

Christmas Tree of Lights

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As we observed last month, you probably have gone out for an afternoon and found yourself coming back in the dark. It can be unnerving if you don't know how to interpret the rising lights. So, let's focus on those rules that govern – Rules 20 – 31. We got started with Rules 20 – 22 back in January. Let's move on now to the “Christmas tree” section – Rules 23 – 25.

Rule 23 – What Does It Say?

Why do I call it the “Christmas tree” section? Because many vessels exhibit so many lights that they look like Christmas trees underway. Rule of thumb – the more lights, the bigger a problem it will be for you if it hits you. And “yellow” as usual means “caution.” In fact, I teach that yellow lights mean “stay well clear.”

Rule 23 specifically speaks about power-driven vessels – from ours' up to the leviathans. Anything over 50 meters requires two masthead lights – one forward and one aligned with it, abaft (behind) and above it. To the uninformed, this can look confusing since it is common practice to align the side lights under the aft masthead light! This puts this solitary white light ahead, which can appear, to the uninformed, that a large vessel is underway in reverse! Definitely don't try to go between the two white lights by falsely believing that the solitary white masthead is a vessel at anchor near another vessel exhibiting a masthead and side light. BTW, you already know that regulatory lights on the water are blue (think USCG), not red. So, if you see a red flashing light, what is that? It is a hover-craft (known as a Wing-in-Ground [WIG] craft under the rules) underway!

Rule 24 – What Does It Say?

Here is another set of lights not to go between at night. (I can't imagine how you'd go between them in daylight.) Rule 24 is about what lights – and “shapes” – towing vessels shall (must!) exhibit. A towing vessel must have two masthead lights in a vertical line, one above the other. If the towed object is more than 200 meters (over a tenth of a nautical mile) astern, there must be three mast head lights in a vertical line. She must also have a towing light (yellow, per Rule 21, [see “Lights! Camera! Action!” LIBW, January 2011]) above her stern light. All her other lights must conform to a

power-driven vessel (Rule 23, above.)

What about the “shape?” When under way with a tow over 200 meters aft, in all conditions (but you'll only see it in daylight), a towing vessel must also carry a “diamond shape where it can best be seen.” This is the equivalent of the three masthead lights for night/foul conditions.

What about the towed vessel? It has to show lights – and shapes – just like a power-driven vessel except it doesn't need a masthead light. But it does need side lights and a stern light, plus a diamond shape if the towing vessel also exhibits one. Unfortunately, this is what has caused, from time to time, the uninformed to try to go between what they believe are two vessels... with catastrophic results. You can imagine the tension that the towing hawser between the tower and towed is under. Hitting that is like hitting a steel clothes line – at speed.

Rule 24 has a brace of other issues related to multiple towed vessels, side tows (“on the hip”) and more. But remember my rule of thumb – **the more lights, the greater the distance to stay away!**

Rule 25 – What Does It Say?

It covers sail boats and “vessels under oars.” With respect to sail boats, the rules look to find a way to telegraph to you that the vessel you are closing on at night is underway, but not a power boat. How? Well, it is lighted like a power save one feature. It has no mast light. Sail boats are required, like powered vessels, to have side lights (red and green) and a stern light – but no mast light.

If she is under 20 meters (remember the 3x + 10% rule of thumb from the January column), she may exhibit an all-around light at the top of her mast – white shining astern, red and green abeam and ahead, port and starboard. The light itself shall (must!) conform to the exact degree specifications we talked about with respect to Rule 21 – remember those “jet wings” we talked about.

What if you come upon a vessel at night which is exhibiting the side-light-stern-light configuration of a sail boat but also, high above, you see two lights – red over green? Under Rule 25 (c), a sail boat may also exhibit the red-over-green configuration at the top of her mast to make her easier to see – “Red over green, I'm

sailing tonight and want to be seen!” BTW, she cannot do it in conjunction with the all-around light we described above, regardless of her size. Under Rule 25 (d), a sail boat under 7 meters (~23 feet) “may” exhibit the lights configuration of her larger cousins but, if she isn't fitted with them, she “shall have ready at hand an electric torch [a flash light, Bunky] or lighted lantern showing a white light which shall be exhibited in sufficient time to avoid collision.” Often, the sailor will shine the light on the sail since it creates a larger palette.

Row, Row, Row Your Boat

What about rowing – which includes kayaks, which are now, due to their growing popularity, among the highest source of accidents and death at sea (or “at bay” or “at creek”, as it were). The rule for (wo)man-powered vessels – of any size – is just like 25 (d) for sail boats – she “may” exhibit the lights configuration of her wind-powered cousins but, if she isn't fitted with them, she “shall have ready at hand an electric torch or lighted lantern showing a white light which shall be exhibited in sufficient time to avoid collision.” How many kayakers out there have a flashlight under their decks? Or life jackets on them? The stats on those that don't are getting deadlier and deadlier by the year. Don't be a statistic!

Lest we forget our new emphasis on shapes - are sailing vessels required to display a shape and when? Yes, there is a shape for sailing vessels – it is called the “cone, apex-downward.” It looks (or is supposed to look) like an ice-cream cone. It is to be exhibited forward “where it can best be seen.” And when is it to be displayed? When the sails are up – and the engine is on. In short, she has to declare that “I am just a funny looking power-boat right now” and be expected to act accordingly – and be treated accordingly. (Just remember that there are no “100-0” accidents out there. She is still unable to respond as quickly and sharply as a powered vessel since her sails give her considerable “windage.”) BTW, sailing vessels under 12 meters (~26 feet) “may” exhibit the shape but are not required to.

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the DISR Human Resources Department, which is in charge of new member matters, at DSO-HR and we will help you “get in this thing.”