

Chapter 7. Boating

Chapter Summary

Boating, for recreational and commercial purposes, is one of the most popular uses of Pleasant Bay. By all accounts, boating activity on the Bay has intensified in recent years, both in terms of numbers of boaters, and the variety of vessels utilizing public access points and waterways.

The natural features of the Bay, including many enclosed waterways, narrow channels, shoaling, and eelgrass beds, pose navigational challenges, and render the Bay more suitable to small- and medium-sized vessels. The location and sensitivity of these features can exacerbate negative environmental impacts from boating activities.

Boating is supported by a wide array of public and private resources and facilities. The towns of Orleans, Chatham, and Harwich regulate their respective waterways in the Bay, and manage moorings and navigational aides. Private boatyards, marinas and yachting clubs also provide services and facilities including fueling stations and pump-out facilities. A small number of public and private dredging projects have been undertaken over the past fifty years to maintain navigational channels.

Continued long term growth in boating activity poses significant management challenges for the three towns governing Pleasant Bay's waterways. Growth in boating activity has led to more demand for boating facilities and services. More boating activity, coupled with further expansion of support facilities and services, could result in considerable natural resource impacts. Also, the likelihood of conflicts among boaters, and between boaters and other Bay users, will increase as boating activity intensifies.

7.0 Overview

Boating for fishing, shellfishing and other commercial purposes, has a long history on Pleasant Bay. For generations now, the Bay has also been renowned as a premier location for recreational boating. One sailing school operates in the Bay, and two yacht clubs run sailing schools for their members. Sailing races are frequent during the summer months. Power boating is popular too, for providing access to North Beach, recreational fishing, and water skiing. Canoes, sea kayaks and dories are among the non-motorized vessels that frequent the shallow waters closer to shore. At the other end of the spectrum, there has also been an observed increase in the number of personal watercraft (PWC), commonly known as "jet skis", on the Bay. Growth in the popularity of boating, combined with an increase in the diversity of vessels, is adding stress on naturally constricted waterways, on limited boating facilities, and on natural resource conditions.

7.1 Growing Popularity of Boating on Pleasant Bay

Between Memorial Day and Labor Day of each year, Pleasant Bay attracts a large number of transient boaters. Boating is also a popular and important use of the Bay among residents. Forty-three per cent of residents from the four Bay towns surveyed said they use the Bay for power boating, forty-two per cent said they use it for sail boating, and twenty-two per cent said they use it for kayaking or canoeing. On a smaller scale, nine per cent of respondents said they use the Bay for water skiing, and only one per cent for operating a PWC.

By all accounts, use of the Bay by all types of boaters is on the rise. There are unprecedented waiting lists for moorings in each town, seasonal overcrowding at many town landings, and numerous anecdotal accounts of congestion on the water. It is not uncommon on a summer weekend afternoon to count several hundred boats underway on the water. The potential for continued long term growth in boating poses a significant management challenge for the four towns.

7.2 Boats and Facilities on Pleasant Bay

Pleasant Bay is enjoyed as an exceptional location for boating, but its shallow water, sand bars, outcroppings of vegetation, and ocean exposure pose numerous navigational challenges. These features, beautiful and critical to the ecology of the area, pose challenges even for seasoned boaters.

Although protected by North Beach, the Bay is open to the Atlantic Ocean and subject to strong winds, heavy fog, and ocean currents. Ocean waves reach shoal areas in Chatham Harbor where they break and can be extremely dangerous for boaters. Increased wave and wind exposure from the new inlet causes extensive shoaling and filling of some navigable channels. Intermittent marshy areas and eelgrass beds pose additional shallow water obstacles. The Bay’s navigable channels are generally narrow and subject to shoaling. The Bay’s four foot tidal range can leave many inexperienced or unfamiliar boaters stranded on a sand bar until the next high tide.

The conditions in Pleasant Bay are more conducive to operating small- to medium-sized boats. Of the vessels moored in the Bay, more than ninety per cent are twenty-five feet in length or smaller.¹ Notwithstanding the navigational hazards these conditions pose for larger boats, a growing number of larger vessels are observed in Pleasant Bay each boating season.

MOORED VESSELS IN PLEASANT BAY BY SIZE

MOORING LOCATION	<16FT	16-25FT	>25-40FT	>40FT	TOTAL MOORINGS
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¹ From Harbormasters’ records. Boats that are launched at town landings, and small non-motorized vessels, are not included in these figures. However they are typically of similar or smaller size than moored vessels.

ORLEANS	173	380	81	--	634
CHATHAM	191	408	17	--	616
HARWICH	19	107	6	1	133
BAY-WIDE	383	895	104	1	1,383

Source: Harbormasters of Orleans, Chatham, Harwich, 1996

Boating on the Bay is supported by a range of facilities and services. Publicly-owned or managed resources include town landings, moorings, and navigational markers. Boat waste pump-out facilities are extremely limited.² Harbormasters from Orleans, Chatham, and Harwich regularly patrol their respective waterways in the Bay, and tend to moorings and navigational aids. The towns are also responsible for undertaking periodic dredging projects to maintain channels. Privately-owned facilities used to support boating on the Bay include marinas, boatyards, yacht clubs, and fueling stations, as well as individual docks and piers. The increasing number of vessels on the water is adding to the demand for all of these facilities and services. In some cases, this demand is placing stress on facilities. For example, three town landings -- River Road in Orleans, Ryder's Cove in Chatham, and Round Cove in Harwich -- are the ones most frequently used for boat launching and mooring. As discussed below, growth in these facilities, and the boating activity they support, can pose threats to natural resources, and heighten conflicts between boating and other ways people use the Bay.

7.3 Moorings

There are 1,383 moorings in Pleasant Bay permitted by the Orleans, Chatham, and Harwich harbormasters' offices, respectively. Most moorings are grouped into mooring areas located in protected areas of the Bay such as coves and salt ponds. The vast majority of moorings are located off of town landings which provide limited parking for boaters, and storage area for dinghies. Nearly three hundred of the moorings are permitted to two private boatyards, one marina, and two yacht clubs that operate in the Bay.³

It is common to wait a period of years before obtaining a mooring at one of the more popular landings on the Bay. The growing demand for moorings is placing increasing pressure on harbormasters to expand the number of moorings. However, there are concerns that an increase in the number of moorings in the Bay could damage natural resources, and add to boating congestion. Among residents surveyed, seventy-two per cent said moorings are an important issue for the resource management plan to address., Eighteen per cent of those surveyed support increasing the number of moorings, and twenty-five per cent support reducing the number of moorings.

The number of mooring permits issued is determined by each local harbormaster in accordance with Army Corps of Engineers approval. Presently, there is no

² The Orleans and Chatham pump-out facilities are shared between geographically distinct water bodies. Harwich obtained a pump-out boat in October, 1997, to be shared between town water bodies. Nauset Maine East has a portable pump-out service available on request.

³ The private facilities also maintain a total of eighty-two slips.

coordination among the towns on the issuance of permits, or the location of moorings. Orleans has stopped issuing moorings in the Bay, and currently has a waiting list at every mooring area. In Harwich, the waiting period for a mooring in Round Cove is several years, while moorings are available in a less protected area in Big Pleasant Bay. In Chatham, the Board of Selectmen recently voted to establish a one year moratorium on the issuance of new moorings in the Town pending study of impacts on natural resources. However, the moratorium was rescinded and there are no controls in place.

7.4 Dredging

Prior to the mid-1980's, navigation in the Bay was enhanced by a small number of dredging projects, primarily in entrance channels to salt ponds. The latest public dredging project within the ACEC was at Round Cove in 1989. Prior to that, The Narrows North Entrance was dredged in 1975, and Meeting House Pond Boatyard in 1970. All other dredging occurred between the late 1940's through early 1960's, including Ryder's Cove boatyard, Kescayogansett (Lonnie's) Pond entrance channel, Namequoit (Arey's) River, Paw Wah Pond entrance channel, The Narrows North entrance channel, Quanset Pond entrance channel, and Meeting House Pond boatyard. For the most part these projects were permitted to dredge channels of up to six feet deep. The state Waterways (Chapter 91) Regulations prohibit improvement (new) dredging within an ACEC, but maintenance dredging (to maintain previously dredged areas) is allowed, provided all necessary federal, state and local permits are obtained. Within the study area, the Town of Chatham is undertaking a ten to fifteen year maintenance dredging project in Aunt Lydia's Cove. The total estimated volume of dredged materials to be generated over the life of the project is 214,000 to 321,000 cubic yards. The Town of Chatham is in the process of developing a long-term strategy for the disposal of dredged materials.

Increased wave and tidal action in the Bay, particularly in the vicinity of Chatham Harbor, may lead to a need for improvement dredging to maintain channels clear for navigation. Maintenance and improvement dredging projects must be planned carefully to ensure that they do not damage eelgrass, shellfish, or other marine life and habitats.