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Photo by Melissa Haneline
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No-wake war zone

Boaters who don't idle spark wave of anger on Lowcountry's waters

By [Brian Hicks](#)
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A boater heeds the state Department of Natural Resources buoy near the Isle of Palms Marina.

It seems to happen just about every time you try to put your boat in the water: Some guy in a center console comes plowing by, throwing a tsunami, rocking your world.

And your boat.

And the floating dock.

These days, it's hard to get from one place to another on Lowcountry waters without running into a few no-wake zones. Some people stop, some people don't.

Some people get fined \$465 or 30 days — on first offense.

No-wake zones have turned into war zones on South Carolina waters. As more people have built docks on local waterways and the number of marinas and boat ramps has increased, there has been more pressure on boaters to throttle back, float by and watch their wakes.

In 2006, the Department of Natural Resources ticketed 268 boaters for no-wake zone violations. And with more DNR officers on the water this year, Lt. Mike Sabaka says he expects to see that number rise.

To try and stem the, ahem, tide, a lot of people have put up no-wake signs on their own docks. But in most cases those are just requests — they aren't really legal. Most of the 25 no-wake zones in Charleston County are around boat landings and marinas, and are patrolled by the DNR or even the Charleston Police Department.

"Boating safety is the bottom line," said Lt. Gary Sullivan with DNR's Marine Law Enforcement/Investigations section. "It's always incumbent on the boat operator to act in a safe manner. And the responsibility for a wake always falls to the operator."

Wakes have a ripple effect. Not only do they send tied-up boats slamming into docks, they also can speed erosion around piers and pilings, capsize a kayaker or joust folks from their johnboats.

Some boaters rebel, arguing that a boat speeding by on plane throws less of a wake than stopping and throttling up a boat at either end of a zone. But others say the idea is to slow down well before and not to kick it until you are well past an idle-speed area.

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"Most people obey no-wake zones," Sam Maw said. "But it seems like there's a variance."

Maw, his wife Beth, their daughter Emily and her friend Mia Lorenz glided through a no-wake zone behind the Isle of Palms on a recent evening, carefully minding the rules of the waterway. An engineer by trade, Maw says there are all sorts of technical factors in the speeding-by versus stopping-and-starting argument, but it's obviously better to just slow down.

After all, you're out having fun, not taking the bypass to work. Still, some people seem to be in a real hurry to get on another patch of water.

"You can be going along (through a no-wake zone) and get passed like you're going nowhere," Maw said.

The Intracoastal Waterway between the Isle of Palms and Goat Island is the newest no-wake zone in Charleston County, established just last year. From channel marker 116 south to just about the Isle of Palms connector, you are expected to mind your manners and your wake.



Photo by Melissa Haneline
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A boater speeds toward Wappoo
Cut on Sunday.

On a slow cruise through the area, it's clear the locals are sick of cruisers careening through their backyards. Along this stretch of water, many docks have no-wake signs, and others have gotten a little more creative. On Goat Island, one dock sports the sign "Unless you are a tractor, quit plowing!" while another urges you to "Join Wake Watchers." Of course, people still speed through, knocking DNR "Idle Speed" buoys for a loop.

DNR officials say boaters need to remember that speeding through a no-wake zone invites all sorts of other trouble. If you get stopped for running when you should walk, you are most likely going to be checked for all your safety equipment, your registration and so on. Enough to leave any floating party all

wet.

"You kind of get a mini-safety lesson if you get stopped," Sullivan said.

DNR says there were 130 reported boating accidents in South Carolina last year that caused 76 injuries, although there is no breakdown on how many of those were caused by folks playing NASCAR through a no-wake zone.

Of course, even safe boaters forget every now and then, and run a little too fast when they should be idling through. At the Isle of Palms Marina, workers occasionally see someone fly past the dock, showing no respect for the no-wake zone or the boats tied up there.

That's when you get what might charitably be called a citizen's warning.

"Most of the time we just yell at them to slow down," said marina worker Chilton Stone. "It's a no-wake zone."