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**Sanctuary's Research Vessel *Auk*
Passes Safety Check to Kick Off National Safe Boating Week**

NOAA's Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary and the South Shore Division 12 of the Coast Guard Auxiliary Northern Region marked the start of National Safe Boating Week (May 22-28) with an inspection of the sanctuary's Research Vessel (R/V) *Auk*. Courtesy examinations such as this are offered free to all interested boaters and help ensure greater boating safety.

A Vessel Safety Check verifies the presence and condition of certain safety equipment required by state and federal regulations. The program is run through U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliaries and United States Power Squadrons with trained specialists.

"This is not a law enforcement program and we do not issue any citations," said Richard Eckhouse, local auxiliary division vessel examiner. "We provide the boat owner with our evaluation and recommendations to make him or her a safer boater."

Vessels that pass the inspection can display the distinctive VSC decal. "The R/V *Auk* passed her inspection with flying colors today," said Eckhouse. "We invite other boaters along the South Shore to take advantage of this free program." To contact a local VSC examiner and to schedule a safety check, visit the on-line lookup page at www.safetyseal.net/GetVSC/.

Boating safety items that examiners look for include the presence of appropriate personal flotation devices (PFDs) or life jackets, visual distress signals, fire extinguishers, navigation lights, and proper ventilation systems. "We are especially conscientious about the quantity and quality of personal flotation devices stored on each vessel," said Eckhouse. "Storing too few flotation devices is just as unsafe as obtaining inadequate equipment or poorly maintaining devices that will not support a person in the water."

This year National Safe Boating Week is focusing on life jacket safety, with a slogan of "Wear It!"

Although the R/V *Auk* is a federal vessel and part of the NOAA fleet, with its own set of safety rules, the sanctuary undertakes the VSC inspection each year. "We keep safety as our highest priority at all times," said Ben Cowie-Haskell, sanctuary deputy superintendent, who is also in charge of vessel operations. "The vessel is inspected annually by NOAA, but the US Coast Guard Auxiliary's safety check by our local flotilla provides us with another level of protection."

In noting this year's National Safe Boating Week slogan, Cowie-Haskell pointed out that all passengers and crew on R/V *Auk* cruises are required to don their PFDs when working outside the cabin. "For the sanctuary, 'Wear It!' is our everyday byword," Cowie-Haskell said. "It would be great to see all boaters in the sanctuary and elsewhere in local waters taking that slogan to heart."

Designated in 1992, Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary encompasses 842 square miles of ocean, stretching between Cape Ann and Cape Cod. Renowned for its scenic

beauty and remarkable productivity, the sanctuary supports a rich diversity of marine life including 22 species of marine mammals, more than 53 species of seabirds, more than 80 species of fishes, and hundreds of marine invertebrates.

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On the Web:

Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary: <http://stellwagen.noaa.gov>

Office of National Marine Sanctuaries: <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov>

United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Vessel Safety Check: <http://www.cgaux.org/vsc/>