

Water cops help enforce lake safety

By JUDITH BERNE

Lake patrol in summer, snowmobile watch in winter—it sounds like a cushy job.

But the marine division of the Oakland County Sheriff's Department maintains it isn't so.

The division has responsibility for the 450 Oakland County lakes on a year-round basis.

Currently in the middle of its busiest season, the regular five-man force has swelled to 30 to keep adequate watch over local boaters, bathers, fishermen and water skiers who enjoy the lakes but do not always recognize their potential dangers.

The officers are charged with instruction in and enforcement of the laws of pleasure boating and the recovery of drownings. In addition, they keep peace among the various users of the lakes.

SENIOR MARINE deputy Ralph Allison is in command of Cass Lake waters—all 1,287 acres of them.

For 15 years, the tanned, weather-worn officer has been patrolling Oakland County's biggest lake in an effort also to make it the safest.

Considered as much a part of Cass as the ice in winter and the sun in summer, Allison recalls that the division began with six officers back in 1960 and each had to own his own boat.

Currently the division owns and maintains 19 craft as part of its \$150,000 annual budget.

The officer makes his own decisions as to when to patrol Cass Lake. "Allison knows what the use of the lake is," his division boss, Sgt. John Lamberton, reports. "When it warrants it, he's out there."

Allison generally takes a second marine deputy out with him, especially during the busy weekend and evening hours. "Four eyes are better than two out here," he believes.

FOR ALLISON and Lamberton, as for the other marine officers, their



Allison announces the marine patrols intentions by microphone.



They inspect safety equipment including life vests and fire extinguishers.

summer days and nights belong to the division.

According to Lamberton, the men must be available around the clock for potential boating and swimming mishaps.

"You don't consider your time your own," he explains. "It's nothing to be called out from your supper table for a capsized rowboat, a downed sailboat or a drowning."

Lamberton is certain that without the marine patrol the water laws would go unheeded.

Cass is one of few lakes with a full-time patrol. On smaller lakes, where the division can make only spot checks, speed and equipment violations are common.

To Lamberton, this is not surprising. "We are trying to enforce laws which cut down on people's recreation

time," he describes. "They don't want to be bothered by a deputy coming along to tell them to sit down in their boat," he added.

"JUST PLAIN carelessness" is the biggest problem on the water, Lamberton states.

"People are careful at their jobs, around their homes and on the highway," he detailed. "But when they get on the lake they relax, and carelessness goes out the window."

In addition, he describes "a potential war on every one of these lakes: the fishermen against the water skiers, the swimmers against the boaters, the high speed boaters against the sailors."

"Part of our job is to make it fair for everyone," Lamberton said.

All the officers are depressed after a drowning and Lamberton feels the general public's reaction is not as profound as it should be.

"People almost expect a certain number of drownings," he said. "I don't want a single person to drown, it's a needless loss of life."

HE BELIEVES marine officers are a special breed, set apart from the rest of the sheriff's department by "their special feeling for the lakes."

For himself, an evening talking to lake homeowners about keeping their local waters safe is "a lot more rewarding than locking up a drunk."

"We're kind of like mothers out here," Lamberton explained. "We want to protect our children."



A two-man patrol heads for Cass Lake.



Out on the water, they decide to spot-check a passing boat.



One patrol ended, the next could be hours or minutes away...

(Staff photos by Douglas Bauman)