

Ten Reasons Why the Arguments Made by Wake Sport Enthusiasts Lack Substance

Wake sport enthusiasts have been making the following arguments for many years. Here is why they lack merit.

False Argument No. 1: Education will take care of the problems caused by wake boats.

The call for more education is perhaps the emptiest argument made by wake sport enthusiasts, because they routinely fail to state what should be taught and to whom. Notably, no amount of education will change the physics associated with the enormous amounts of energy carried by wake boat waves or make the Newberg Pool less narrow. To the extent that education is warranted, the curriculum should include the following points:

1. Wake boats impair critical edge habitat, damage shoreline property, and ruin the enjoyment of the river by other people. Should you choose to engage in wake sports, keep in mind that you will be doing something that is detrimental to the environment and other people.
2. Wake boats have become increasingly controversial on the Willamette River. Should you decide to invest the considerable amount of money it takes to participate in wake sports, it is possible that forthcoming restrictions will limit the places you can use these boats.
3. There are many other ways to enjoy the river. Prior to the popularity of wake sports, many people found enjoyment through water skiing, fishing, or simply spending time with family and friends on boats that did not consume large amounts of fuel, require expensive accessories, or incur the cost of maintaining complex propulsion systems.

False Argument No. 2: Enforcement of current laws is all that is needed.

Another hollow argument is that enforcement of existing rules will suffice to solve the problems that wake boats are causing in the Newberg Pool. The reality is that the distance restrictions in the current rules were designed solely to reduce damage to shoreline property and do little to curtail the destruction of edge habitat in undeveloped areas or reduce the danger to other boaters.

False Argument No. 3: Erosion, what erosion?

The testimony from the neutral experts on March 4 noted that natural processes such as river flow produce long-scale changes that take decades and centuries to occur. The experts further stated that the kind of short-term erosion seen in the Newberg Pool is caused by anthropogenic activity such as boat wakes. It should be noted is that it is extraordinarily difficult and expensive to repair eroded river banks in a manner that restores edge habitat to its former level of productivity and that such restoration requires that taxpayers fund the administration of permitting and oversight by agencies such as the Department of State Lands.

False Argument No. 4: Restrictions will lead to congestion and safety concerns elsewhere.

Another common argument made by wake sport enthusiasts is that restrictions in one part of the river will shift traffic to other parts of the river and create congestion and safety issues in those parts. This argument fails for three reasons. First, the Willamette River runs through the heart of the state's most populated area, and has the most diverse use of any water body in the state. It is already congested from river mile 10 to river mile 50. Second, existing laws require boaters to adapt their behavior to avoid collisions and minimize other safety problems when water bodies become congested. In other words, when conditions get too congested to engage safely in wake sports, the obligation imposed by law is to refrain from those activities. Third, congestion is only a problem when it entails boats that are capable of creating dangerous conditions. Having hundreds of kayaks and paddleboards in a one-mile stretch puts no one at risk—the same cannot be said for putting five to ten wake boats in the same stretch.

False Argument No. 5: I want my children to have fun.

At one level, it is nice that parents who can afford wake boats with a typical price of \$150,000 are able to tow their children through the water in the name of fun. At a different level, it is wrong when other parents, who may only be able to afford canoes, kayaks, and paddleboards that cost under \$1000, feel it is unsafe to allow their children to use them because of the massive artificial waves generated by wake boats. Likewise, the large waves made by wake boats subject the tubes used by tubers to violent forces that frequently toss children into the river. While some tubers believe this is the desired objective of tubing, massive waves preclude other boaters from engaging in a safer form of tubing that can be done with much lighter boats.

False Argument No. 6: Other boaters should go somewhere else.

Some wake sport enthusiasts argue that other boaters should go to water bodies where wake sports are not practical. However, the “other boaters” are not the ones causing the problems in the Newberg Pool. The reality is that the Willamette River is too narrow to accommodate wake boats without suffering damage. Some better places to consider for wake sports include the Columbia River, Detroit Lake, Foster Reservoir, and Hagg Lake.

False Argument No. 7: Wakesurfing is slow and therefore must be safe.

Some wake sport enthusiasts argue that wakesurfing boats proceed at 8 to 12 mph and therefore must be safer than boating activities that involve more speed. Wake boats move slowly when wakesurfing because most of the energy from their 360 to 430 horsepower engines is directed towards plowing water into massive waves. Although speeds in the range of 20 to 30 mph may seem fast in comparison, these speeds are comparable to those posted on streets and roads in residential and commercial areas that have significant pedestrian activity. A boat moving at 30 mph is hardly a rocket ship.

False Argument No. 8: Restrictions on the Newberg Pool will harm property values.

The argument that people will pay less for riverside property if they cannot use wake boats ignores basic economics. First of all, most wake boat owners do not live on the Newberg Pool nor is the demand for homes there driven by the desire to engage in wake sports. Second, the damage to docks and the erosion of shorelines result in substantial repair costs that devalue property. Sellers of residential properties in Oregon must disclose defects that affect the value or desirability of the property. Activities that are known to damage docks and erode shorelines will necessarily reduce home values and lead to lower tax bases.

False Argument No. 9: The State's economy will collapse.

Notably, wake sport enthusiasts fail to identify any specific businesses that are critically-dependent upon wake sports in the Newberg Pool. To the extent wake boaters end up boating elsewhere, their expenditures will surely benefit the businesses at those locations. Wake boat dealers sometimes assert, using numbers associated with the boating industry as a whole, that wake sports contribute to the economy. However, most of the money from wake boat sales goes outside the state to companies whose manufacturing operations are based in Tennessee, Florida, and California. On the flip side, if sales of fishing boats decline in response to the unpleasantness of fishing when wake boats are out, this would harm companies whose manufacturing operations are in Oregon. In any case, the few businesses which may be affected by HB 2555 and HB 2725 can adapt their operations. For example, water skiing was a popular towed water sport on the river prior to popularity of wake boats, but the ability to engage in conventional water skiing has been almost eliminated by the enhanced wakes generated by wake boats. Likewise, tubing can be done by boats that generate ordinary wakes and the outcry over tubing is predominantly rooted in the use of wake boats for this activity. Thus, HB 2555 and 2725 will not eliminate towed water sports, but would encourage the industry to adapt so that these activities are done in a more responsible manner.

False Argument No. 10: There is a reason to gloss over the edge habitat issue.

It is indisputable that the suspended solids and turbidity kicked up by the massive waves from wake boats are damaging edge habitat where small aquatic insects live and form the food supply for the juvenile salmon that reside year-round in the Newberg Pool. These insects later mature into the adults that constitute an important food supply for the terrestrial animals living at the river's margins. Is it worth damaging this habitat in the pursuit of human recreation? The 631 boaters who have received Towed Watersports Education Endorsements seem to think so. The National Marine Fisheries Services, which holds the sword of Damocles over the State by virtue of its listing of salmon and steelhead populations under the Endangered Species Act, emphatically disagrees. Millions of Oregonians could face hardship if this sword were ever to drop. That is why wake boaters gloss over this issue.

s/Bert P. Krages II