

# A Record Decline In Boating Fatalities, With One Glaring Exception

*The Coast Guard reported the largest drop in recreational boating fatalities in more than a decade, but the news was tempered by an increase in paddling deaths*

ORLANDO, FLORIDA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, June 4, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The Coast Guard last week reported the largest year-over-year drop in recreational boating fatalities in more than a decade, but that encouraging news was tempered by an increase in paddling deaths.



Standup paddleboarding is a safe and relaxing way to enjoy the water when proper safety protocols such as wearing a leash and a properly fitting life jacket are followed

According to the agency's Recreational Boating Safety Statistics for 2023, overall boating fatalities fell a whopping 11.3 percent, from 636 in 2022 to 564 last year. The news was good almost across the board, with incidents down 4.9 percent and non-fatal injuries decreasing 4.3 percent.

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Paddling fatalities continue to increase even as overall boating deaths are declining”

*Jim Emmons, Executive Director, Water Sports Foundation*

Flying against this welcome trend was paddling fatalities, which increased yet again in 2023 to nearly one in three (32.5 percent) recreational boating deaths in the United States, up from 27.4 percent in 2022.

Jim Emmons, executive director of the [Water Sports Foundation](#) said, “The number of people involved in paddling incidents, and especially those who don’t come back to their loved ones, is unacceptable. Paddling

fatalities continue to increase even as overall boating deaths are declining. Since most incidents are preventable, recreational paddling safety advocates including the [U.S. Coast Guard](#), state agencies and non-profits must rally together to reverse this trend.” The Water Sports Foundation (WSF) is a nationally focused nonprofit boater education organization based in Orlando, Fla.

Paddling safety has been a cornerstone of WSF outreach efforts since 2016 when the nonprofit launched the first U.S. Coast Guard grant-funded project designed to increase awareness of paddlesports safety. Subsequent grant projects have sought to better understand the causes of paddling accidents. Canoeing, kayaking and standup paddleboarding don't involve headline-grabbing hazards such as high-speed collisions, propeller strikes, flammable liquids, and carbon monoxide poisoning. Yet a startling proportion of boating fatalities involve paddlers.

One reason is that more Americans are paddling than ever before, and many of them are new to the sport. For example, an examination of Recreational Boating Safety Statistics reveals that nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of those who died in paddling accidents in 2022 had less than 100 hours experience in the activity, and well over one-third (39.7 percent) had less than 10 hours experience. In other words, the paddlers who are most at risk aren't the young guns charging through whitewater rapids; they're ordinary folks who bought a kayak on a whim.

During the pandemic, paddlesports participation soared as record numbers of Americans took to the water to cope with lockdowns. Paddling fatalities spiked 21 percent in 2020, reaching an all-time high of 202. Powerboating incidents followed a similar pattern, surging during the so-called pandemic boating boom before trending back down. In 2023, powerboating deaths were down 17 percent from the previous year, but paddlesports fatalities actually increased by 5 percent – a troubling trend deserving immediate attention.

The data show that educating new paddlers presents the best opportunity to reverse the trend. The Water Sports Foundation's outreach to newcomers includes an effort to enlist as allies in the fight the retailers where most beginners buy their first kayaks and paddleboards.



When practiced safely, kayaking is an excellent way to get exercise and enjoy the outdoors, but recent Coast Guard data show an upward trend in casualties



A sweepstakes offer to win a gift card at the Dick's Sporting Goods U event ensured the Water Sports Foundation effectively shared its safety message with store manager attendees

As part of this project, the WSF and the Pennsylvania Boat and Fish Commission (PFBC) recently coordinated an effort to enlist Dick's Sporting Goods as paddling safety ambassadors. Corporate managers pledged to promote more safety recommendations online and in stores, including the importance of wearing life jackets and taking a free paddler safety course. The goal is to educate paddlers who purchase kayaks and paddleboards from the popular sporting goods chain. The effort positions Dick's Sporting Goods as a safety leader among large non-specialty retailers, which sell the majority of entry-level paddle craft in the United States.

Joining the effort was the American Canoe Association (ACA), which serves the paddling community with a variety of benefits including paddlesports education. The ACA offered free online paddling courses for Dick's employees and customers.

Last year, the Water Sports Foundation found similar success with kayak retailer, Tractor Supply, when the nonprofit reached out to corporate management encouraging increased safety promotion such as offering life jackets to paddlesports customers. Tractor Supply now sells life jackets as an addition to their kayak display. Safety advocates applaud this as a huge win for paddlesports safety.

The record decline in boating fatalities highlights significant boating safety and education strides, while the increase in paddling deaths underscores the critical need for targeted interventions. The Water Sports Foundation, in collaboration with the ACA, PFBC, and retail partners such as Dick's Sporting Goods, is working to equip all paddlers with the knowledge and skills they need to enjoy the sport safely.

Jim Emmons

The Water Sports Foundation

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