

TOURING KAYAK SAFETY OUTFITTING GUIDE

Touring or sea kayaks are incredibly capable vessels. Voyages of heroic proportions have been made based on these slender personal boats. Ocean-going kayaks have been essential survival tools in cultures existing in the harshest of climates. Indigenous paddlers often had no choice about paddling dangerous waters in threatening conditions. Often it was a matter of no paddle then no food, no shelter, no heat. The situation was one of harsh simplicity, hone and develop your paddling abilities or perish.

The inherent capability of sea kayaks can create a false sense of security, especially in today's recreational paddlers. This factor can have an impact whether you are on a multi-day trip in remote waters or just heading out for the afternoon. Weather conditions can change with frightening swiftness and can place the most casual outing in jeopardy.

It is your responsibility to be prepared for the unexpected whether it the result of weather, sickness, wildlife, or other people out on the water. Most paddlers do not have the experience or skills of our forebears. Our boats may be superior in terms of design capabilities and material durability but our skills are often softened by those same factors. Plus, we have to prepare for and contend with hazards that paddlers of the past never faced, such as power boats and sail boats and commercial shipping.

Fortunately, sophisticated yet relatively simple safety items have been developed that can improve our ability to safely respond and react to most hazards. Given the added protection provided, these items are very inexpensive and most are so compact to make stowage a non-issue. This guide is intended to summarize readily available and useful safety items that should be considered by any touring or sea kayaker. Safety items fall into to four categories: Items for Self-Rescue and Group Rescue capability, Navigation and Positioning Aids, and those designed to provide Signalling/Visibility capacity for parties in distress to alert other boating traffic to your presence.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Any discussion of safety and rescue must begin with an emphasis on experience and judgement. These two factors are by far the most effective preparation for safe paddling you can have. Proper experience and judgement will go further in eliminating or minimizing hazards than any combination of high tech safety and rescue gear.

Experience and judgement not only allow you to more effectively cope with a dangerous situation but will also allow you to know when to anticipate potentially hazardous situations. The importance of adequate experience and proper judgement cannot be emphasized enough. And the process of obtaining that experience and developing the ability to make accurate and safe evaluation of potential consequences is an ongoing process, obtained and added to every time you hit the water.

You can't simply go out and buy experience or judgement like you can a piece of safety gear. They are earned and accumulated over time. However, you can shorten the learning curve by paddling with experienced paddlers and absorbing their wisdom and making it your own. You also should not be satisfied being able to take care of yourself. It's imperative that you be able to effectively assist other members in your paddling party who may find themselves in difficulty.

Qualified instruction can be invaluable in preparing you for unanticipated happenings. Instruction can fine tune your personal rescue skills and develop your group safety capabilities as well. Instruction can be formal as offered by paddling schools, at symposiums, via paddling shops or clubs, or it can be informal, learned from experienced paddling partners.

One particular skill that ideally would be in every paddler's repertoire of skills is to be able to roll. Most often considered a whitewater paddler's skill and tool, a solid roll is of great value to any kayaker. It's just about always preferable to be able to stay in your boat rather than having to exit and then re-enter.

Many "rec" kayaks or those with overlarge cockpits are not "rollable." If your boat fits this criteria, you'll need to pay added attention to re-entry aid systems.

All the instruction in the world is not sufficient without practice. Constant practice in a variety of conditions and scenarios. Don't fall into a sense of complacency because you're fully "geared up" with safety and rescue gear and have taken a course or two. Skills gets stale and erode unless they are honed by constant practice.

Think of your rescue gear as hardware and experience, judgement, instruction, and practice as software. You need both types of components to build a fully functional safety system you can rely on.

SELF-RESCUE AID SYSTEMS

These items are designed to assist paddlers in self rescue, in particular deep water re-entry into their kayak and the ability to restore their boat to safe and fully "paddleable" condition.

SPARE PADDLE

First on any safety gear list should be a spare paddle. There are innumerable ways a paddle can be lost,

ranging from rough conditions to a moment's inattention, and consequences can range from inconvenient to dire.

Your spare paddle doesn't have to be fancy or expensive, it just needs to be there, on or in every kayak, not just one per group. Most paddlers prefer a take apart paddle as a spare. It's easily stowed out of the way yet near at hand. It is important to periodically check your spare to make sure the ferrule (joint) operates smoothly and won't bind or lock-up.

PADDLE LEASH

The paddle leash is the simplest way to keep your paddle near at hand and connected at all times. Leashes consist of an elastic or coiled cord that attaches to your deck or wrist and to the center of your paddle shaft. The elastic/coil contracts and expands to accommodate your stroke and won't pose an undue entrapment hazard.

PADDLE FLOAT

Probably the single most common rescue aid is the paddle float. Paddle floats are inflatable bladders or foam pads that attach to one blade on your paddle and allow it to be deployed as an outrigger to increase the stability of your boat and make deep water re-entry of your boat easier.

Paddle float design should emphasize durability in terms of materials. Some paddlers prefer foam block floats rather than inflatables so as not to worry about punctures compromising the ability of the float to contain air. Others prefer the capability for compact storage inherent to an inflatable float.

Either way you go, the float should lock on to your blade when inflated or otherwise in position. A back up security system such as a lanyard is advisable as severe wind and waves can pose added risk of loss or separation. The float should deploy in a minimal amount of time and effort. Remember you're in harm's way when you're using this thing, every moment can count.

Inflatable floats should inflate quickly (5 or 6 breaths maximum – remember cold water immersion can inhibit your ability to take a deep breath) Look for an inflation valve that requires at most one hand to operate or better yet, hands-free operation. You'll find more uses than hands during a re-entry situation between controlling boat, paddle, etc.

Inflatable paddle floats feature either single or dual air chambers. Reasoning is that dual cells offer some insurance should one cell be damaged, the second will likely remain functional. The single celled float offers the advantage of faster inflation as you only have to deal with one valve and inflation system. Fumbling with two valves can delay deployment of the float.

It's wise to consider choosing a light bright colored paddle float which can do double duty as a signalling device when placed on the end of a vertical paddle.

Some floats are rigged with reflective tape to increase their visibility.

It's imperative to stow your paddle float where it'll be readily available for use when needed. If waves are rough, don't rely on simply tucking your float under the deck rigging where it could get dislodged. Most paddle floats have a leash or a lanyard to allow them to be securely attached to your boat. If yours' does not have one, improvise, run a cord through a grommet.

Avoid securing your float in such a way that it's difficult to release for use. Cold fingers can be singularly incapable of manipulating small clips and fittings. When you need your paddle float, you're likely to need it NOW. A single point attachment is best.

You'll also need to make sure your kayak is properly rigged for deploying a paddle float. One paddle blade will need to be held in place on the deck of your boat, preferably immediately behind the cockpit. Make sure your boat has shock cord deck rigging in place and that it is positioned and laid out properly to secure your paddle blade. If necessary, Deck Bungy Kits are available that will allow you to add this capability to your boat.

SPONSON SYSTEM

An alternative or adjunct system to a paddle float is a strap on sponson system featuring inflatable bladders that attach to the sides of the hull and provide increased flotation and buoyancy to create a more stable platform for re-entry.

Sponson systems are a bit more time consuming to deploy as they often need to be deployed (i.e., strapped on) prior to being of use and most systems utilize tandem sponsons for balance and maximum flotation. This results in doubling the inflation time as well. Most sponsons are larger than paddle floats, also increasing deployment time.

On the positive side, sponsons will provide a more stable platform for re-entry and require less aptitude than paddle floats, making them friendlier to less athletic or experienced paddlers.

Sponson systems are of value in more than deep water re-entry situations. They can provide a stable platform for supporting or towing a sick or disabled paddler whose balance is impaired.

Sponson systems are a wise consideration for group equipment, for paddlers facing sizable exposed open water crossings, for groups travelling in remote regions or for paddlers anticipating spending considerable time floating, fishing or taking photos. They're a nice "ace in the hole" to have available when things get rough or turn nasty or when your attention is focused on something other than paddling.

BILGE PUMP

If you've exited your boat, you can count on the fact that water has taken your place. It's imperative that entrapped water be removed as quickly as possible to restore your kayak's "paddleability." A waterlogged boat is extremely unstable and as you can imagine, is very difficult (if not impossible) to paddle out of harm's way.

The most effective means of returning that water to where it belongs is by using a hand bilge pump. Most personal bilge pumps are approximately 14" long, about 2" in diameter, feature a T-grip handle, and will move upwards of 5 gallons a minute. Most pumps should be outfitted with a flotation collar to keep them afloat if dropped. Pumps are easily stowed under deck rigging or tucked the curve of the hull next to your seat.

Bilge pumps don't only come into play if your boat swamps. Heavy rains and leaky or torn sprayskirts are a combination that can make a pump right useful.

SPONGE

For the size and expense, you'll find a sponge a very useful addition, as much for comfort as safety. Nothing'll dry off a wet seat like a sponge and if you're comfortable you're far better prepared to concentrate on the tasks at hand and be in a much better position to paddle at your best.

A sponge can also be very useful around camp and for cleaning your gear at the end of your trip. A word of caution, sponges can be very creative in finding ways to slip loose from underneath deck rigging or can fall out easily if left to float around in your boat. If your sponge doesn't have a strap, bore a hole in the sponge and run a cord loop through it and secure the cord to a fitting on your boat.

GROUP RESCUE AIDS

When it comes to assisting other party members out of difficulty, care must be exercised to make sure that you do not complicate the situation and end up jeopardizing yourself or other group members. This is one area in which qualified instruction is invaluable.

PADDLE 'BINER

A carabiner sized to fit over paddle shafts can be useful in an awful lot of ways and is so small and compact that it is no burden to have on hand. A paddle 'biner can be an integral part of a rescue system and can be handy for use in camp, rigging tarp lines, securing boats, hoisting food bags out of reach of raccoons and other varmints.

THROW ROPE

Developed initially for whitewater but equally valuable in flat or open water when tide and wind and wave conspire to carry boat or paddler away from group. Just learn to throw it from a seated position and be ready to absorb the weight and stress of the load. A 50' rope is about all that can be handled from a seated position.

TOW SYSTEM

The touring paddler's derivative of a throw rope with hardware and fittings that allow clipping into a distressed

boat and just as important providing immediate release if situation deteriorates. This is a piece of gear that should be used only by paddlers skilled and educated in rescue procedures as it can become a liability if improperly used.

NAVIGATION & POSITIONING AIDS

These items fit more into the safety category than in rescue but are none the less essential. After all, like many things in life, prevention is less painful than the cure.

COMPASS

Staying on course and knowing your place are integral to being safe especially on long trips with finite amount of food and supplies. Also, anytime weather threatens it's best to be accurately positioned to know where and how quickly you can reach safe waters.

Compasses can be deck mounted on the foredeck in front of your cockpit or handheld. The advantage of the deck mount compass is that it is hands-free and always available for consultation. However, compared to a hand held compass they are expensive. If you opt for a hand-held compass, keep it where it's readily available, say, clipped to or in a pocket of your PFD. Regardless of what compass you use, it's essential you know how to read and use it effectively.

MAP/CHART CASE

Charts and maps are key to safe navigation but a wet smeared chart is virtually useless and easily destroyed. Cases protect the charts, keep them dry and strong and provide an erasable surface to note directions, prominent features, etc. freeing you from repeatedly consulting the guidebook or trusting to our all-too-fallible memories. Look for chart cases that feature easy attachment to deck rigging.

GPS

Global Positioning System receivers are valuable aids for determining position although comparatively costly ones. Do not rely on GPS's exclusively, batteries can go dead or moisture can make them inoperable. Use them as a confirming device and don't forget how to use compass and dead reckoning should your GPS fail.

SIGNALLING/VISIBILITY AIDS

The key to being properly equipped as far as being able to make your presence and position known is to first consider all the various conditions you might encounter and make sure you have the aids that will increase your visibility in every condition, daylight, night, fog, mist, etc.

WHISTLE

An essential on any trip, offers more rescue application for the cost than any other one piece of gear. For marine use, opt for a "pealess" whistle in a molded rather than metal shell to avoid corrosion and discomfort in cold weather. Pealess whistles can't jam when wet and are as loud or louder than other whistles. Whistles are effective not in alerting other groups to your presence but for communication within your party as well.

SIGNAL MIRROR

Sunny days are often the most difficult in which to make your presence known. A signal mirror will take advantage of the conditions that make it tough to be seen. A mirror with a sighting hole is preferable to increase your ability to aim and direct your signal. Make sure you know proper signals before setting out. The mirror can also help you look your best when the rescuers arrive.

FLARES

Hand held flares are effective for night time signalling. They may be excessive for short outings but can be invaluable for paddlers in remote waters. Make sure you know how to use them safely. Personal flares are often small enough to be secured on your PFD.

DYE MARKERS

An excellent daylight signal aid, dye markers shade the surrounding waters a highly visible fluorescent color that is easily noted from the air. Choose environmentally friendly, biodegradable markers please.

CHEMICAL LIGHTS

The light sticks so popular for Halloween are effective safety and rescue lights for paddlers. They require no batteries and tolerate long term storage well without degradation. For improved visibility, tie a length of cord to hole in end and swing them above your head.

STROBE LIGHTS

Designed originally as a man overboard light for ocean vessels, the applicability of a strobe light for paddlers is obvious. Strobes are intensely bright and small enough to be permanently attached to your PFD. Periodically check your strobe for battery life and strength.

HANDHELD VHF RADIOS

The US Coast Guard monitors VHF Channel 16 and most recreational boaters also carry VHF radios. Handheld VHF's can be of value in verbally transmitting position and location. Many are water resistant but few are entirely waterproof, protection via a waterproof case is recommended. Battery life is limited and should be regularly checked and spares kept on hand.

CELL PHONES

The increasingly ubiquitous cell phone can be very effective as a rescue device. Note local rescue service numbers such as USCG, rescue squads, etc. prior to departure. Few cell phones are tolerant of moisture. Protect your phone with a waterproof case and use only when necessary.

EPIRBS

When activated, Epirbs link into satellite navigational systems and provide precise position for rescue or search parties. Epirbs are very expensive and not generally necessary for groups close to shore and in well-traveled waters. However, for expeditions venturing into remote areas, an Epirb is perhaps the most effective rescue device available.