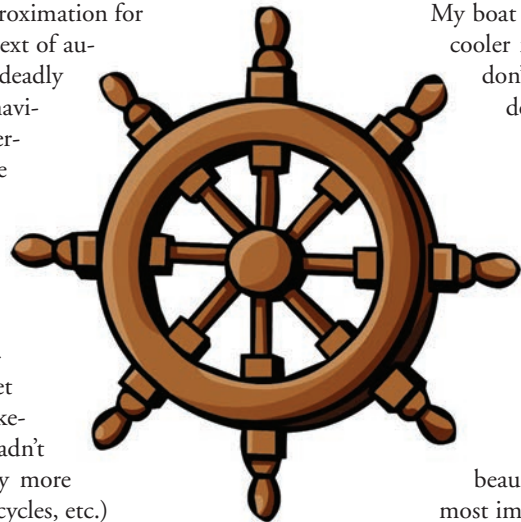


*Drinking and driving a car. Even those who do it aren't likely to openly advocate for it. It's an act of depraved indifference, and it carries a commensurate stigma, as it should.*

Drinking and boating – when it comes to pervasive attitudes concerning this just-as-illegal act, the water is a little murkier than the asphalt-black-and-white associated with drunk-driving. Oddly, there's a hint of unspoken social acceptance linking alcoholic beverages and boats. Sure, waterways tend to be less crowded than roads, but perhaps there's an entitlement bias associated with the luxury aspect of boating in contrast to the universal utilitarian act of operating an automobile. Think of it as “nautical privilege” in modern-speak.

Which brings me to the facts. I have found consistent, comparable data sets for cars and boats from 2020, so I'm using them, with the assumption that then – two years ago – is a reasonable approximation for now. First, alcohol in the context of automotive transportation is a deadly weapon. So it is in maritime navigation, as well. Twenty-nine percent of automotive fatalities are linked to alcohol. With boating deaths, alcohol is the most statistically significant causal factor, present in 19 percent of fatal incidents. Whether it's one-in-four (cars), or one-in-five (boats), a significant subset of total deaths could have likely been avoided if alcohol hadn't been used. ‘But there are way more cars (and trucks, buses, motorcycles, etc.) than there are boats,’ you say. And you're right. Yet the relative lethality of the two transportation modes are (perhaps surprisingly) similar. In 2020, the U.S. had approximately 276 million registered vehicles (all types) on its roads. And 38,824 people died using them. That means there's a .014 percent chance that somebody dies in your car this year. Meanwhile, 11.8 million nautical vessels were registered in the U.S., and 767 people died using them, which equates to .007 percent probability of a death on your boat. In other words, someone dying in your car is twice as likely as someone dying in your boat this year. But I bet you drive your car more than two days for every one on your boat. So, you can make a reasonable argument that boating is considerably more deadly than driving a car.

But laws don't reflect the relative danger between the two stupid acts. It is illegal everywhere in the U.S. to drink and operate a motor vehicle. So is the ubiquity of the same prohibition as it pertains to boats. However, it's also illegal nearly everywhere to operate an automobile with an open container of alcohol anywhere inside, never mind who is consuming (or not consuming it). On a boat – even an 8-footer that might be a tight squeeze for two guys – if you're not at the helm (or on the tiller, as with the aforementioned-8-foot skiff), drink up! And move freely about the open and slippery deck, unencumbered by safety constraints, while you do so. Seems weird when you think about it like that, right?



My boat has a built-in, slide-out, big-ass cooler right below my captain's seat. I don't have to do more than bend down (taking my eye off the water for no more than a few seconds, but it'll be okay, no doubt) to grab a cold one (in my case, water, since I don't drink and haven't for a quarter-century). But I can't visualize an ice chest on the arm rest in my car between mine and my passenger's seat.

This part of the world is so beautiful from the water that it's almost impossible to describe to someone who hasn't been on a boat. So, if you're fortunate enough to have access to such amazingness, do you really need a beer to make it “better?” Not if you're at the wheel...no way! The selfish satisfaction of a sip is – not by any calculation – worth the horrible risks.

*Scott A. Lauriat*

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