

NOTICE TO MARINERS No.24 of 2009

MAKING VESSELS UNDER OARS, COACHING BOATS, KAYAKS AND CANOES MORE VISIBLE TO OTHER RIVER TRAFFIC

The low profile of rowing vessels and kayaks or canoes on a congested river where lines of sight are often fouled, either by vessel construction or structures such as bridges, piers and buildings makes them difficult to see by night or day and presents a significant hazard. This hazard is increased considerably at night as recent incidents have highlighted. Rules 2 and 5 of the Colregs¹ are especially pertinent here

All masters of vessels, whether of a Super Tanker or a single scull, have a responsibility to consider fully the potential dangers presented to his or her vessel in any conceivable situation (as stated fully in Colregs Rule 2). Even if you are navigating correctly and keeping a good lookout it is still possible to be involved in an incident with another vessel who might not be following the rules. The River Thames is a moving highway used by a great variety of traffic and as with any other busy highway one must be alert to and allow for all conceivable dangers.

Rule 5 of the Colregs states:

Every vessel shall at all times maintain a proper look-out by sight and hearing as well as by all available means appropriate in the prevailing circumstances and conditions so as to make a full appraisal of the situation and of the risk of collision.

It is very unusual to find rowers out at night downstream of Wapping, but on the upper reaches rowers are often afloat at night, and paddlers (which includes both kayakers and canoeists) are commonly seen at night up and down all reaches of the Tidal Thames. The increasingly frequent presence of high speed craft and the periodic need for rowers and paddlers to cross from one side of the river to the other adds to an already hazardous undertaking for small unpowered vessels.

At night it is common practice for rowers and paddlers to meet the requirements for the lights specified at Rule 25 (d), parts (i) and (ii) of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions (the Colregs) by using head-torches, which by nature of construction and operation direct the light only in the direction faced by the oarsman or paddler. Recent incidents and near-misses show that the directional nature of the head-torch makes these small vessels all but invisible to other vessels approaching from the opposite direction to that down which the head-torch beam is directed. As a consequence, action by larger vessels to avoid rowing vessels and kayaks or canoes is often late and considerably more substantial than if the sighting occurred much earlier.

Lights displayed by Vessels under Oars or Paddles

Persons in charge of vessels navigating under oars are reminded that compliance with Rule 25 of the Colregs is mandatory on the tidal Thames.

¹ The International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972 with amendments adopted from November 2003

Therefore rowing vessels and canoes, as a minimum, should ‘... have ready at hand an electric torch, lighted lantern or other means to show an all-round (360 degrees) white light, which shall be exhibited in sufficient time to prevent collision.’

This rule, acknowledging the difficulty of seeing a small vessel at night or in reduced visibility, clearly puts the onus on the small vessel to show the specified light in time.

In practice, in densely trafficked areas (downstream of Lambeth Bridge) with the added hazard of high speed vessels, vessels under oars (or paddles) should display a continuous white light visible over an arc of 360 degrees (an all-round white light) In certain vessels two lights, one forward and one aft, may be required to ensure visibility throughout 360 degrees.

Lights displayed by Coaching Boats

Power driven vessels used for coaching should, as a minimum, display an all-round white light and, if proceeding at more than 7 knots, port and starboard navigation lights.

Vessels between Putney and Teddington

Explicit rules are already in place for vessels under oars and coaching boats between Putney and Teddington. The code of practice for rowing on the Tideway gives further details and refers to a previous iteration of this PNTM. The requirements for all rowing vessels in the entire area is the same as for vessels in the densely trafficked areas of the river downstream of Lambeth. (see above)

Every time before going afloat at night rowers, kayakers and canoeists must assess whether it is safe to do so. Low and high tides, weather conditions such as fog and rain, can dramatically increase the already higher level of risk of rowing in the dark. In addition, in-line with the recommendations of the majority of the rowing clubs upstream of Putney Bridge, the PLA does not recommend rowing downstream of Putney Bridge at night.

High Visibility Vests and Reflective Tape

Under all conditions of visibility by night and day the wearing of high visibility vests and adorning of craft and oars/paddles with reflective tape to enhance visibility are very strongly recommended.

Making small craft more visible

Apart from showing the lights described above there are two other ways which small craft should consider in order to become more visible to other river users:

1. Consider the use of flags or similar in order to raise the profile of the vessel and present a larger visual target.
2. Position small craft in the river where they may easily be observed by larger vessels. The warning often carried by lorries on the roads of “*if you cannot see my mirrors then I cannot see you*” has an echo here; small craft should place themselves where they are able to see the bridge or wheelhouse windows and ideally the helmsman also of other larger vessels.

The enforcement of these regulations has the support of British Rowing and the British Canoe Union.

24th November 2009

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**DAVID SNELSON CB FNI
CHIEF HARBOUR MASTER**

Owners, Agents and Charterers should ensure that the contents of this Notice are made known to the masters or persons in charge of their vessels or craft.

NOTICE EXPIRY DATE: TBA

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Telephone calls, VHF radio traffic, CCTV and radar images may be recorded In the VTS Centres at Gravesend and Woolwich.



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