

Tragedy follows boaters who drink

by Louise Donhauser

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It was a clear night, with a full moon shining brightly. The treeline on both sides of the river and the moon reflected off the Kuskokwim River. The river looked calm and beautiful.

But suddenly, after a boat stopped at the fishcamp across the village, a woman began to wail sorrowfully, "How come you make my Jimmy drown?" Somehow the beauty of the river was gone, but to the residents of that village it wasn't something new. Nearly every summer the river took someone like Jimmy's (not his real name) life and in almost every drowning alcohol was involved.

While alcohol and boats often resulted in a fatal mixture in that village, many other villages in Alaska also had to deal with drownings. In 1983 that calm moon-lit river took at least three lives between May and September, according to Public Safety's Records and Administration.

The total number of water fatalities in Alaska last year was 130. In the summer months 33 rural Alaskans died as a result of drowning.

But there are many things the total number doesn't show, Marilyn Crenshaw of the Public Safety Office said. When the Alaska State Troopers do the paperwork the troopers aren't required to say alcohol was involved.

Crenshaw said, "They (troopers) don't always put it on the paperwork we get. If drowning was the cause of death it says drowning. They don't say alcohol." Crenshaw added that urban areas aren't concerned if a drowning resulted from intoxication but many rural-related organizations have inquired about the number of alcohol related drownings.

While no one could say exactly how many drownings were alcohol related, another question remains unanswered: Who is responsible for ensuring the safety of rural Alaskans who use their rivers as primary sources of transportation?

Since statehood the Alaska State Troopers have been given the responsibility of ensuring

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Drowning questions remain unanswered

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the safety of Alaskans by enforcing the law. Until the Village Public Safety Officers were introduced the troopers were the only law enforcement agents in rural Alaska. In some villages the troopers are still the only law enforcement agents.

In urban areas a local police force is given the responsibility to ensure the safety of motorists when alcohol is involved. Local officers are assigned to checkpoints along roads in Anchorage. When a driver is caught driving while intoxicated the driver has to serve a mandatory 72 hours in jail.

On Alaskan rivers which often serve as rural highways, troopers or village public safety officers aren't assigned patrol duty.

"When you have so many violent crimes it's hard to justify river patrol," State Trooper Detachment Commander Joe De-Temple of Bethel said.

Some feel a river patrol may not be the answer to boating while intoxicated. A tribal leader, Willie Goodwin, who serves as vice-chairman for the Kotzebue IRA (Indian Reorganization Act) government and chairman of United Tribes of Alaska said if a river patrol saved lives it would be beneficial but if it was used to search boats it would not be a logical answer to the drowning problem.

"If it were for purposes of safety we wouldn't have a problem. But if they (troopers) used it for searches we'd get upset," Goodwin said.

Goodwin said the troopers are making an effort to curtail the number of drunk drivers on water ways. "I know they've been arresting people," Goodwin said, adding that someone in Selawik had been arrested. "They're making some effort, which is good."

Goodwin said it would be difficult for a tribal government to institute a river patrol because the state would not give a tribal government the jurisdiction to do it and a tribal government wouldn't have the manpower either.

"If we tried that there would be somebody saying we were exceeding our authority. If we did would we hire our own cops? How can we? The only government I know is the state and they wouldn't give that to a tribal government. How could we do it even if we wanted to?" Goodwin asked.

While tribal governments may not be given the authority to patrol rivers and make BWI arrests Alaska Fish and Wildlife officers do have the authority to make arrests.

While there are numerous driving safety courses available in urban areas, in rural areas there is no guarantee that a person would be able to participate in a boating safety program if convicted of driving a boat while intoxicated.

"We do have a small scale water safety program" De-Temple said but a boat operator would be required to participate in a safety program only after a conviction and if a judge ordered the defendant to.

When asked how a drunk boat driver was identified De-Temple explained, "You have to watch the operation of the boat." If the driver of the boat appeared to be weaving or showed similar signs of a DWI on the road the troopers would "take them to the bank and make them do a sobriety test," he added.

Lieutenant Glenn Godfrey of the State Troopers said, "We do investigate all vessel fatalities. We're geared to take it after the fact."

It was also after the fact that the Alaska State Troopers had to respond to the 24 fatal drownings which occurred between January and March of 1984 in Alaska.

The number is based on figures which have been filed with the Public Safety Division in Juneau. More recently another after-the-fact was Ray Peltola of Aniak. His body hasn't been found but his boat was found drifting 20 miles up the Holitna River.



Good times can be had on Alaska's rivers, as indicated by this pleasant setting in Northwest Alaska as Luke Sampson takes one of his young sons fishing. Yet, boaters who run the rivers with alcohol in their blood can ruin the day not only for themselves but others too.

Photo by Bill Hess