

WHAT DOES BOATING MEAN TO FLORIDA & OTHER STATES?

A WAKE-UP CALL TO OTHER STATES TO PROTECT THEIR MARINE INDUSTRIES.

In answering this question, perhaps we need to define the term South Florida. Its definition can be very subjective. Many people believe that South Florida includes Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties. Why not Monroe? The Keys do offer a unique way of life, but they are geographically part of Florida and certainly are south. Likewise, when people refer to the Palm Beach area they are usually venturing much further north than the county line.

As a native, I understand these nuances, but for others it may be difficult to grasp them. As a native, I also understand that I am in the minority. Most people that now call South Florida their home came from somewhere else and will eventually move somewhere else. My eight-year-old son Kyle is also a native of South Florida. So far, he has had three best friends in his life. The first was Eddie, whose parents moved here from New York in 2000 and subsequently moved to Dallas in 2003. The second was Kyle. He and his brother were actually born here after their parents moved from Maine in 1997. In 2004, they moved to Maryland. My son's third best friend is also named Kyle. He was born here after his parents moved from Wisconsin; they will soon be moving to North Carolina. All three of these families made a conscious decision to live in South Florida, raise a family, and then move in search of their "home." All of the adults in these families were

involved in the community and held professional jobs. All managed to live in South Florida without truly experiencing what makes this region of the country the "Venice of America" or the "Yachting Capital of the World."

Businesses are not much different than families. In fact, many are one and the same. Businesses strive to create a foothold in an industry and establish their headquarters (a.k.a. their "home"). Home is where they find the most resources readily available to achieve the greatest return on their investment as well as potential opportunities for future growth. In this arena, South Florida is no different from many other regions. Businesses will come and go based on market trends. There should only be concern if an entire industry is on the move.

Recent headlines in many trade publications as well as newspapers suggest that the marine industry is leaving Florida. Many boatbuilders have moved to the Carolinas where the land is cheap and the labor pool is large. Should we be concerned? Maybe not yet, but we need to be evaluating the resources of our marine industry to assess if it will be sufficient to keep boating strong in Florida in general and specifically in South Florida.

During the first half of the 20th century, South Florida had a strong foothold in the agriculture industry. There were

always fishermen, and for those that could afford it, recreational boating, but boating was not the big business it is today. When my grandfather started his business in 1950, Ward's Marine Electric, he applied the skills he had used to fix generators on farms to various marine applications. In 1962, the Marine Industries Association was formed in an effort to create a unified voice to speak with local legislators and to participate in developing marine facilities and dockage to keep the boats coming.

Those legislators should be commended as they listened closely to their constituents' needs. Today, the South Florida marine industry has an economic impact of \$13.4 billion and 162,000 jobs. At the state level, the marine industry represents an \$18.4 billion economic impact and 220,000 jobs. In comparison with other industries, the Florida cruise ship industry in 2004 had a \$5.2 billion dollar economic impact and the Florida citrus industry represented a \$9.1 billion economic impact and 90,000 jobs.

The marine industry is clearly one of the largest industries in Florida, both in dollars and jobs, so it would seem logical that all Florida state license tags would have a boat and that there would be "Welcome to Florida" signs with illustrations of families in boats, on the water, enjoying the many year-round natural amenities the Sunshine State has to offer. You haven't seen

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those? Well then have you seen the commercials and advertising campaigns that remind visitors, residents, families, and corporations to get out on the water and continue the heritage of boating? No? Well at least all Florida local and state legislators understand the importance of the marine industry to their communities. No? The Florida citrus industry has had all of this and much more for decades, and yet our industry's impact both on the economy and in employment is more than double that associated with citrus. Last year, in an effort to protect their \$9.1 billion dollar industry, the Florida Department of Citrus (FDOC) spent over \$45 million dollars to remind Florida residents and visitors the importance of citrus. Maybe we also need a FDOB – the Florida Department of Boating.

In 2003, the Marine Industries Association of Florida (MIAF), an umbrella group for many of the regional marine trade associations in the state, along with some of its partners, worked very hard to push for legislation establishing the Florida Office of Boating & Waterways, a division of Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).

According to the FWC Web site, the Office of Boating and Waterways has the following responsibilities: provide safe and enjoyable boating for the people of Florida and its visitors through the effective and coordinated management of our waterways, to work with all stakeholders when developing rules and making statutory recommendations, to use sound scientific data, reasonable public input, and common sense for recommendations of slow speed zones and other restrictions and regulations, the formulation of solutions that will not jeopardize our natural resources or our freedoms to navigate the waterways of the state.

But is all this enough? When a threat

to Florida citrus is even suspected, which I reiterate is an industry with less than half the employment and economic impact of boating, the attention of the Florida Legislature and Governor is immediate. However, in the face of numerous challenges to the boating industry, we remain largely self-reliant with the seemingly repetitive task of convincing the legislators and regulators of our role in the economy, lifestyle, and Florida's overall community. Unfortunately, despite the good intentions, high hopes, and progress made with the creation of the Office of Boating & Waterways, it is not enough.



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A Florida Department of Boating is needed to manage the marketing, research, and regulation of the marine industry, while encouraging its growth and development, thus benefiting all the citizens of this state. It is needed to ensure a focus on issues management with the responsibility for many of the activities related to boating that are currently scattered across the governmental landscape. And similar to the California Depart-

ment of Boating, it should monitor and facilitate boating safety and education, law enforcement, water access development, as well as offering loans and grants for facilities and marine environmental improvements. Are the marine businesses, boat owners, and citizens not deserving of at least this much? Florida has the greatest number of coastal/tidal miles in the U.S. and is considered both the Yachting and Fishing Capitals of the World. This year, Florida took the lead as the number one state in the U.S. with the greatest number of registered boats – 963,758. This state also offers year round boating, something three of the other top five boating states cannot offer. I believe that as an industry with a strong economic impact and 220,000 people whose families depend on boating for their livelihood, we deserve a strong voice at the executive branch level.

In my vision for the future of the marine industry, a Florida Department of Boating, functioning as a strong voice for boating in the state, would protect our high wage and high skill jobs and would ensure that everyone is aware of boating and its benefits as a recreation and economic driver. The challenges of the marine industry would be addressed with an even stronger resolve for mutually beneficial solutions and there would be more time for effective management. I believe boating would be better and safer with more boating destinations and events for all to enjoy.

Boating may be one of the largest industries in the state but it is also much more than that. It is a lifestyle. If those three families had experienced this lifestyle, they may well have chosen to still call South Florida their home.

In closing, other coastal states need to take a lesson from what is taking place in Florida and take action to protect their marine industries. 