



TIPS TO AVOID PROBLEMS WHEN

BUYING A USED ATV, SNOWMOBILE, OR PERSONAL WATERCRAFT

By Mike Bonser, Iowa Department of Natural Resources Conservation Officer

Posted: February 21, 2006

The large number of powerboats, personal watercraft (PWC), all-terrain vehicles (ATV), motor-cross (Mx) bikes and snowmobiles purchased and used in state recreation areas is evidence of their growing popularity. These vessels and machines bring a lot of enjoyment when used properly and safely. But before riding the waves, hitting the dirt track or snowy trail, owners can prevent future headaches by learning more about what they are buying and the responsibilities as a buyer.

Since new machines are expensive, many people opt to purchase a used machine to fit their budget and to see if it fits their lifestyle. Buying used can be an excellent choice if the buyer does the research and asks the right questions.

When buying a used recreational machine it is almost as important to evaluate the seller as it is the machine itself. Ask the seller:

- Why are you selling this boat, PWC, ATV, bike or sled?
- Are you the original owner? If not, how long have you had it and how many miles / hours have you put on?
- How was the vessel / machine used? For example, was the boat used for fishing or skiing? On a river or lake? Was the ATV used on trails or for racing or on a farm? Was the snowmobile used for touring or pond skipping?
- How often was the vessel / machine used?
- How long have you been boating / riding / sledding?
- What other vessels / machines have you driven or owned?
- Would you buy another vessel/machine like this one? Why or why not?
- Where has the vessel / machine been serviced? Do you have records?
- What maintenance / service work did you perform yourself? How often?
- Where did you get your parts?
- What after-market parts have been installed?
- Is the registration current and is the title clear?
- What else is there to know about the vessel / machine?

If you are not comfortable with any answers or with the condition of the machine, thank the seller and move on. Also, use caution if considering online auction sales. The Internet enables criminals to easily sell stolen or non-existent machines to unsuspecting buyers. It is truly a buyer beware world when it comes to purchasing a used recreational machine. Remember if the asking price seems too good to be true, it probably is.

To avoid becoming the victim of a sales scam or purchasing stolen property, take the following precautions:

Verify the Registration

Physically examine the registration numbers, tags or plates and match them with the registration documentation. Make sure the seller's name and information matches what is on the documents.

Make sure the registration is up to date. By Iowa law, all registrations must be current and the information up to date before a legal sale can be made (used vessels and machines purchased from out of state can be transferred with an expired registration). It can be costly in terms of time and money for the buyer if this simple piece of paper is not current.

Check the Vehicle-Identification-Number (VIN) or Hull-Identification-Number (HIN) to see if it matches what is on the registration document.

Examine the HIN or VIN to determine if the number has been removed or altered. If the number is not present or appears to have been altered within any way, do not consider a purchase under any circumstance and contact your local conservation officer or the Iowa State Patrol.

Contact your insurance company for a rate quote using the HIN or VIN. If a loss or stolen property claim has been made against the vessel or machine it may appear here. Contact the manufacturer of the vessel or machine for recall information using the HIN or VIN. Information regarding the motor identification number can be obtained at this time. This will pertain only to those vessels which have inboard or inboard / outboard motors.

Contact local law enforcement authorities to see if the vessel or machine has been reported stolen. Ask to have the check ran by both the registration number and the HIN or VIN.

Verify the title

Iowa law requires titles for:

- Vessels, 17 feet or longer, purchased after Jan. 1, 1988.
- ATVs, or Mx bike registered as an ATV, purchased after Jan. 1, 2000.
- Snowmobiles purchased after Jan. 1, 1998.

The registration of a titled vessel or machine will be stamped "TITLED" and a title number will be included in the document's information. The title number can be used to ascertain who holds the vessel or machine's title.

If the vessel or machine is owned free and clear, the owner is required to hand over title or lien to the buyer once the purchase is complete.

If the title or lien is not held by the owner, the seller should contact the financial institution that does. Find out what the amount of the payoff is and make arrangements to have the buyer directly pay the company with check or money order, only giving the seller the difference.

Transferring Ownership

Once the sale has been agreed upon, the buyer needs to read the front and back of the registration and title to make sure all the information has been filled out pertaining to the transfer of ownership. A Bill of Sale is also required to transfer.

The Bill of Sale should include the buyer and seller information, a complete description of the vessel or machine (year, make, model, and HIN or VIN), the date of sale and the selling price. Be sure that the required signatures are obtained.

As with the purchase of a new machine, Iowa law states the buyer has only 30 days to register the boat or machine into the new owner's name. Many buyers of used vessels and machines fail to transfer the registration into their name in a timely fashion. This procrastination often ends with the operator receiving a citation and the vessel or machine is impounded until proper documentation of ownership and registration is produced.

There can be further complications if the new owner waits until after the end of the registration period to transfer ownership. Unlike an ordinary motor vehicle registration, there is no grace period for registering a vessel or ATV / Mx bike. The previous owner will have to be located, the registration will still need to be renewed by that owner, a late registration penalty will be assessed and a citation may be issued to the new owner.

Purchasing a used ATV, boat or snowmobile can be a daunting task. Buying a used vessel or machine from one of the many dealers which are licensed through the Iowa Department of Natural Resources can help alleviate many potential problems, as they should be familiar with the legal requirements and process. State conservation officers can also assist with questions and concerns a buyer may have. By taking some simple precautions and doing a bit of research, buyers can prevent problems, meet the legal responsibilities and be riding the waves and hitting the trails sooner.

Anytime you purchase a brand new vessel, snowmobile, or ATV, the owner will need to provide a Manufacturer's Statement of Origin (MSO) and a Bill of Sale to register and/or title.

If you have questions, you may contact the Department of Natural Resources at 515/281-5918.