

Totally Tubular

By Reg P. Wydeven
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My family and I spent the 4th of July weekend at my wife's parents' cottage. I sat on the dock and watched all of the action on the lake: fishing boats, jet skis, canoes, a paddle boat, pontoons, and various boats pulling kids on skis or inner tubes. I remember one kid climbing onto the biggest tube I ever saw - it had to have been 10 feet across.

I assumed that a few of the kid's friends would join him on the tube and the boat would pull them all on a leisurely lap around the lake. Instead, the boat gunned it, the kid on the tube pulled on the handles and pretty soon he lifted up off the surface of the water. In a few seconds he was at least 15 feet high in the air, sailing behind the boat.

Fifteen years ago, I'm sure I would have tried tube kiting, as it is known. But now two broken noses, two concussions, a herniated disc, cartilage and ligament tears in both knees, a knocked-out front tooth and several sprained ankles later, I sound like a bowl of Rice Krispies when I get up in the morning. That's why I think this kid must be crazy to fly 15 feet in the air tethered to a speeding boat.

Apparently, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission agrees with me.

The week before the 4th, the CPSC issued a warning about tube kites and is investigating them to determine whether they're too dangerous for consumer use. The agency has documented two deaths that have resulted from the use of tube kites, in addition to 12 other serious injuries, including a broken neck, punctured lung, broken ribs, broken femur, chest and back injuries, and facial injuries, such as jaw fractures.

Most experts claim that boats pulling tube kites should not exceed 16 miles per hour, however, to really get the tube kite airborne, boats must go between 25 and 35 mph. In addition, it is recommended that the rope pulling the tube kite should not stretch and should not exceed 60 feet in length, but most boaters use standard ski ropes, which are 75 feet long and have some slack.

The CPSC claims tube kites are dangerous because: 1) they are difficult for the rider to control once in the air, 2) most boat operators are inexperienced at pulling them, and 3) it's practically impossible to predict how the tube will react in certain weather conditions.

Wind gusts are especially problematic, as they can cause the tube to spin out of control. Other problems arise when the boat suddenly slows or stops, which can cause the tube to nosedive into the water. Also, just because the boat stops, that doesn't mean the tube kite will - the rider could continue past the boat and collide with it or with other boats, docks or bridges.

While the CPSC has yet to take an official position on tube kites, the Tulsa district of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers banned their use on the lakes it manages because of the serious injuries. The National Park Service also banned tube kites at Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, which includes Lake Powell, where at least four serious injuries have occurred.

Needless to say, I'm glad I stayed on the dock.