

GPS technology has certainly made navigating on inshore waters easier and safer. It's also allowed savvy captains to mark the precise locations of all sorts of things, including submerged obstructions, productive fishing holes and suitable anchoring sites. When used properly, GPS units make fishing more consistently productive.

In order to maximize the effectiveness of a GPS unit, captains should set things up properly and learn to use all the basic functions of the tool. First and foremost, the screen should be oriented "Track Up". This terminology might vary within different brands of GPS, but the concept is simple. When the screen is oriented Track Up, the unit continually resets while the boat is underway so that the direction of travel is always centered in the top of the screen.

In essence, this creates a useful illusion, where the top of the screen lines up with the bow of the boat. In other words, what lies ahead in the captain's line of sight continually appears in the top of the screen. This illusion helps prevent confusion.

Most (or possibly all) GPS units come out of the box with the screen oriented North Up, where the direction of true north stays at the top center of the screen. This set up can create confusion and make navigation more difficult on inshore waters, where traveling in one direction for long distances is normally impossible.

Most marine GPS units also have a factory setting which causes them to leave a "trail of crumbs" behind whatever icon indicates the boat's position. In Garmin terms, this is called a Track History. Hypothetically, a track line can help a disoriented captain return home by returning on an exact path. In most cases, though, such a plan would be stupid, as a shorter, better way almost always exists. Only the least experienced and knowledgeable captain would ever use a track line for such a purpose.

I use track lines to make roads on which I travel. Often, these roads allow me to avoid running in the ICW or in other congested areas, and to stay on the leeward side of the bay, in relatively shallow water. I set up the unit with main roads which run unbroken from the boat ramp to distant destinations, and also enhance the network with side roads leading into treacherous areas along the way. I only turn the Track History feature on when I want to lay a new road, so that I'm not constantly making lines all over the screen and jumbling up the map.

Making a line all the time also uses up the unit's memory and causes it to begin erasing the oldest data, whatever it is. If the erased lines were of major importance to the captain, they become arbitrarily tossed anyway. Other ways exist to create roads on GPS systems, some of which other captains find more useful. In Garmin systems, it's possible, for instance, to use the route planner to make such roads.

Whatever system chosen, a smart captain will learn to set up the map with distinct roads, placed in areas safe for navigation. Making sure the roads don't pass over dangerous obstructions requires some knowledge of the bay systems beyond what's provided on the screen by the GPS map makers. No GPS map shows all the obstructions in a bay system, particularly treacherous ones like

Baffin and Nueces Bays.

In order to set up and use safe roads, a captain needs to have other stuff marked and saved in the unit. It's best to use icons to denote different types of marks on the screen. I use a skull icon for obstructions, whether natural or man-made, a fish icon for a sweet spot where fish are often caught, and an anchor to denote the precise location where I like to leave the boat to begin a wading session.

I've also used buoy icons to indicate small cuts through sandbars. Other captains might find icon systems more suited to their needs; all should use some kind of system to mark and identify various known objects and sites. Creating a spreadsheet and noting the name (or number) of the waypoint, the type of icon used to indicate it, its coordinates and any notes related to its use and then saving the spreadsheet in one's computer is useful.

Additionally, it's best to back up all the data in the GPS in a file on the hard drive and on a disc, so it won't be lost if the unit and/or hard drive crash. Different GPS units communicate with computers in different ways, using different software and hardware. Most modern ones take a generic SD card which can be inserted into the front of the unit so data can be written onto it. Then, the card can be placed in a card reader or port in the computer to transfer the data.

In order for the computer to read and use the data, software specific to the GPS will have to be installed on it. Wise captains who wish to maximize the use of their GPS units and who wish to avoid the potential loss of hard-earned data will become familiar with the process of transferring data back and forth from the computer to the GPS and vice versa, and will acquire all the stuff necessary to make this work properly. Some will go so far as to learn how to view their GPS data on Google Earth maps and how to create and upload data using their system.

I've observed many people who purchase expensive GPS units for their boats, but who don't take the time to really learn to use the tools. Reading the manual is one good way to go; experimenting with all the buttons and menus is another. Remaining in the dark and ignorant of most of the functions is sad and unnecessary. I suspect some people fail to learn to use their unit properly out of laziness; others do so out of a fear of gadgets and technology.

Most of the fearful ones have graying locks and are set in their ways. They were born back in the day, when boats were mostly made of aluminum and wood, were steered with cables, and outboard engines had to be cranked with a hard tug on a rope. In other words, they are getting old!

Even old dogs can learn new tricks. Making good use of a GPS is not really difficult, provided one is willing to do a little work to save a lot of hassles. This blog is far from a complete discussion on the topic, of course. For a more thorough one, see *Inshore Angler's Blueprint for Success*, available for purchase at [www.fishbaffinbay.com](http://www.fishbaffinbay.com).