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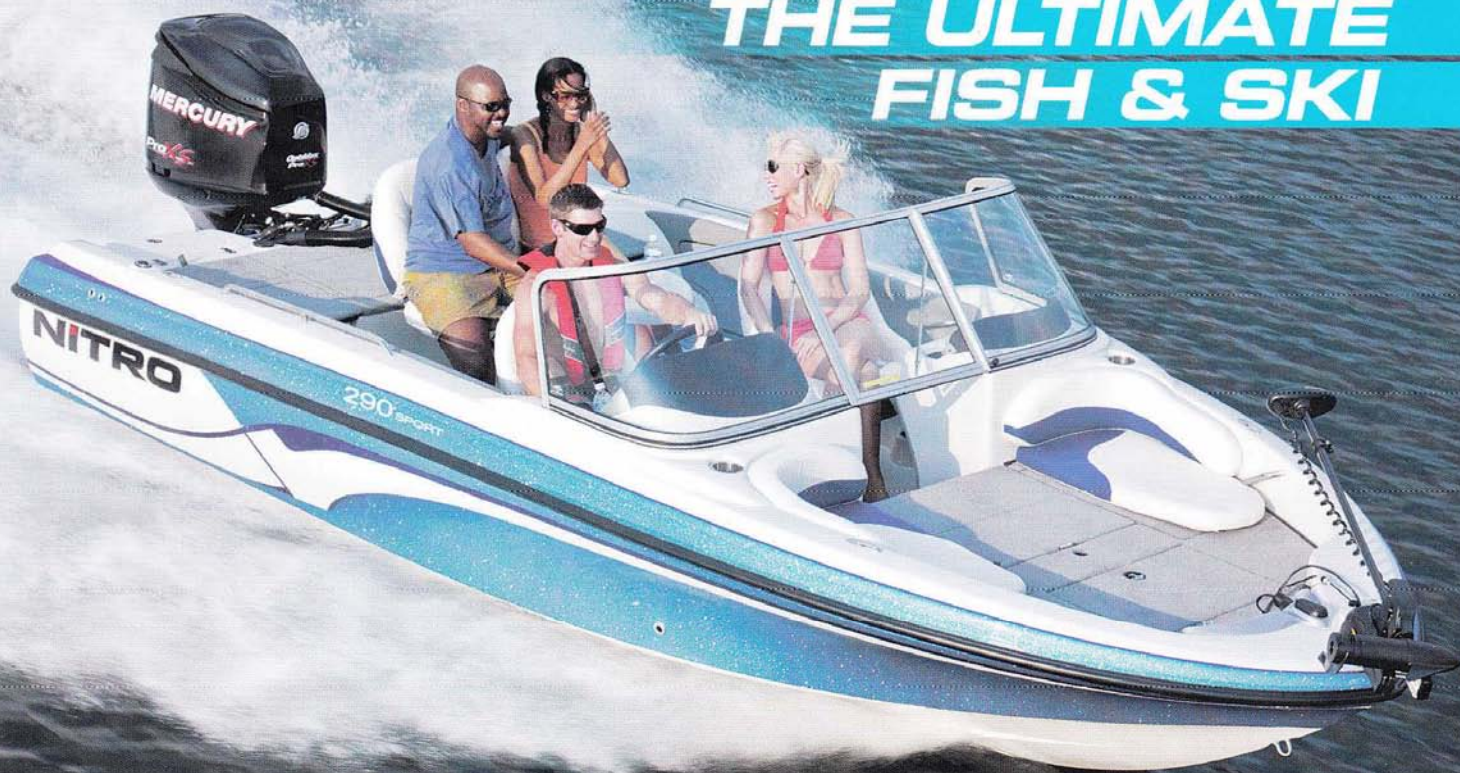
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Vinyl upholstery care is not a tough task, but avoid it and you'll pay the price sooner rather than later

Whether you've been boating just one year or 50 years, you surely know if you don't take care of your vinyl upholstery it will deteriorate rapidly. (If that's news to you, consider this your warning.) In fact, a boat's upholstery might be the quickest part of the boat to break down if neglected

completely—and the results aren't pretty. First, if your upholstery isn't protected, the sun's ultraviolet rays will dry out and crack the surface. Add in the environmental elements of wind, salt water, dirt and more—not to mention body oils, fish blood, sunblocks and spills—and there's a lot of potential for damage, stains and general wear and tear.

The good news is that vinyl, like leather, is very durable, capable of withstanding years of use when cared for properly, even in sun-drenched marine environments. Even better, it takes minimal attention to keep it clean and protected.

Still, the general properties of vinyl lead to a limited lifespan. So, with the primary goal of preventing vinyl deterioration for as long as possible, *Trailer Boats* reached out to some industry professionals to

find out how they recommend you care for your upholstery.

KEEP IT CLEAN

If you take only one thing from this story, remember to clean your vinyl as often as possible. Some folks suggest giving it a thorough scrubbing at least once a month if you use your boat regularly on weekends. Bill Lindsey, vice president of marketing for Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based Star brite (800/327-8583; starbrite.com), suggests cleaning the upholstery every time you wash your boat.

He, along with many others, realizes it doesn't take much more time and energy to wipe down your upholstery with clean water and a mild general-purpose vinyl cleaner such as Star brite's Vinyl Cleaner & Polish if you've already committed to



PHOTO COURTESY STAR BRITE

If you don't pay proper attention to your upholstery it could end up cracked and destroyed like this extreme example.

washing your hull, trailer, drive, bilge compartment, etc.

Deeply embedded dirt and salt can degrade and scratch the surface of the vinyl—and sunlight will make it brittle and stiff—so it's important to remove all those contaminants from your seats, gunwale padding, sun pads and more. There are quite a few effective and environmentally safe cleaners available—more to follow on that.

Sunscreens, body oils and even minerals from fresh water also will act as abrasive surfaces that break down vinyl, which is very porous, as people move around on the seats. The potential for mold and mildew growth is there, too, which can require a specially formulated cleaner and a good stiff bristle brush.

Dan Danforth, vice president of education for Fibrenew, said it's best to avoid using lake water for the job because the minerals and dirt in most lake water can stick around on your vinyl. Salt water is even worse. He agreed that keeping it wiped down to eliminate debris is critical, but he said there's something else that is just as important—limiting exposure to the sun.

KEEP IT PROTECTED

"We highly recommend covering your upholstery," said Danforth. His company, Canadian-based franchise Fibrenew (800/345-2951; fibrenew.com), specializes in the renewal of leather and plastics. "The number one thing with any type of vinyl or leather is minimizing the amount of time it spends in the sun. That's what makes it brittle and lose its elasticity."

And in the heat, vinyl becomes more porous so oils get baked down into the vinyl, making it harder to clean off. Cold weather also can be a problem. Danforth pointed out that a lot of people damage their upholstery during winter storage or when it's near freezing outside because the vinyl loses its flexibility.

"We've seen many cases where someone split their upholstery by standing on it when it's cold outside," Danforth said. "We recommend you set a platform with smooth, round edges over the surface to avoid damaging or ripping the vinyl."

If you have a cover, pay close attention to it to make sure it covers all surfaces to protect them from not only sunlight but tree sap—sap is one of the most difficult things to remove. Leaving an anti-moisture product inside the covered area also is recommended because it will suck up any moisture, which helps prevent mildew.



Covered with mildew, stains and tears, all it took was some deep cleaning and refurbishment from the folks at Fibrenew, and the upholstery in the pontoon (above) was back to like-new condition. To renew and protect your vinyl, try Star brite's Vinyl Cleaner & Polish (right).

You can even use something as simple as a bucket of charcoal.

Another way to keep vinyl from cracking and fading in the sun's ultraviolet rays is to apply a protective polish that will serve as a temporary barrier to dirt and UV exposure. Companies such as 303 (530/549-5617; 303products.com), 3M (888/364-3577; 3m.com), Captain John's Boat Brite (877/262-8274; captainjohnsboatbrite.com), Meguiar's (800/347-5700; meguiars.com) and Star brite all offer protectants and sealants.

While a polish doesn't compare to a cover in terms of overall defense against the elements, seagulls, trees, etc., think of



PHOTO COURTESY FIBRENEW

VINYL CARE TIPS

it as a sunblock, providing an additional level of protection from the drying effects of the sun. A good-quality vinyl polish also will allow colored surfaces to look their best. Some products even incorporate cleaning agents that are perfectly suited for removing stains and discoloration.

SAFE PRODUCTS

Walk into your local West Marine or other marine specialty shop and you'll find a wide array of vinyl care products. The available products consist of various pH-balanced formulas that do everything from provide UV protection and leave a clean scent to restore the vinyl's original brilliance and remove heavy dirt, grime and mildew.

The good news is that most bottles on display will do the trick when it comes to cleaning and protecting your upholstery. Just don't use a bleach-based product. Danforth, Lindsey and a representative from Meguiar's all said never to use bleach to clean vinyl.

"Bleach is a caustic chemical that can quickly and irrevocably damage vinyl,"

Lindsey stated. "Yes, many people swear by bleach as a fast, cheap way to brighten vinyl or remove tough stains or mildew. However, the reality is that very few, if any, manufacturers of commercially available vinyl cleaners or mildew stain removers use bleach in their products.

"Bleach is inexpensive, so if it worked, manufacturers would flock to it," he continued. "They do not for the simple reason it is dangerous to work with—it will burn unprotected skin and can cause eye damage if splashed—and it can harm vinyl. It's also destructive to all but the toughest nylon threads. It's not unusual to see bleach destroy the threads that hold upholstery together."

Beyond that, there's not a whole lot more you need to know about vinyl care. If you're lucky enough to have new upholstery, be sure to take care of it regularly. Or if your vinyl is looking a little worn, don't give up. Try some of the conditioners and restorers on the market to bring back some of that luster. Then keep it clean and protected and you should enjoy it for many more years. **TB**



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QUICK FIX

When it comes to vinyl care, there's often that lone scratch, crack or nick in the upholstery that is more unsightly than any stains or the overall condition. If you're a handy person, you can do some patchwork or you can even replace an entire section of vinyl.

Here's another solution. Call the folks at Fibrenew, a company specializing in the restoration of leather and plastics in the automotive, residential, aviation, marine and commercial markets. Based in Calgary, Canada,

Fibrenew has more than 200 franchises with mobile technicians, who are prepared to refurbish virtually any type of damage to leather, vinyl or plastic.

According to Fibrenew's Dan Danforth, the company cleans any contaminants off first, then uses a patching material either above or below the damaged section and heats it along with a special prep solution so it melts together. Then the technician will match the color and apply a top coat to make it more wear-resistant.

"Everything is 95 percent

water based, and within an hour of us leaving it's 80 percent cured and 100 percent cured within 48 hours," Danforth said.

"We also provide advice on how to maintain your overall upholstery, not just the refurbished area. Of course, we'd rather you do nothing to your boat so we can see you a lot."

From the looks of the before-and-after photos online (fibrenew.com), the process is extremely effective. Look for a follow-up story in a future issue of *Trailer Boats*.



A large cut in the headrest of this bucket seat was no match for the special treatment applied by the technicians at Fibrenew, a Canadian-based company that specializes in the restoration of leather and plastics in the marine market, as well as others.

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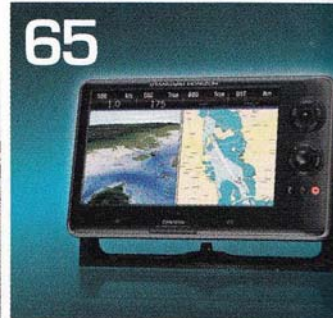
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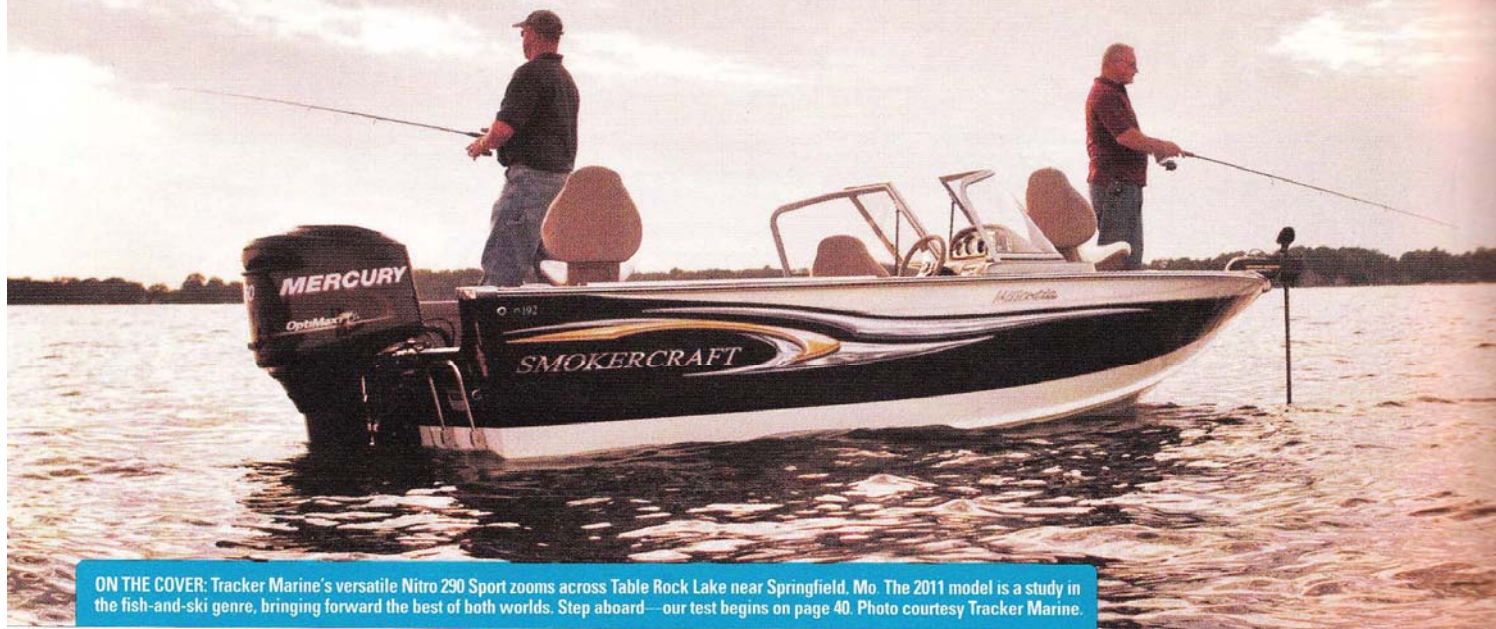
Stuff You Want

66 Over the Transom

Funny Photo Contest

AMERICAN METAL

The Smokercraft Millentia 192 is one of 13 aluminum fishing boats featured this month in "Tin Soldiers." Check out each of these versatile, fuel-efficient and easy-to-trailer models, beginning on page 26. Photo courtesy Smokercraft.



ON THE COVER: Tracker Marine's versatile Nitro 290 Sport zooms across Table Rock Lake near Springfield, Mo. The 2011 model is a study in the fish-and-ski genre, bringing forward the best of both worlds. Step aboard—our test begins on page 40. Photo courtesy Tracker Marine.