speeders, and paying more attention to the smaller lakes.

"We're having to worry about speed, something we haven't had to push at in the past," he said. "Before, if a boat was going fast, it didn't matter as much because there was no one else out there.

"But as it's getting more crowded, there is less room for fast boats to go without getting close to someone."

Lakes Underhill and Holden, for example, have become hot spots, he said. "People are building up around the small lakes. They're finding that jet skis are just as much fun on a small pond as it is in a big lake."

The patrol has a couple of jet skis to go after people on those crafts and for getting into tight places.

McDaniel gets frustrated at boater carelessness, but he knows education is the answer. Besides, he loves his job.

"You're working in a marine environment, and it's a positive job," he said. "You feel good about yourself at the end of the day."