

NEWS

DNR warns about 'drowning machines'

May 16, 2007 at 4:00 AM

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The Department of Natural Resources has a boating guide specifically for the Mississippi River from the Twin Cities to Iowa. It tells about how to stay safe, read river markers, go through a lock and avoid trouble. It's available at some DNR offices or on the web at www.dnr.state.mn.us/safety/boatwater/guides.

The Drowning Machine (page 55 of DNR booklet)
<http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/rlp/regulations/boatwater/boatingguide.pdf>

By John Weiss

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They are called drowning machines.

Dams, from those only a few feet tall on smaller rivers to the giant dams on the Mississippi River, can be dangerous for boaters approaching from either side.

Boaters who go over the dam from above can get killed, but even those approaching from downriver can get pulled into the recirculating current below them and be pulled under.

That is what happened Saturday night when four Twin Cities people apparently drowned when they got too close to Lock and

Dam 7 at Dresbach. Their boat was pulled upriver by the current and was pinned against the dam. When others tried to rescue them, the boat was pulled under.

In the 10 years from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, 14 people drowned at dams on Minnesota rivers, said Kim Elverum, DNR boat and water safety coordinator. Two anglers were killed in 1993 at the large Mississippi dam at Coon Rapids when they were fishing in a spillway and were pulled under. In 1983, a boater was killed in a similar accident at the lock and dam at Winona, and another one in 2000 on the Crow Wing River near Brainerd.

Elverum's advice is to stay away from dams — all dams.

On the Mississippi, it's illegal to get within 600 feet upriver of the dam or 150 feet below it. And when the river is high, such as in spring, it's even more dangerous because eddies and back currents can develop. The river is now several feet below flood stage.

Even when levels are normal during summer, recirculating water is so powerful and water so loaded with oxygen that lifejackets generally aren't a help. While he always suggests that everyone wear lifejackets when on the water, they won't float when there's too much oxygen in the water.

Small dams on rivers such as the Straight can be just as dangerous, he said.

Other pieces of advice:

- Make sure your boat and motor are in good condition and you know how to operate them.
- Learn what river markers mean.
- Never anchor from the back; always from the front. If you anchor from the back, the current can swamp the boat.

- When you go through a lock, never tie up the boat; just hold onto the ropes. To go through, boaters only need to go up to the lock wall and pull a rope that signals they need to go through, though it may take a few hours if a towboat is moving barges through at the time.
- Avoid those towboats and their barges.

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