

THE REGION

County's boating accidents, deaths down

But Monroe leads state's 67 counties, according to commission's 1999 tally

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MARATHON — Boating in the Florida Keys was safer in 1999, but Monroe County still ranks as the state's most dangerous area for accidents on the water.

According to statistics compiled by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Monroe again led the state's 67 counties with 199 serious boating accidents that caused one death, 67 injuries and nearly \$1 million in damage.

Although 1999 marked one of the safest boating years statewide in more than half a decade, Florida also remained the nation's leader in accidents and fatalities on the water in a year the number of boats registered statewide soared to a record 829,971.

Ironically, Monroe had fewer registered boats, 25,862, than 10 Florida counties, including land-locked Orange and Polk.

With thousands of tourists and their boats trekking to the Keys for fishing and diving, Florida Marine Patrol Maj. Mike Long says it's no wonder Monroe tops the state in boating accidents annually. While there were 14 fewer accidents last year than in 1998, the Keys still recorded 50 more boating mishaps in 1999 than runner-up Broward County and nearly 100 more than Palm Beach, which was third.

Only one person died in 1999 from a Monroe boating accident — a substantial decrease from the five fatalities in the previous year. That death was the result of one of 61 reported accidents involving personal watercraft such as water bikes and wave



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DANGER IN THE WATER: Despite statewide improvement in statistics, Florida still led the nation in boating accidents in 1999.

runners.

Increased boat patrols and Marine Patrol boating safety courses and outreach programs are helping to decrease Keys boating accidents, Long says, but the agency's change in

how it counts accidents could make a difference. Until recently, the conservation commission considered vessel groundings as a "reportable boating accident." Such a designation requires that there be at least \$500 in damage, a

death, missing person or an injury which requires treatment more than basic first aid.

Long said counting groundings among those boating accidents tends to inflate the number and doesn't account for the dollar amount of environmental damage done. Beginning this year, the commission will regard groundings separately. The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary also keeps its own grounding statistics.

With July marking the highest number of boating accidents in the Keys, the Marine Patrol will step up patrols at "hot spots" throughout Monroe County, including waters around the Seven Mile Bridge, Whale Harbor and Boca Chica bridges. Long hopes such efforts will be evident in the commission's 2000 accident report.

"We've been trying diligently to make a difference out there," Long said. "If that's led to a decrease in injuries and fatalities, and apparently it has, then that's a step in the right direction."