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# Wake Boats in The Land of 10,000 Lakes

## What is a wake boat?

Minnesota has over 800,000 registered boats plying the waters of more than 11,000 lakes, providing countless hours of enjoyment for many residents. At the Sierra Club, our tagline mission is to explore, enjoy and protect the planet. So we're sensitive to the need for people to keep enjoying and connecting with our world, while at the same time protecting it for future generations.

Most boats are able to be operated safely. However, one type of vessel, the wake boat, can be exceptionally destructive if operated without care. Tanks at the back of these boats take on thousands of pounds of lake water to increase their weight and cause them to ride bow-up and stern-down. This design creates large wakes so that people can surf behind the boats without being tethered to them.

Wake boats are increasingly popular. According to The Star Tribune, several hundred wake boats were registered in Minnesota in 2019. In 2020, sales increased by 20%.

## What is the environmental impact of wake boats?

Just one pass of a wake boat can be devastating to the ecosystem. Unfortunately, these boats often make multiple passes in the same area, causing long-lasting damage.

When there isn't enough distance on a lake or river to dissipate these wakes, the boats cause shoreline erosion. They also damage docks, swamp other boats, endanger swimmers, and destroy waterfowl nesting sites.

Additionally, the propwash points downward at such an angle that it can disturb the lake bottom at depths 16' or more. This action reintroduces sequestered contaminants such as phosphorus and nitrates into the water column and results in algae blooms. The propwash also increases turbidity, which warms the water and makes the ecosystem less hospitable to native flora and fauna. It uproots native plants and destroys fish nesting sites.

Furthermore, Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) are often pumped into the tank along with the lake water. A **study** (<https://www.maisrc.umn.edu/news/wakeboards>) by the Minnesota Aquatic Invasive Species Research Center shows that Zebra Mussels are difficult to remove from these tanks and therefore easily spread to other lakes. Although the boating industry has acknowledged this problem and is attempting to improve the tank-cleaning process, for now the boats will continue spreading AIS.

## What do scientists say?

While the boating industry's **2015 commissioned report** ([https://www.wsia.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/WSIA\\_draft\\_report\\_Rev\\_II.pdf](https://www.wsia.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/WSIA_draft_report_Rev_II.pdf)) argues that wake boats only cause problems if they are closer than 200 feet to shore, a **scientific study** (<https://coalitionnavigation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Research-to-date.pdf>) from the University of Quebec, Montreal states that boats need to maintain at least 1,000 feet (300 meters) from shore to prevent most erosion.

Legislatures across the country, from New Hampshire to Washington state, are struggling to weigh the impact of wake boats on the environment, public safety, and the economy. We need more peer-reviewed studies to determine the most effective regulations. At the University of Minnesota St. Anthony Falls Laboratory, researchers have begun **to study the effects of wake boats** (<https://sites.google.com/umn.edu/healthywatersinitiative/welcome>) on shoreline and lake bottom ecosystems. Until this study has data available, possibly yet this year, any legislation should lean toward the protection of our lakes, rivers, and their natural inhabitants.



## What can you do?

It's certainly challenging to find a balance between competing demands on our waterways. Right now, no Minnesota statewide legislation exists to define or regulate wake boats, although the boating industry is lobbying for the 200' from shore regulation with no mention of the depth necessary to protect the underwater ecosystem (see bills **HF1606**

([https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=HF1606&type=bill&version=0&session=ls92&session\\_year=2021&session\\_number=0](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=HF1606&type=bill&version=0&session=ls92&session_year=2021&session_number=0)) and **SF1639** ([https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=SF1639&version=latest&session=ls92&session\\_year=2021&session\\_number=0](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=SF1639&version=latest&session=ls92&session_year=2021&session_number=0))).

The Sierra Club is seeking to live up to our mission and is advocating for legislators to:

1. Fund independent scientific peer-reviewed studies regarding this issue and
2. Work on designating areas where wake boats can operate using the 1,000' and 16' depth guidelines until we have better data.

Join us in contacting your legislator. Personal calls are one of the most effective ways to get involved, so **find out who represents you** (<https://www.gis.leg.mn/iMaps/districts/>) and then give them a call!

Let's protect our 10,000 lakes so that future generations can continue to enjoy countless hours on the water.

*By the Wake Boat Subcommittee of the Waters and Wetlands Stewards, NorthStar Chapter of the Sierra Club*

### Additional Resources:

New Hampshire General Court Statutory and Study Committees. 2020. *Final Report of the Commission to Study Wake Boats.*

<http://gencourt.state.nh.us/statstudcomm/committees/1434/default.html>  
(<http://gencourt.state.nh.us/statstudcomm/committees/1434/default.html>)

### Local Taxonomy

[water \(/taxonomy/term/37662\)](/taxonomy/term/37662)

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