

# Personal Watercraft: *Is It Getting Personal?*

Compared to people who own motorboats or lakefront homes, personal watercraft (PWC) users are the newest “players” around New York’s recreational waterways in the summertime. But despite the enthusiasm that jetskiers bring to their pastime and the positive effects that PWC use brings to coastal economies, there seems to be a perception that the loud drone of jet-skis interferes with the lifestyle of coastal property owners and that PWC users cruise by motorboats at unsafe speeds and distances.

Photo by Cheng-Ping Wang



Using personal watercraft in the Great Lakes.

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***Most PWC users, boaters and landowners prefer operating distances greater than the regulation 100 feet.***

—Chad Dawson  
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In a Sea Grant-funded study concluding in early 2000, professor **Chad Dawson** and Sea Grant Scholar **Cheng-Ping Wang** of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science & Forestry at Syracuse sought to find out what conflict factors among different lake users are likely to arise. They enlisted some help from NYSG Great Lakes Extension leader **Dave White**, a specialist in marinas and recreational facilities along New York’s Great Lakes shorelines.

The study revealed that the current multiple uses of our waterways may not be the best way to reduce recreation conflict and that education may increase compatibility between different user groups.

According to Dawson’s study, “Compared to many inland bodies of water in New York State, the Great Lakes have a larger water surface area and less public access overall.” But the potential for conflict arises not in the middle of a lake, but in the accessible bays, harbors or beaches that dot the lakefront.

To measure potential recreation conflict, Dawson mailed three surveys with parallel questions to about 1,000 personal watercraft owners, 3,000 motorboat owners and over 600 coastal landowners from NY’s ten counties along the St. Lawrence River, Lake Ontario, Niagara River and Lake Erie. The mailing took into account all the different activity combinations such as landowners who own personal watercraft.

With an adjusted response rate of 42 percent, the survey found that all groups enjoy the lake environment’s natural setting and the chance to relax, rest and get away. Although the social aspect of lake activities was moderately important for all groups, landowners like to get together with family and friends whereas PWC owners and motorboat owners like to “see and be seen” during their boating excursions. PWC owners especially stated they enjoy excitement more.

Although user groups have similar recreational goals, the study suggests there are one-way or “asymmetric” conflicts. Dawson reports, “There were landowners who were bothered by both PWC users and motorboaters. There were motorboaters who were bothered by PWC users but not much by landowners, and finally, there were PWC users who did not seem to be affected by either motorboaters or landowners.”

According to the survey, all PWC owners evaluated their behavior as a group favorably. But landowners and motorboat owners without PWCs had more negative evaluations of PWC owners, answering questions that characterized users as risky, noisy, discourteous or irresponsible. One possible explanation is *resource dependence*.

Landowners can't change the location of their properties whereas PWC users and motorboaters can find a new area to ride boats or jet-skis.

When asked about their sensitivity to interference from other user groups, all groups responded that recreation conflict was not that significant. However, failing to maintain the recreational quality for visitors who are sensitive to conflict may cause those visitors to spend their leisure dollars elsewhere at a loss to the local economy.

User's perceptions of boating regulations suggest that many of them do not understand the current NYS regulation of 5 mph within 100 feet from shore. In addition, the landowners' responses indicate not only their unfamiliarity with boating rules, but also their strong feelings against PWC use.

When surveyed, about 70 percent of PWC users and motorboaters cumulatively reported preferred distances of more than 100 feet from shore. These results indicate that the current NYS regulation may not be sufficient from their perspectives. About 45 percent of PWC users preferred longer distances from other PWC users. A noticeable proportion of non-PWC users reported needing a distance of 1,000 feet or more away from jet-skis, citing motor noise, concern for safety, perceptions of crowding, disruptive or unsafe behaviors and privacy issues as reasons. Landowners felt noise and speeding from PWCs and motorboats disturbed their daily life and could pose safety concerns for their families when wading, swimming or fishing. Motorboaters reported that PWC users followed their boats too closely, jumped boat wakes or interrupted their course.

But preferences for such large distances between users during their activities should not be generalized to inland lakes or river systems where banks and shorelines differ greatly from those of the Great Lakes, Dawson reports.

This study may suggest regulatory changes based on the distances preferred, but other alternatives need

consideration. New boat and PWC motor technology will reduce noise levels and minimize the impacts to the natural environment. Dawson also suggests that "education may be the key to reduce the conflict among user groups." In this study, PWC users perceived they were not appreciated by other users, but thought their behaviors were not as bad as other groups thought. Motorboaters perceived interference from jet skiers, but did not perceive that they also caused problems to landowners. Both motorboaters and landowners with PWCs had more sympathy for PWC use and users.

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*Education may be the key to reduce the conflict among user groups.*

*—Chad Dawson*  
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Photo by Chad Dawson



One of many docks for motorboats on Lake Ontario.

"This study suggests that people participating in multiple activities may have more empathy and tolerance for other types of visitors," concludes Dawson. Recreation managers may reduce some perceived recreation conflict by increasing tolerance through "experience sharing" among different user groups. Education could provide jetskiers with strategies to avoid conflict such as selecting a quieter 4-cycle PWC motor, acting courteously to other users or selecting suitable areas for jet-skiing that would minimize impacts. NYSG's White will soon have in hand some materials that will help "rev up" this education effort. Stay tuned.

**—Barbara A. Branca**