

## **Safety on the Water**

by John Gahn

Sea kayaking can be a very safe and enjoyable experience for the whole family by applying some very simple principles. However, risk is always involved. Boaters need to develop the ability to assess the water and weather conditions as well as their skill and ability in order to make safe decisions for themselves and fellow boaters.

Safety begins with 3 basic principles: KNOWLEDGE - PREPARATION - AND ANTICIPATION. Let's look at each one and how to apply it.

### **KNOWLEDGE**

Boaters need as much information as appropriate for the water and weather conditions for their trip. The first and perhaps the best advice for beginners would be: Learn from experienced, skilled local boaters who can be trusted to respect your current skill level. By learning to kayak in small increments one can make a smooth transition to the next skill level.

Take kayaking classes. It is much easier to learn a skill properly in the first place than to try to correct poor form. Learn to wet exit, perform strokes and maneuvers, execute rescues and recoveries, how to read charts, and how to use a compass and navigate. Next, practice these skills. Each time you paddle; keep your paddle in the water and use it to propel, turn, go sideways, and stop your boat. Try new things and above all have fun!!

Learn all you can about local weather conditions. Since sea kayaking involves paddling in inland waters and for the most part close to shore in the ocean, listen to both the marine forecast and the onshore forecast. It is likely the conditions will be a combination of the two. Start listening to the weather reports a couple of days before the paddle and the prediction for the day after the paddle so you can look for trends. Look for changes in weather systems. For instance, the best conditions locally, but not always, are a change from a high pressure system to a low pressure system. In simple local terms, this is when the weather changes from sunny days with northwest winds to southwest winds with cloudy skies. There is very often a 24 hour window of calm wind and sea conditions. These are the same conditions local fisherman look for when going to sea. Watching the weather is a constant source of wonder and enlightenment. There are always surprises!!

### **PREPARATION**

All considerations concerning sea kayaking are interconnected. Therefore, your preparation should start with listening to the local inland and marine weather forecasts. Once you determine that the forecast warrants the drive to the put-in point, the next step is assessing the actual conditions at the launch point. Even if the conditions are smooth and calm that doesn't mean they will stay that way. Make sure you and everyone in your group can handle the conditions if they become more active. Give yourself a margin of safety. For instance, if the winds are predicted to go to 20 knots (one knot = 1.1 miles per hour) and you are only comfortable in 10 knot winds -- stay on the beach. There is always another day.

You can also use local weather patterns to your advantage. It is often the case either on inland lakes or in coastal areas that the wind comes up in the afternoon. There are many paddles you can safely enjoy by starting at 7:00 or 8:00am and being off the water by 11:00am. Get to know the local patterns and go paddling with experienced local boaters.

Preparation also includes having a seaworthy boat and the proper safety gear. A good sea kayak includes fore and aft watertight bulkheads (compartment dividers), watertight hatch covers, deck lines, working rudder or skeg (if appropriate), and deck bungees to name a few things.

Recreational kayaks usually don't have water tight compartments so they require flotation bags to make more seaworthy. Sit on tops are the exception since they are fully sealed. For those boaters competent at wet exits, either a nylon sprayskirt or the more watertight neoprene sprayskirt will complete a seaworthy boat.

Proper safety gear starts with the PFD (personal flotation device). Wear it!! It is of no use in your boat or on your deck. Most kayakers use a Type III PFD which allows for the comfort and maneuverability needed in a kayak. The Coast Guard also requires boaters to carry a whistle. Get a loud one and attach it to your PFD but not to a zipper. If boating at night the Coast Guards also requires a white light.

Two additional items are needed. A bilge pump and a paddle float. Learn how to use the paddle float for various recoveries and invent your own new uses. For recreational boaters you will also need a milk jug with the bottom cut out to use as a bailing tool. Attaching a short line and a piece of foam to the handle will allow it to float. Sponges are also handy for extracting small amounts of water from your boat.

These are the four basic must have items: PFD, whistle, bilge pump and paddle float. However, kayaking can be strenuous so you are always going to want to carry water and some food. Energy bars are a convenient and popular choice.

Next, since capsizes are a real possibility. Kayakers need to dress for the temperature of the water which for Humboldt Bay, the Pacific Ocean, and Stone and Big Lagoons (in the winter) is usually 50 to 55 degrees Fahrenheit. Wet suits or dry suits are the most appropriate things to wear since the human body loses heat 25 times faster in water than in air. Wearing fleece type garments that will keep you warm even when wet are a must. Paddle jackets over fleece are often a good choice. Wear wicking layers next to the skin and always avoid cotton or cotton like garments. Learn about the various stages of hypothermia ( a severe and life threatening condition caused by lowering the core body temperature). Learn how to recognize it and treat it and best of all avoid it by dressing for the temperature of the water. It is also advisable to carry a spare change of clothes in a water tight bag.

For those paddlers going on intermediate or advanced trips here are some additional safety items you can add to your carry on list: Spare paddle, weather radio, VHF marine radio, First Aid Kit, waterproof matches, lighter, fire starter, space blanket, large poncho or anorak, flares, boat repair kits, large brass safety pins, signal mirror, extra energy bars, duct tape, and spare line only to name a few.

File a float plan. Tell a friend or family member where you are going, how long you plan to be out, and when you plan on returning. You can also leave a note on your car with your trip plans although this could also expose your car to theft or break-in.

## ANTICIPATION

Being aware of your surroundings is crucial to boating safety. If you take a 360 degree view every few minutes, you will be able to stay current on changing conditions, boat traffic, and the whereabouts and status of your fellow kayakers. Communicating with people within the group facilitates learning individual and group expectations, monitoring energy levels and the sharing of knowledge and skill among group members. Of course, maintaining a pace that keeps all group members within talking distance is a must for this to happen. Staying close as a group and holding a predictable course is also the best way for power boaters to see you and respect your position. Always go boating with people who honor your skill level and will turn around or seek a safe place to land if anyone is uncomfortable.

Consider the amount of exposure you will encounter. Factor in the expected weather, distance from shore, available safe landing spots, length of trip, level of fitness, and the amount and types of safety gear you are carrying. One rule of thumb says: "There is no such thing as a day trip". The more potential problems you anticipate, the less actual problems you will have to deal with.

## RATINGS FOR CLUB PADDLES

**NOVICE:** Paddler who is just beginning to be comfortable in a kayak. Perhaps has taken a intro to kayaking class.

Appropriate conditions for novice kayakers:

**RISK:** Low

1. Sea state Calm to slightly rippled
2. Winds Calm to 5 knots
3. Sheltered waters such as Stone Lagoon, Big Lagoon or Mad River Slough.

Novice kayakers can go on **beginning** trips when accompanied by intermediate paddlers who lead them through the trip. It is always advisable to get as much experience as possible at one's current level before attempting the next level.

**BEGINNER:** Paddler who is becoming proficient at maneuvering a kayak and can handle light ( 1/2 knot ) current and light chop (1 foot or less).

Appropriate conditions for beginning kayakers:

**RISK:** low to moderate

1. Sea state Calm to less than 1 foot waves
2. Winds Not more than 10 knots
3. Currents 1/2 knot or less
4. Sheltered locations such as Stone and Big Lagoons, Mad River Slough, and Freshwater Slough, plus sheltered locations on Humboldt Bay around Woodley Island. Be sure to read the

tide charts and go with a more experienced kayaker when negotiating the currents of Humboldt Bay.

It is always good to learn in small increments. Paddle with more experienced boaters and test conditions in waters where there is a sheltered area to retreat to.

**INTERMEDIATE:** Kayaker with considerable experience in conditions such as wind to 18 knots, eddying and ferrying in currents, wind waves to 2 feet and swell to 4 feet. Competence in rescues and reading weather and sea conditions.

Appropriate conditions for intermediate kayakers:

**RISK:** moderate to considerable

1. Sea state Calm to 2 foot wind waves and or 4 foot swell
2. Winds Less than 18 knots
3. Currents No more than 3 knots
4. Most of Humboldt Bay and Trinidad Bay in its sheltered locations if dressed for the water. Intermediate boaters can safely accompany advanced boaters on short controlled trips with sheltered waters nearby.

**ADVANCED:** Kayakers with several years experience in rough conditions. Proficient at self rescues and rescuing others. Ability to understand weather forecasts and read and adapt to changing conditions.

Appropriate conditions for advanced kayakers:

**Risk:** considerable

1. Sea state Continuous wind and swell conditions possibly 6 to 8 feet. Possible surf landings in 3 foot surf. Rough conditions.
2. Winds Up to 20 knots
3. Currents Up to 6 knots
4. Humboldt Bay near the entrance and the ocean off Trinidad.

This rating system is by no means written in stone but is an attempt to help kayakers choose safe boating trips and help people understand which ENC trips would be appropriate for them. As always, when faced with new conditions, use good judgment and go boating with more experienced kayakers.

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John Gahn 2005