

Six Tips for Vessel Maintenance

By Terry Johnson, Agent
Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program

1. Good vessel and equipment maintenance will do more to assure financial success than any other element of your business management.

- It prevents breakdown which cost heavily in lost fishing opportunity
- It preserves the value of boat and equipment. Loss in asset value from deteriorated boat and gear quickly eats up long term profitability.
- It enhances safety.
- It enhances crew morale and productivity.
- It lowers operating costs and insurance costs.
- It promotes self-reliance. The experience gained from performing good maintenance contributes to a more thorough understanding of boat and gear which helps the operator prevent problems and also gives him understanding and skills needed to solve them when they do occur.

2. Good maintenance begins with selection and purchase. Check potential purchases carefully, looking for flaws and problems. Use a reputable marine surveyor, but don't rely solely on a surveyor. Take experienced friends or

relatives along to inspect potential purchases and instruct them to look for anything that is wrong or could go wrong with a boat. If they don't find anything they're either inexperienced or not looking hard enough. All boats have their Achilles heels and finding them could keep you from buying a seriously flawed boat, or at least would allow you know what it is so you can address it after purchase.

Things to look for:

- an engine room too small or snug for you to be able to work on any part of the engine or reduction gear
- rust, corrosion or rot anywhere on or in the boat, especially underwater locations, and any cracks or broken structural pieces
- soot, belt dust, oil in bilges, hydraulic fluid, fuel smell anywhere, exhaust smell anywhere but the exhaust stack
- mismatched, broken, bunched up or otherwise unprofessional-looking wiring, or signs of burn wires or adjacent surfaces

And so on. There are many more. But these are common, easily recognizable signs of on-going maintenance problems.

Remember, the simpler a boat, the easier to maintain. Teak looks nice but requires a lot of work to keep it that way. It's pleasant to have sound systems, refrigerators, showers, forced-air heat, and all that stuff, but it all requires maintenance, and all will eventually break down and have to be repaired or replaced. Select a boat based on its simplicity, access to spaces to do maintenance and repair, and the quality of components and installations.

3. Do maintenance first. Do the routine daily stuff as soon as you tie up or anchor. Don't wait until after you've eaten, had a coupla beers, yakked with your pals. Do it first. It's like dog mushers who always feed their dogs before feeding themselves.

Do annual maintenance when putting boat away in the fall. Correct winterizing, including oil and filter changes, prevent a certain amount of deterioration over the winter compared with doing the same tasks in the spring. Do painting jobs at the end of summer to protect over the winter.

Do maintenance first - pay those costs before spending money on anything else. Fix your boat before feeding your family; you'll always find ways to buy groceries if your boat is taken care of, but if money's scarce and you spend it on living expenses you won't find more for the boat.

4. Keep good records. Record all the model names and numbers, not only of engine, marine gear and so on, but of belts, filters, pumps and impellers, starter, alternator, hydraulic pumps and motors, refrigeration components, and so on. You'll eventually have to order

replacement parts for all of them. Keep in an accessible place on the boat so you can find quickly when needed. (Of course you should carry spares for most of those things, but you need the information so you can order replacements for the spares.) Also, record fuel consumption, oil consumption, coolant, and record each oil & filter change, coolant change and so on. Good maintenance records enhance resale value and help you remember what you've done and when. It's common to write the date of filter change on the filter canisters with a felt pen, for example, so you know when it's time to change again.

5. Read up on maintenance. There are a lot of good books and articles, and you'll learn important things about your boat and systems that are not intuitive and that you'll not learn by just talking to your pals, who probably don't know any more than you do. There are a lot of maintenance myths out there, circulating the docks, that not only aren't helpful but in some cases can actually cause problems.

6. Keep everything well lubricated and protected. It's amazing how quickly components rust and corrode when exposed to salt spray and even to simply the dampness of an engine room when the boat's not in used. Relentlessly root out and destroy rust, and then treat with rust preventative. Oil or grease all metal-to-metal moving joints. Spray down all metal parts with a preservative. WD-40 is not a rust preventative, it's a lubricant. It will to some extent free up rusted parts but not protect them from future rust. Buy big cans of spray rust preventative and apply liberally and frequently. Keep paint touched up. Keep the zincs up.