

HardisonInk.com

FWC saves lives and conserves natural resources



Justin Geiger (aboard the boat) and Adam Hayes help an FWC officer check out their material for safety before they depart to be in the Chiefland Rotary Fishing Tournament. Thomas Race was in this fishing crew although he is out of camera view at this moment. A Rotarian said he would relay a request from *HardisonInk.com* to be provided with results from this year's tournament.

Story, Photos and Video By Jeff M. Hardison © May 21, 2017 at 4:37 p.m.

GULF OF MEXICO -- In conjunction with National Safe Boating Week, Gov. Rick Scott has issued a proclamation declaring May 20-26, Safe Boating Week in Florida.

Four Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) officers started their day in Cedar Key as they were among the FWC force throughout the state on the first day of Safe Boating Week on Saturday (May 20).

FWC officers Robert Johnson and James Fox initially assisted FWC officers Jordan Hilliard and Brennan Starling as Hilliard and Starling focused on saving lives and conserving natural resources at the Rotary Club of Chiefland's Annual Fishing Tournament.

VIDEO LINK IS ON THE MAY PAGE

In this two-minute set of video clips, FWC Officer Robert Johnston and FWC Officer James Fox are at the wheel of the boat. At one point Saturday morning, the boat was brought up to a relatively fast speed to catch up with a boater who appeared to be leaving quickly once the FWC had started toward him. That boater said he was not trying to escape from the FWC officers. The clips end with Officer Fox bringing the boat in for a very smooth docking at Cedar Key.

HardisonInk.com



FWC Officer Robert Johnston is seen as the sun rises in the background near the launching point of Cedar Key.



FWC officers (from left) Jordan Hilliard, Robert Johnston, James Fox and Brennan Starling pause for a moment to be captured in a photo.

HardisonInk.com



Charlie Kennedy, a participant in the Chiefland Rotary Club tournament, looks happy before launching that day.

John Meeks, a participant in the Chiefland Rotary Club tournament, checks out the boat as it sits on a trailer.

Every one of the 61 boats registered for that Rotary Club's fishing tournament -- that showed up -- was provided a safety inspection.

Boaters might want to take the necessary steps to assure they are complying with laws before going on the water with their vessels.

All vessels in Florida, except non-motor-powered vessels shorter than 16-feet long, and except for canoes, kayaks, racing shells or rowing sculls regardless of their length, must be registered through the local Tax Collector's Office.



HardisonInk.com

All recreational vessels are required to have size-specific safety equipment on board, according to Florida law. The regulations for commercial vessels are more stringent.

FWC Officer Johnston explained that the FWC first seeks to protect lives and to assure the legal use of natural resources is occurring.

FWC officers have no quota of citations and they often use verbal and written warnings to stress the importance of abiding by the law, rather than issuing citations.

FWC officers Johnston and Fox, after completing their assistance of their colleagues at the boat ramps in Cedar Key, launched in a 2005 22-foot Pathfinder boat, powered by a 250-horsepower Yamaha marine engine.



Two boats with oysters harvested by two men are checked Saturday morning.



Some of the many beautiful natural scenes that can be observed from a boat in the Gulf of Mexico off of the coast of Levy County show why this part of the Gulf is a destination for boaters and fishermen. The natural beauty here remains untarnished by buildings on the shoreline.



HardisonInk.com

These two officers on that Saturday patrolled waterways in Levy County, which includes the Gulf of Mexico and the Suwannee River.

Gulf sturgeon have begun their annual migration back into the Suwannee River, FWC Officer Johnston mentioned as he and Officer Fox provided information.

“The best course of action is to go slow, wear your life jacket and keep people off the bow of the boat,” FWC Maj. Andy Krause, FWC regional

commander, stated earlier this year in regard to sturgeon safety. “The Suwannee is a beautiful river, and we certainly don’t want to scare anyone away from enjoying it. We just want those recreating there to be aware these fish are present and can jump at any time. There have been injuries and, tragically, even a death in past years due to sturgeon strikes.”

Watching and speaking with FWC officers Johnston and Fox provided more insight from their perspective as they conducted safety and resource checks on recreational and commercial vessels, starting with the parking lot next to Cedar Key City Park and the boat ramps there, and then on the Gulf of Mexico until noon.

At noon, the officers docked the Pathfinder boat to enjoy lunch in Cedar Key at Steamer’s Clam Bar and Grill. Their journalist ride-along guest of the day was forced to finish that part of his day off of the water -- due to other (less fun) demands of owning a daily news website.

Once on the water in the morning, however, the officers knew they would not be checking fish sizes of the tournament participants too soon, because it takes some time to catch fish.

With Officer Johnston occasionally being the captain of the vessel and with Officer Fox also accepting that responsibility, the three men first headed north in the Gulf of Mexico from the launch point at Cedar Key.



HardisonInk.com



A young fisherman holds a mackerel he caught as the FWC officers were checking safety equipment.



The mackerel is measured. This picture was taken before the fish's lips were slid up to the point where measurement began. It was longer than 12 inches long. A flounder caught within minutes of this fish also measured to be proved as a keeper.

HardisonInk.com



FWC Officer James Fox looks through binoculars to determine what is happening on a distant boat.



FWC Officer Robert Johnston checks safety equipment on a vessel used by a commercial oyster harvester.

HardisonInk.com



A group of commercial oyster harvesters cruises through the Gulf of Mexico off of Levy County.

During the hours of touring, some things became obvious.

People operating recreational and commercial boats are not always the registered owners, and sometimes they do not have the paperwork to prove the vessel is registered with a valid, paid registration.

Thanks to radio communication and computer databases accessible by FWC personnel in dispatch centers, officers are able to confirm vessel registrations and valid fishing licenses.

Officers Johnston and Fox did not -- between 6 a.m. and noon on Saturday -- issue citations, which might include a fine, and they did not have occasion to place into handcuffs any suspected criminals.

Nevertheless, people did receive written and verbal warnings to update vessel registrations, and to purchase the proper type of flares and life vests. Commercial and recreational boaters also enjoyed the opportunity to have all of their questions answered when they asked them of the two FWC officers.

In regard to these officers' actions to save lives, one primary duty was assuring that children wore life vests in any vessel that was underway. The law requires children 6 years and younger to be wearing a life vest if the boat is underway. If a boat is not anchored, it is underway.

Another lesser known method for these officers to keep people from becoming sick or from dying relates to oyster harvesting.

In Wakulla, Dixie and Levy counties, oyster harvesting is prohibited from June 1 through Aug. 31. The two officers checked at least five harvesting vessels in the morning

HardisonInk.com

on May 20 as those shell-fishermen (and women) earned money by taking oysters from the Gulf.

Not only is there a specific season for harvesting oysters, but within the waters of the Gulf of Mexico off of Levy County, for instance, there are zones where harvesting is prohibited.

Likewise, there are time-of-day limits for harvesting the oysters and that varies by month. The water and air temperature varies between September and June.

The time of day restrictions for delivering two classifications of oysters – one that can be eaten on the half-shell and the other that is cooked or processed – are different as well. That time notes the time of day when those oysters are to be delivered to their final destination (prior to the final destination of the dinner table).

The regulations controlling the harvest of oysters relate to temperature and microscopic organisms that can present health issues – especially to humans with weaker immune systems.

Officers Johnston and Fox provided commercial oyster harvesters with either a complete verbal approval of everything on the boat as being safe and proper, or the boaters received verbal or written warnings about safety equipment.

There was one, written one-month past-due vehicle registration warning issued.

If an oyster harvesting person violated certain laws, they could have been arrested for a criminal violation of the law. Those criminal laws are to protect people's lives by reducing the odds of oyster eaters becoming sick.

Another law where Officer Johnston mentioned he is not inclined to give only a verbal or written warning is when he sees a vessel operator not requiring a child younger than 6 years old to wear a life vest. That will result in a citation, and upon conviction or an admission of guilt, the person will pay a fine.

Every person younger than the age of 6 years old must wear an approved Type I, II, or III life vest while the vessel is underway.

The goal of the FWC is to protect lives, FWC Officer Johnston said.

During the few-hour tour Saturday, all four officers who were observed -- Johnston, Fox, Hilliard and Starling -- demonstrated their high level of professional service to save lives and conserve the natural resources of Florida.

HardisonInk.com

Levy County second worst of 67 counties for per-capita boating safety in 2016;

Dixie County had one death and one injury in 2016;

Gilchrist County had zero boating accidents in 2016



John Caddigan, the commander of United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla Yankeetown, along with member Joseph Catalano are seen on the boat ramp in Cedar Key last Saturday (May 20) helping people stay safer while boating with complimentary vessel examinations. A list of safety equipment is checked. Safety equipment for boats includes having on board fire extinguishers that are fully charged and not expired for use. The week-long event is part of National Safe Boating Week (May 20-26) conducted at boat ramps, booths, with public speeches and news articles informing and educating the boating public about safer boating.
Photo by Mike Moore Yankeetown Coast Guard Auxiliary Public Affairs

~

By Jeff M. Hardison © May 22, 2017 at 9:07 a.m.

TALLAHASSEE -- Levy County ranks as the second worst of 67 counties for safe boating when calculating the ratio of the number of accidents in relation to the number of people in the county, according to the 2016 Reportable Boating Accidents figures available by searching the [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission](#).

Levy County is 27th overall of the 67 counties in ranking when calculating the ratio of accidents in relation to the number of vessels registered in this county, according to the 2016 Reportable Boating Accidents figures.

The 2016 records show 4,049 recreational vessels registered in Levy County. There is a 2016 total of 4,409 total vessels registered in Levy County, which shows 360 vessels as being commercial or something other than recreational.

There were six reportable boating accidents in Levy County in 2016, with five resulting in injuries and one resulting in a death, according to records.

The estimated property damage from boating accidents in Levy County in 2016 was \$25,700,

HardisonInk.com

according to records.

Perhaps the most significant figure for Levy County residents is the per-capita ratio in relation to boat accidents.

For every 735 people in Levy County in 2016, there was one accident. That puts the county in second place from that perspective.

Glades County took first place in the per-capita ratio in relation to 2016 boat accidents figure with one accident for every 315 people.

Dixie County had one death and one injury in boating accidents in 2016, according to the FWC figures. The per-capita ratio for Dixie County in 2016 was one accident for every 1,284 people.

Gilchrist County had zero boating accidents in 2016, according to the FWC figures.

The top five counties in Florida that had the accidents in 2016 per number of registered vessels in the counties (not the per-capita figure), according to the FWC figures follow:

- 1 – Monroe County 105 accidents; three deaths; 52 injuries
- 2 – Miami-Dade County 67 accidents; seven deaths; 37 injuries
- 3 – Palm Beach County 62 accidents; three deaths; 19 injuries
- 4 – Pinellas County 44 accidents; two deaths; 37 injuries
- 5 – Lee County 39 accidents; six deaths; 29 injuries

The totals for Florida boating accidents in 2016 show that from the 931,450 vessels registered last year there were 714 reportable accidents; 67 deaths; 421 injuries; and more than \$10 million worth of property damage. The average per-capita ratio of population to boating accidents when looking at all 67 counties shows a ratio of 1:1,305.