



Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) Framework for Selected Recreational Watersports Types during Covid-19 Pandemic

Background

The outbreak of COVID-19 Pandemic has brought the world to a standstill. This is an unprecedented global health emergency with tremendous impact on societies and livelihoods. Travel and Tourism is among the sectors most affected by this crisis. Resumption of tourism activities has proved to be an unprecedented challenge like no other; but with collective efforts, Tourism can also be an integral part of the global recovery efforts. Specific to water-based leisure and recreation activities, the challenges posed by Covid-19 pandemic are more acute in nature given the frequency of the use or touch of the equipments and gears along with the personal interfaces during the activities/operations, more particularly bodily contacts. Given the activities being water-born, the participants (guests) and the operators will have to come in to close proximity/contact at more than one stage of the activity, constraining thereby the maintenance of Covid-19 protocols, more particularly social distancing norms.

The search over the Internet suggest that though recreational boating activities have been permitted to resume in some parts of the developed world, two specific patterns are evident as of now:

1. Very few vessels are on water, operating albeit with bare minimum onboard capacities as per social distancing norms;
2. The guests on-board largely are either family members and/or friends. This means that the people on-board would know each other's background including travel history.
3. The trend so far is that boating activities involving the 'unknown public/strangers' has not been resumed yet.
4. The vessels, watercrafts and the equipments and gears presently in use are mostly privately owned and its use confined accordingly.



1. Genesis

NIWS officials have been receiving requests from the stakeholders of recreational boating and watersports industry to suggest the mechanisms for resuming of the activities in safe manner. They were gravely concerned about the survival of the persons involved in the industry which remains shut since the last week of March 2020. The menacing Covid-19 pandemic has already taken heavy toll on their livelihood and the uncertainty is prolonging indefinitely. Meanwhile, A&N Tourism has also written to NIWS for providing a SOP Framework so that resumption of the activities can be explored.

While deliberating to work for a SOP Framework, the team was puzzled and worried as everyone else. Unlike other economic sectors, tourism and the boating and watersports in particular are comparatively more prone to the threat of Covid-19 virus. Because; a). The visitors are strangers to the destination communities and vice versa, where, one would not know the potential carriers of the virus; b). Potential for closer encounters of people including bodily contacts are very high in certain facets of the activity cycle; c). Research is still ongoing and it is not clear how long the SARSCoV-2 virus can survive in water (Fresh water and Salt water).

Such distinct situation made us to be adequately cautious in pondering the possible alternatives and good practices. The approach to the evolving the framework was to first gather, document and then analyse the domain-specific documents from India and some leading countries and institutions famous for boating and watersports standards. It was comprised of documents of the Govt. of India and International resources such as WHO, US Coast Guard, Australian Boating and Canadian Watersports besides the professional bodies such as SSI, PADI, Surf Rider etc.

The focus was on identifying different facets of the activity cycle and potential risks in each and to search for probable mitigation practices. In the process, the role of key stakeholders- viz. the visitors, owners, operators and booking counter and staff as well as agents and guides- were emphasised.

Needlessly, while delineating the probable good practices, special attention was accorded to the operational context in India. However, it is to emphasise here that the contents of this SOP Framework is referential in nature and meant to assist the regulators and authorities to frame own Guidelines. It is imperative that the institutions



taking reference to this framework would subject it to further scrutiny and due diligence before appropriate decisions.

2. SOP Framework

Some recent researches indicated that high concentrations of the viable COVID-19 virus could put freshwater recreation users at risk. The Diver's Alert Network (DAN), a body dive professionals also observed that there is still no information on the ability of the COVID-19 virus to remain viable in saltwater. Previous studies on the SARS-CoV-1 virus (2003 epidemic) have shown that it remained infectious for long periods on the surface (lakes, rivers, wetlands, etc.). It appears that Sea water is not able to neutralise the virus. As such, the existing scientific knowledge does not offer any conclusive understanding if swimming at salt-water beaches elevates the risk of contracting COVID-19.

The scope of this SOP largely focuses on certain specific types of recreational boating activities that allow strict adherence to the Covid-19 safety protocols and procedures. In other words, this SOP Framework envisions resumption of only few types of boating activities in the near future, for which, the chances of close proximity of the persons including the bodily contact is bare minimum.

3. Recreational Watersports Activities for Consideration

In strict adherence to this SOP framework, the following activities could be considered **at this stage**:

1. Pleasure boating rides
2. Wind Surfing
3. Kayaking (Solo kayaks)
4. Snorkelling

This framework focuses on stakeholder involvement in different stages: a). Before the ride; b). During the ride; c). After the ride.

Permissions for other types of activities including SCUBA Diving may be considered after the effective Covid-19 preventive measures are brought in place along with specific immunity patterns emerging thereof.



3.A General Preventive Measures

The Central Government and the State Governments announces specific public health and safety measures from time to time to secure the people from the risks of COVID-19 infection and to curtail its spread. Those measures form central to prevention practices, and the specific steps as listed out herein are the additions and to be treated accordingly. These are to be observed by all: Owner, Operator, Employees, Associations, Agents, Guides and Guests- at all times. General measures are:

1. All Watersports/boating activities in **containment zones must remain closed** and no operation must be allowed.
2. It must be made mandatory for guests and all those involved in operations to download, install and verify the status **Aarogya Setu mobile** application.
3. The Owner, Operator, Employees, Associations, Agents, Guides etc. Must subject themselves for **thermal scanning** at least twice in a day- before commencement of the duties in the morning and upon completion of the operations in the afternoon/evening.
4. All Guests arriving at the booking counter/watersports centre should be **thermally scanned** and the status ascertained on **Aarogya Setu mobile app** before the tickets are issued.
5. It is mandatory for all to wear the **face-mask of stipulated standard** all through and it should be unforced unflinching.
6. **Respiratory etiquettes** to be strictly followed. This involves strict practice of covering one's mouth and nose while coughing/sneezing with a tissue/handkerchief/ flexed elbow and disposing off used tissues properly after use.
7. At the Ticket Counters and jetties/marina, **foot-operated bio-hazardous waste collection bins** must be placed to collect the trash/waste of the guests and other stakeholders.
8. **Sick or unwell guests** to be immediately taken for check-up to nearest hospital in separate vehicle.
9. Booking of trips and allocation of slots should be planned to **avoid unwarranted gathering of guests** and adhere to social distancing norms.
10. Ensure that guests are taken in **small groups to meet physical distancing norm of minimum 6 feet** between guests and it should be strictly maintained. Any change in this norm should be in accordance to the Government norms from time to time.



11. **Enforcement of the SOP shall be the responsibility of the Boat-club owner** and he/she shall be responsible for any violation.

3.B Operating Procedure for Recreational Boating on Open Boats.

The following practices are to be strictly adhered to while taking guests for boating trips. The following SOP stipulates practices at each stage/facet and for specific stakeholders.

3.B.1 Before Boarding (While arriving at Watersports centre)

3.B.1.1 Boat-club Owners:

- a) It must be ensured that all touch points in public areas like the ticketing counter, counter tops, boat jetty, onboard boat, door handles, levers, hand railings, etc. are cleaned frequently and at regular intervals every day using a sanitizer/disinfectant. It is advised to use Sodium Hypochlorite 1% solution having at least 70% alcohol to clean these frequently touched points.
- b) The commonly used personal safety protection equipment like Life jackets/Personal Floatation Device (PFD) should not be reused without cleaning and disinfecting. In its absence, the risk of contracting the virus increases. If same PFD's are to be reused every day, it must be cleaned with lukewarm water and dried and rubbed thoroughly with alcohol (70%) based sanitizers.
- c) Ensure that hand washing facilities like wash-basin in working condition and sanitizers are available for use at the booking stations along with provision for timely replenishment.
- d) At ticket counter, if wash basin is not available, a water tank fitted with tap may be placed at safe distance from booking counter/station. Foot operated soap dispenser may be placed near the wash-basin.
- e) Face masks and sanitizers should be made available to guests on demand.
- f) Proper documentation of the guest in each trip for contact tracing must be enforced. Use of separate trip sheets for each trip must be a standard practise.
- g) The trip-sheet should have details viz.: Guest name, their age, city of domicile, telephone, date and time of the trip etc. Trip-sheet must be duly signed by the escort and owner.



3.B.1.2 Operator and Crew Members

- a) To ensure all boat systems and engines function efficiently and all equipment and gears in full operating condition.
- b) A boat operating with more than one staff, viz. the operator and crew/helper must ensure the stipulated social distancing norms on-board also.
- c) The boat and all gears in use must be cleaned and disinfected before commencement of the operation, after which, it must also be thoroughly wash-down. On completion of trips every day also, above safe procedure must be followed.
- d) To ensure that sanitizers are used by the guests before boarding the vessel.

3.B.1.3 Association/ Agents/ Guides

- a) Greet the guests with “Namaste” preferably with folded hands. Hand-shaks should be strictly avoided.
- b) Agents and guides should carry sanitizer and wear mask.
- c) Always carry extra face masks onboard to offer guest in case of emergency.
- d) As per Ministry of Tourism stipulation, the Guides must handle group lesser than 10 guests. One dedicated person should be deployed for coordination of every group of maximum 10 guests.
- e) At ticket counters/booths, the staff etc must wear the gloves and masks all through. In addition, face-shield for the counter-staff can also be considered.
- f) Upon issuing the tickets, the guests should be given detail brief on the do’s and don’ts during the operations, and it must be reminded frequently till the trip is over.
- g) Employees handling ticketing and currency transactions are compulsorily to wear, face shield and to hand sanitize the hand frequently.

3.B.1.4 The Guests

- a) Vigilantly maintain the social distancing norms uncompromisingly.
- b) Avoid sharing of items like in addition eatables, water bottles, toys and safety gear etc. Always wear hand-gloves.
- c) Wash the hands frequently with soap for 20 - 30 seconds even if it is visibly not dirty.
- d) Hand sanitizers should be used before and after use of safety gear.



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- e) Self-monitoring of health by all and reporting any illness at the earliest must be diligently practiced.
- f) All guests must mandatorily to have Aarogya Setu mobile application downloaded installed and used frequently.

3.B.2 While Boarding the Boat

3.B.2.1 Boat-club Owners:

- a) Fix the queue markers as per distancing norms in waiting areas and ensure the orders.
- b) Ensure complete discipline and order during boarding and to avoid unwarranted heckling.
- c) Ensure that all persons aboard are seated as per social distancing norms, wearing face masks, hand gloves etc.
- d) Ensure all equipments are adequately disinfected before and after every use.

3.B.2.2 Operator and Crew

- a) It shall be mandatory on part of the operator and crew to ensure social distancing norms on-board.
- b) It must be ensured that the hand gloves, masks and face shields are worn by the crew members, especially during the boarding and alighting.
- c) The guest needing assistance during boarding and alighting should compulsorily wear face shield and hand gloves.
- d) Specific seat should be allotted to each guest and they should not be allowed to change during the entire trip.

3.B.2.3 The Guests

- a) Always allow the guests in front to move/board or alight first by maintaining social distancing norms.
- b) Always wait for those in front to completely disembark the ramps during boarding/alighting before others are allowed.
- c) Always walk in the walkways assigned and do not wander or jaywalk.
- d) The guests must be told to avoid touching the objects/ surfaces when it is not absolutely necessary.



3.B.3 During Ride

3.B.3.1 Boat-club Owners-

- a) Proactive replenishment: Hand Sanitizers, Hand Gloves and Masks to be available at the Guest waiting Area.
- b) Supply Garbage Bags (separate bio-hazard bags for used masks and other PPEs as per CPCB's guidelines), sufficient disinfectants like sodium hypochlorite (1%) etc. are in order.

3.B.3.2 Operator and Crew

- a) Safe operation practises must be strictly followed.
- b) Ensure that at no point during the trip, the guest should be allowed to change the seat or stand-up to avoid loss of balance and bodily contact.
- c) If bodily contact was necessary, use hand sanitizers and clean hands properly.
- d) Maintain safe speed so as to avoid any accidents or injury so that calling emergency services/help can be avoided.

3.B.3.3 The Guests

- a) Always wear a face mask and do not sneeze or cough openly, instead use towels or folded elbow. While onboard, should not stand-up to avoid loss of balance and bodily contact
- b) To remain seated only at the assigned seat throughout the trip.

3.B.4 While Alighting

3.B.4.1 Owners, Operator and Crew

- a) Ensure that the Jetty or marina area is not crowded. Complete discipline must be adhered to.
- b) Incoming boats should wait for their turn to use jetty/marina until all boats are cleared off it.
- c) Keep the hand-gloves and seek help of the crew if necessary for alighting.



3.B.4.2 Guests

- a) Use hand-gloves while alighting. Should vacate from boat with order and discipline and by following social distancing norms.
- b) Remove safety gears and sanitise the hand afterwards.
- c) Dispose of the disposables only at designated bins/containers.

3.C Specific SOP for Kayaking, Snorkelling:

In addition to above points of action, certain sets of specific practices and procedure are to be mandatorily observed by the stakeholders for the recreational activities listed below. These are Covid-19 virus mitigation steps and all other standard operational procedures mandated for these rides shall remain same.

3.C.1 Kayaking : Additional practices proposed:

- a) Maintain the hygiene standards.
- b) Only single-seated kayaks are to be used and allowed.
- c) Multiple seat kayaks should not be used since the social distancing norms cannot be practised.

3.C.2 Snorkelling: Additional practices being proposed:

3.C.2.1 Before entering the water:

- a) The Snorkelling Guide shall brief the guests on the importance of maintaining social distancing and operations of snorkelling.
- b) The Guest should have complete personal snorkelling kit full face mask. Only such guests should be allowed to undergo the rides.
- c) No snorkelling equipments shall be hired, borrowed, lent or shared even among members of the same family.
- d) Only 02 guests per Guide must be allowed to snorkel at a time.
- e) All guests must compulsorily wear face masks and hand gloves until entering the water and upon leaving the water-body.
- f) At no point should the snorkelling guide touch any guest's snorkelling equipments. All demonstrations must be given using own equipments.



3.C.2.2 While in water

- a) Demonstrate snorkelling skills in thigh-level water maintaining social distancing norms.
- b) All guests must wear a life jacket before entering the water.
- c) Use Lifebuoy with rope to tow the guests while snorkelling.

3.C.2.3 After leaving the water

- a) The safety gears such as Life Jacket and Life-buoy used by the guests must be rinsed, dried and disinfected before the next use.
- b) The snorkelling equipment used by the guide must be kept at possession at all times to avoid accidental usage by other guides. The Guide must be diligent on this practice.

Note: *The guide should mark all personal snorkelling kit with paint so that other persons may not use the same.*

4. Emergency Response Procedure

4.1 On-Board Emergency:

1. As a matter of practice, the Operator or Crew shall not disobey physical distancing norms unless any life-threatening emergency situation emerges.
2. The Operator must call for Emergency Medical Service (EMS) from the boat, and with the victim, immediately rush to the shore.
3. Assess the condition of patient till the emergency medical service arrives for help. If possible, ask the family or friend of the patient to aid the patient as per qualified First Aider instructions.
4. When EMS arrives, brief the professional medical person about the condition and First Aid provided to the patient.
5. If the PPE kit is available at Watersports centre, the qualified First Aider must wear the same to perform First Aid till the time EMS arrives.

4.2 Over-Board Emergency:

1. During Man Over-board situation, the boat operator and crew must follow the standard MOB procedure to rescue the victim.
2. All boats in operations must carry a boat embarkation ladder/scramble net and extra rope 14 mm and 15 meters length.



3. To rescue the conscious victim on-board, the life guard/crew must give correct instructions to climb the ladder and to get on-board. If the victim required support, provide step-by-step instructions to the family members or friends of the victim to assist him/her.
4. If the victim is unconscious in water, use spinal board/ back board to mobilise the victim from water and recover him on-board.
5. Once the victim is on-board, qualified First Aider must do complete assessment of victim for response. If the victim does not respond, i.e. No breath or No Pulse, contact EMS immediately and rush the victim to the shore. If possible, commence the CPR procedure onboard. Else, administer the CPR procedure immediately after reaching the shore and securing the victim.

4.3 Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation:

1. If the Victim is not responding, the qualified CPR aider must wear PPE kit and gloves before commencing of chest compression. Continue chest compression at the rate of 100 per minute.
2. Emergency breathing must be given only with AMBU bag, mouth to mouth resuscitation is strictly forbidden
3. Continue the procedure till the Emergency Medical Service arrives or the victim is handed over to a medical professional.

5. Recreational Watersports Activities Not Suggested for Consideration at this Stage:

Many watersports activities including recreational diving are popular in India and different States and UT's offer these depending on the resource base of respective regions. However, keeping in perspective the risks of Covid-19 virus infection and the laid down SOP's for its prevention, it was not found tenable to suggest for resumption given that strict adherence to the SOP's while practicing some of these activities is a palpable challenge. Risk interfaces are many including the repeat use of the equipments by the unknown persons and that enhances the virus risk propensity.

Hence, resumption of Parasailing, Jetski, SCUBA Diving/ Sea-walk, Boat Cruise, Banana/Sofa rides and White-water rafting is suggested to put on hold. However, it can be permitted as and when the Director General of Shipping and other competent authorities in India pass necessary orders supported by the activity-specific SOP's in



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place. Further, use of own/personal equipments for the Self and family/friends may not be as risky since the use is restricted in nature and the profile of user is known to each other.

The watersports activities suggested for putting on hold for now and the specific considerations in each case to this effect are as per following:

G.1: Personal Water Craft (Jet Ski): Specific challenges during the operation are:

1. It demands close body contact between the operator and guest during rides, which is unavoidable.
2. The face-mask to get wet with splashing and spraying of water or falling down during the ride. The wet the mask would constrict breathing.
3. In the event of the guest falling in the water, recovering the Guest back onboard the PWC will be very risky and it impairs Covid-19 protocol.
4. Usually, solo operation of PWC (Jet Ski) demands the operator to be qualified and experienced enough to its handling independently but such guest are negligible in numbers.

G.2: Recreational Scuba Diving and Sea Walk: The devices used for artificial breathing under-water are directly connected to the divers' respiratory system and the intensity of breathing under-water is high. Thus, use of the devices by more than one person poses varied challenges. Owing to this, Professional Bodies across the world endorse diving in open-water for members of the same family with professional escort. The diving equipments and gears suggested for use are also privately owned ones. Specifically, challenges of diving services are:

1. The Guests are going to be unknown, and hence, the risk profile of Guest may not be known to the Diving professionals or Dive Centers.
2. Observing social distancing norms are not feasible, either during confined-water demonstration sessions and diving under-water. Specifically, while the Diver escort the guests under-water, the demand for them to dive closer with the guests is higher for the guest's comfort and their monitoring.
3. The Diver has to hold the regulator mouth-piece directly between teeth and to seal with lips. When the same gears are used by any other person, the risk propensity of virus contamination can be palpable even if these parts are sanitized even before and after every dive.
4. The wet-suite (body-suit) and face-mask are reused by the guests for diving.



G.3: Banana/Sofa Rides:

1. Main challenge arises when the Banana rider signals for rescuing from the water since the virus risk-profile of the rider is unknown to the rescuer.
2. The face-mask to get wet with splashing and spraying of water or falling down during the ride. The wet the mask would constrict breathing.
3. While getting back onboard the Banana after falling in to the water, riders would come very closer to each other and may take help of each other. This impairs with social distancing norms.
4. Going by the standard sizes of Banana tubes, maintaining social distancing norms may be a constraint when the economic viability of the rides is a consideration. At best, it may be able to accommodate 02-03 persons depending on the length.
5. Usually, a Boat-club keeps 01 or 02 Towables in their inventory, and it is not feasible to completely sanitise and disinfect before and after every ride.

G.4: Boat Cruises

1. In larger vessels including the air-conditioned ones, maintenance of the norms of social distancing and people gathering/crowing may get jeopardised.
2. Common touch-points within the larger vessels are too many and its frequent sanitization is fraught with challenges.
3. During incidents, rescue operations can be challenging for both the guests in danger and the rescuers, especially the risk of Covid-19 infection.

G.5: Parasailing

1. During parasailing activity, Crew members have to be in closer proximity and contact with the guest, particularly during take-off and landing irrespective of whether it is beach-based or winch-operated parasailing.
2. Crew members have to help the guests in wearing the Harness before launch and to release upon landing, which invariably demands physical proximity and contact with unknown persons.
3. Because of very nature of its making, sanitization of the Harness to make it completely free of virus strains cannot be ensured.



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4. During rides, the rider holds on to the ropes attached to the Parachute and it cannot be changed after every ride. It is also not feasible to sanitise the rope to make it fully infection-free in a short span and before the next ride.
5. Many guests may demand a Buddy during the ride but it would not be advisable during Covid-19 pandemic.
6. In the event of the Guest falling in the water, wearing of face-mask is risky since a wet mask could constrict normal breathing.
7. Rescuing of the Guest in danger, especially when in the water, could make both the guest and the rescuer vulnerable to infection if either of them is a carrier.
8. During ferrying of the guests from the shore to the winch-parasailing boat anchored in the sea and back, the crew has to support many guests for boarding and alighting from the parasailing boat. This enhances the risks of infection.

G.6: White-water Rafting:

1. The face-mask to get wet with splashing and spraying of water or falling down during the ride. The wet the mask would constrict normal breathing.
2. Main challenge arises when the rider signals for rescuing from the water. It could make both the guest and the rescuer vulnerable to infection if either of them is a carrier.
3. While trying to get back onboard the Raft after falling in to the water, riders would come very closer to each other and may take help of each other. This impairs with social distancing norms.
4. Usually, a Boat-club keeps limited rafts to its inventory, and it is not feasible to completely sanitise and disinfect before and after every ride in a given day.
5. Going by the standard sizes of the Raft, maintaining social distancing norms may be a constraint when the economic viability of the rides is a consideration.

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