

Potti-Training for Boaters!

By Leigh T. Johnson, Coastal Resources Advisor

You want me to do what?! I don't do potti-training!!



Little did I know that I would soon be certifying "Potti-Trainers for Boaters" in a team effort with the Coast Guard's San Diego Marine Safety Office (MSO). We borrowed the Potti-Training idea from Julie Massey, Texas Sea Grant Marine Agent in the Galveston-Clear Lake area. In the summer of 1999 we added a Train the Trainers twist by teaching 14 Coast Guard Auxiliarists and Reserves how to organize and teach Potti-Training for Boaters seminars in cooperation with marinas and yacht clubs in four San Diego County cities: San Diego, Chula Vista, Coronado and Oceanside. Our core Train the Trainers team included Coast Guard Cdr. Mike Farley, who was Captain of the Port for San Diego Bay, Coast Guard Auxiliarist Tom McNiff, and myself.

So what *is* Potti-Training for Boaters?! It's a light and humorous way to remind boaters what an effect their pollution has on the waters where they motor, sail and, yes, also fall overboard! When sewage holding tanks are dumped in harbors and marinas, there's a risk of serious disease, such as hepatitis, from swimming in those waters. Not to mention risks for the underwater hull cleaners who work there every day!

Other pollutants, such as used oil, fuel spills, and copper from bottom paints affect the eggs, larvae and juvenile stages of fish and other critters that live in or visit marinas. And of course, garbage and trash foul the water and can become entangled in propellers, fishing lines, and so forth.



Coast Guard Auxiliary display used at boat shows and other events as part of the Potti-Training Program.

The boaters who attended our seminars already knew that pollution in the harbor was a big deal. Nobody raised a hand when we asked who would swim in the marina or eat a fish caught there!

Vessel sewage pumpout station distributors gave demonstrations on how to use the facilities, because misuse can put a pumpout out of commission. Boaters got practical tips on how to maintain the sewage holding tanks on their boats. Basically, the key is not to put anything into the tank that couldn't go through you. The "salad dressing solution" is the best way to maintain the tank and lines. First, use vinegar to slough off built-up material. Then use oil to re-lubricate the parts!

And, almost no one (including yours truly) knew that dumping vessel sewage in a "no discharge zone" can bring stiff fines and jail time! It's important to find out the sewage discharge policy for your home port and for any harbor you plan to visit. Many harbors are "no discharge zones" and require all vessels to have holding tanks!

In general, the 3 nautical-mile rule applies to sewage discharges. That is, you must be three miles offshore before it's OK. One of the Coast Guard Auxiliarists gave a rule of thumb for how to know when you're 3 miles out: when a 6-foot tall person can no longer see the shoreline when standing on deck. Remember, this is just a rule of thumb. Go a bit farther out to be sure!

Why did we decide on a Train the Trainers approach? Two reasons: First, we knew that the University of California Cooperative Extension education program couldn't possibly reach everybody. Second, there's a lot of turnover, so even if we could teach everybody this year, there are always new boaters who need to be clued in about pollution prevention. We needed to keep reaching lots of boaters every year.

One of the best ways to do this is to find leaders in the group you want to reach. The Coast Guard Auxiliary was perfect: they're boaters and they already know how to teach boaters (through their safety courses). So, when the California Department of Boating and Waterways asked us to do a vessel sewage education program for San Diego, back in 1996, we suggested the Coast Guard Auxiliary. With the support of the Coast Guard MSO in San Diego, the Auxiliary accepted a Clean Vessel Act grant and did a bang-up job. They opened a visitor center on San Diego Bay, went to boat and sport fishing shows, blanketed the air waves with radio spots, and walked the docks to talk to boaters and hand out canvas bags of educational brochures. The Coast Guard Reserves got in on the action, too, through their Sea Partners environmental education program for boaters. So, by 1999 both groups were ready for the "Train the Potti-Trainers" program!

Did we make a difference? The Auxiliarists and Reserves that we trained worked in teams to teach 70 boaters in the 1999 seminar series in San Diego County. Local cities sent hazardous waste control staff, who taught boaters how to dispose of used oil, batteries, leftover paint, and so forth. Afterwards, the boaters who came to the seminars got on VHF radio and kept spreading the word!

We surveyed 42 boaters at the end of the seminars and found that between 60% and 90% learned new information on environmental impacts of boating pollution and on laws, disposal and maintenance tips related to vessel sewage, holding tanks and hazardous waste. 83% improved their ability to operate a pumpout station or call a mobile service. The Coast Guard Auxiliarists and Reserves had a lot of fun teaching the seminars and wanted to combine forces for future "dock walks" at marinas.

The Coast Guard Auxiliary installed meters on vessel sewage pump-out stations throughout the San Diego County and collected data beginning in May, 1999. Because the volume of sewage pumped out of boat holding tanks rises and falls with the boating season, they monitored pump-out station use for over a year to measure the effect of the educational program.

The Auxiliary and Reserves conducted local seminars again in summer 2000 and continued outreach via radio, public events, and personal contacts on the docks. The San Diego Coast Guard team and the SGEP partnered to train Potti-Trainers in the Havasu Lakes area of Arizona in February 2000. The Florida Keys Marine Sanctuary requested information on how to establish Potti-Training and the Texas Sea Grant Extension Program considered adding a Train the Trainers element to their Potti-Training program!



A sewage pumpout station being checked for efficiency. Waste pumped out from boats goes into the local sewage treatment system.

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