

Why aren't boaters paying attention?

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In his article *Fatal Distraction*, Major Richard Moore challenges the boating safety community to work together to make recreational boaters more aware of the dangers associated with not paying full attention to their primary task at hand—navigating their vessels.

Top 10 Most Wanted

The Top 10 Most Wanted List represents the states boating programs advocacy priorities. It is designed to increase awareness of, and support for, the most critical changes needed to reduce recreational boating accidents and save lives.

2015-16 NASBLA Top 10 Most Wanted List of Recreational Boating Safety Improvements

1. Reduce Boating Under the Influence of Alcohol and Other Drugs
2. Increase Life Jacket Wear/ Implement Mandatory Wear in Some Situations on Certain Size Boats
3. Address Distracted Boating/ Improper Lookout
4. Address Paddlesports Issues (Including Stand Up Paddleboards)
5. Standardized State/Federal Accident Terminology
6. Mandate (or Increase) Boater Education for All Powerboat Operators of Any Age
7. Advocate for Safety of Towed Water-Sports
8. Support Implementation of National Boating Education Standards as Recognized by the USCG and NASBLA
9. National Reciprocity Accepting Boater Cards for Out-of-State Boaters
10. Implement Measures of Effectiveness for Recreational Boating Safety Program Practices

Accident statistics make a good case for his counsel and offer good reason why *addressing distracted boating and improper lookout* landed high on [NASBLA's 2015-16 Top 10 Most Wanted List of Recreational Boating Safety Improvements](#). The last five years' worth of national statistics reveal that *operator inattention* and *improper lookout*, combined, accounted for between 22 and 24 percent of the total reported accidents annually, keeping them squarely among the top five primary contributing factors for each of those years. During that same period, they also combined to account for between 9 and 14 percent of boating-related fatalities annually.

But *operator inattention* and *improper lookout* as contributing factors to an accident cut a swath of reasons operators aren't paying attention to what's going on inside and outside their boats. Marine law enforcement and partners in the boating safety community see that recreational boaters are carrying their everyday distractions onto the water. Accident reports paint a picture of *how many* and *what* happened. But there still isn't a high volume of consistently collected, quality data that gets at *how* and *why* attention and lookout failures occur and that could aid decisions about the most effective ways to change those unsafe behaviors on the water...at least not yet.

A [2010 Small Craft Advisory article](#) on the vital role that accident report data play in answering boating safety research questions described early-stage work underway by the [NASBLA Engineering, Reporting & Analysis Committee \(ERAC\)](#). It was one facet in a broader set of national- and state-level efforts bent on improving the quality and consistency of report data. Over the next few years, ERAC dedicated resources to refining the selections within five major report form categories whose terms were in need of update and revision, and whose definitions were outdated, non-existent, or used inconsistently.



By September 2013—as a result of the rigorous, multi-year, [consensus-based project](#) that engaged ERAC, U.S. Coast Guard subject matter experts, and states beyond those represented on the committee—NASBLA membership had approved five lists of standardized terms and definitions: [accident types/events](#), [accident contributing factors/causes](#), [operation](#), [activity](#), and [vessel sub-types](#).

One of the project’s revised contributing factors, **Improper Lookout/Inattention**, combines the closely associated *improper lookout* (or *no proper watch*) and *operator inattention*, and resets the definition to read:

The operator failed to perceive danger, resulting in the accident. This could have been with respect to failure(s) to perceive dangers outside or inside the vessel. May apply to violations of the requirement to maintain a proper lookout.



As important as that update to the factor and its primary definition, though, is the set of distraction codes developed to accompany its selection. Mindful of the evolution of accident reporting and capture of more detailed human performance data in other transportation modes, project team members wanted to give recreational boating accident investigators similar opportunities to identify and more consistently record the underlying reasons for the operator’s failure to perceive dangers.

Distraction Codes for Improper Lookout/Inattention

- **Onboard lighting** – Glare from lighted objects onboard the vessel, such as improperly shielded navigation lights, onboard electronics, and other similar devices. Specify.
- **Background lighting** – Lights on docks, shorelines, or other vessels. Specify.
- **Onboard electronics or equipment** – Using, attempting to use, viewing or operating onboard electronics or equipment, such as a navigation device, mobile phone, VHF radio, audio device, radar, autopilot, spotlight. Specify.
- **Operator or occupant activity** – Activity such as sightseeing, moving objects, eating, drinking, smoking, interacting with passengers, fixated on other vessels or persons being towed, or otherwise distracted by other persons or objects in or outside the vessel.
- **Other distraction** – Details regarding the distraction are known, but none of the specified codes is applicable. Specify.
- **Unknown** – Insufficient facts to make any specific distraction determination.

Source: [Contributing Factors/Causes](#), Accident Reporting Terms & Definitions Project, September 2012.

As the updated factors, distraction codes, and selections in the other report categories are applied, there *should* be a marked increase in the overall amount and consistency of basic information available to examine boating safety issues, including human performance in recreational boating accidents. But widespread implementation of the standardized terms and definitions from the project is on hold, for a few reasons.

The effort to update the lists had dual purposes at its core – [direct use by the states](#) and formal adoption by the Coast Guard to use in coding for its Boating Accident Report Database (BARD) and report out in the annual, national accident statistics. Both are stalled pending the outcomes of related [Coast Guard activity on casualty reporting guidance](#), anticipated updates to the Coast Guard’s Boating Accident Report form, and [progress on a regulatory project initiated to make more comprehensive improvements to the accident reporting system](#).

But those looming events haven’t squelched ERAC’s interest in finding viable resolutions now for states that are interested in initiating use of the terms no matter the status of formal actions at the federal level. They haven’t deferred the committee’s efforts to provide guidance to states interested in capturing [more extensive human factors information](#) to augment their recreational boating accident investigations. And they haven’t stifled the states’ general interest in and expectations for the accident terminology used to gather and analyze the data that can ultimately be used to improve boating safety. Like the issues surrounding distracted boating, *standardized state and federal accident terminology* has also found its place on **NASBLA’s Top 10 Most Wanted List of Boating Safety Improvements**.



Where to find:

- Information on tools to guide the collection and review of accident and other boating data and templates for common analysis tasks: nasbla.org/toolstemplates;
- Materials associated with the Accident Reporting Terms & Definitions Project: nasbla.org/lhtermsproject;
- Information about the NASBLA Engineering, Reporting & Analysis Committee’s charter and charges: www.nasbla.org/ERAC.