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On Wisconsin's glacial lakes, wake-enhanced boating damaging and dangerous | Opinion

Enhanced wake boats constitute a non-native, invasive species in Wisconsin and need to be thoughtfully regulated on our precious lakes

Hans Meyer Special to Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Wake boats, designed to create large waves for surfing, are ill-suited for Wisconsin's lakes, which have defined shorelines and existing infrastructure.

The large waves generated by wake boats cause shoreline erosion, damage docks and boats, and pose safety risks to swimmers and other boaters.

The environmental impact of wake boats includes disturbing lakebed sediment, increasing turbidity, and potentially contributing to the spread of invasive species.

This story was updated to add new information that was inadvertently omitted from a previous version.

On Wisconsin's glacial lakes, wake-enhanced boats are a non-native, invasive species.

Developed in the southeast and southwest regions of the country, [wake boats](#) were first used on large reservoirs which typically don't have defined shorelines due to varying water levels and rarely have shoreside owners with docks and other structures built on the banks of lakes and rivers. Low average wind speeds in the southeast provides the additional benefit of little competition with wind waves even on these very large bodies of water. Wake boats are fine on these large reservoirs.

In Wisconsin our conditions couldn't be more different. Most of our 15,000 lakes were formed by the glaciers. Our lakes have well defined shorelines that are by-and-large natural in the northern part of the state while many are armored in the southern part of the state as a result of higher power boat traffic.

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Exposure to artificially large waves has resulted in [shoreline damage](#) on our northern lakes in Wisconsin. Will we need to armor these shorelines and at whose expense? Will the boating industry or the owners of the boats that are creating these [destructive waves](#) offer to pay? Or will the shoreline owners, who in large majority do not like the presence of these boats in the first place, have to [shoulder the expense](#)?

And while our lakes in the southern part of the state are often armored, few if any of our lakes experience "natural" 4-foot-high waves. If shoreline owners in the southern part of the state need to add armor to their shorelines or reinforce existing armor, who will pay for this?

Wake boats now boast making waves higher than 4 feet

Just a few years ago, the wake boats being sold generated waves between two-and-three feet. Today's models boast 4.4 foot waves. When you double the height of a wave, the wave has four times as much destructive energy. It makes you wonder how big these waves will be in two or three years? Is the boating industry making any commitment to limit what it will offer in the future?

How many times will property owners have to re-build their shorelines to accommodate what today is only 4% of the boating population? With new wake boat prices ranging from \$200,000 to \$400,000, this is not the sport of the average Wisconsinite, yet wake boat owners are asking lake and river property owners to bear the cost of their sport.

Unlike the reservoirs in the southeast and southwest regions of the country, Wisconsin's shorelines have shoreline owners and are typically developed with docks, boat lifts and swimming rafts. Tying a boat or other watercraft to a dock is virtually impossible when there can be a random 4-foot wave crashing onto the shore. And more important than the damage that may be caused to either the boat or the dock, people trying to get on or off their boats or attempting to fend their boats off run the risk of being seriously injured. Who is liable for this damage and injury?

Four-foot waves are not natural on our lakes, and when we do have our largest waves, they are wind driven and regular. The wind alerts you that there will be waves and their regular period allows them to be anticipated. Enhanced wakes are random and silent until they come crashing onto the shore or into your boat.

Opinion: [Wisconsin's sandhill cranes are beautiful but damage our crops. Let hunting help.](#)

The random and silent nature of these over-sized waves make them particularly dangerous for other boaters. Many of our fishermen practice their sport standing up. If facing away from an incoming wake boat wave, the first warning a fisherman has is when his boat starts violently rolling. Pontoon boats, which were never designed to handle large waves and are typically occupied by groups of people enjoying an afternoon on the water, can be rocked by these waves causing people to fall and food and drinks to be spilled.

Artificial waves threaten shorelines and other boaters

These large artificial waves are both a threat to and an encroachment on our paddle sports. The joy of paddling can be quickly overcome by the fear of capsizing. Competitive sailing is rendered meaningless when wake boats, capable of changing the outcome of a race, are in the area.

The downwash from heavily loaded wake boats has been documented to damage fishing beds and weed beds while increasing turbidity. Lake bed sediment can be disturbed to depths of 26 feet according to recent research. Increased nutrients in

the water column can lead to algae blooms. Toxic chemicals, like mercury and arsenic, can be re-suspended unknowingly.

Opinion: We want to hear from you: How did President Trump do in address to Congress?

Wisconsin has a problem, in general, with the transfer of invasive species in boats and on trailers moving from lake-to-lake. This problem is particularly acute with wake boats in that manufacturers have made no attempt to facilitate thorough draining and inspection.

It's not that these are "bad" boats, they're just inappropriate for Wisconsin's glacial lakes with their defined shorelines, shoreline infrastructure, shallow depths, and high density usage by Wisconsin residents and tourists.

Enhanced wake boats constitute a non-native, invasive species in Wisconsin and need to be thoughtfully regulated on our precious lakes.

Hans Meyer, of Pewaukee, serves on the [board of directors of Lakes at Stake](#), a bipartisan group raising awareness and lobbying for regulations of wake sports on Wisconsin lakes.