

## **Hand Signals for Sea Kayakers**

by Eric Soares

You are trying to catch up, but you can't. Your arms flail as fast as they can, yet your friends cruise too fast. The guy leading the pack is 200 meters away, and the nearest paddler is 60 meters away. What do you do? Blow the whistle!

That's right, you blow the whistle attached to your PFD and wave your arm. The paddler 60 meters away stops and looks back at you. You put your fist up in the air like John Carlos at the Olympics. The paddler stops and pats her hand on top of her head and faces her palm up, signaling "Are you okay?" You give her the "thumbs up" signal, point to the other paddlers, then repeat the fist in the air. This means "Everybody stop!" She blows her whistle and other paddlers look back at her. She repeats "Everyone stop!" until everyone stops. You then paddle up to her and signal to everyone, "Gather around me!" As the other boaters approach, you signal, "Raft up." Everyone rafts up and you say, "I can't keep up. I'm tired and I need to rest." Everyone agrees and your hide is saved - thanks to hand signals.

When sea kayaking, we need to communicate accurately, reliably, and quickly. Our comfort, and even our lives depend on it. Someday (perhaps soon), we will communicate at sea with inexpensive, waterproof transmitters in our helmets. Until then, hand signals must suffice. Let's look at the grammar and lexicon of hand signals that may be useful while kayaking at sea.

### **Team Communication**

Tsunami Rangers, an ocean adventure kayak team located near San Francisco, use hand signals while touring, exploring, and playing. We keep within shouting distance of other team members to facilitate communication. Our friends, the Banzai Bozos, convinced us to adapt the divers' "buddy system" while adventuring, so someone is always nearby in close communication in case something goes awry.

But even buddies can't always talk at conversation volume due to wind and wave noise, compounded by distance. So, borrowing hand signals from river kayakers, SCUBA divers, military commandos, crane operators, and regular folks who use common nonverbal emblems, Jim Kakuk and I have put together necessary words that our team uses at sea. We share these signals with you in hope that a standard signal set will evolve so kayakers anywhere can readily communicate.

### **Signal Grammar**

To save time and avoid confusion, a common grammar must be used. For simplicity, we structure sentences in a rudimentary manner. That is, we use only simple sentences (no complex or compound sentences -- though multiple nouns and verbs are used); we signal only in the active voice (subject/predicate/object) so no auxiliary verbs are needed; we use only nouns, verbs, and adjectives - prepositions, adverbs and other words are implied; to reduce the number of signals, we use subject pronouns in subjective and objective case (similar to pigeon English).

So, a typical hand signal sentence might state: "YOU COME I." This is a command meaning "Get your ass over here."

Most signals indicate commands. Some indicate personal action, others describe something or someone, while other signals ask questions. "YOU COME I" is a command. "I TAKE PICTURES" is personal action. "IT'S SCARY" describes and "WHAT?" is a question.

### Signal Lexicon

Signals can be broken down into nouns, verbs (predicates), adjectives (descriptors) and a few miscellaneous words. Some signals have multiple meanings which become obvious in context. There is a breakdown of common signals used by the Tsunami Rangers at sea in the lexicon shown in the table below. These comprise the bulk of signals that we use most often. Occasionally we add new ones or drop ones that have no use. We are open to learning new signals that have value or are simply clearer than extant signals. [Send your ideas to us at [info@bask.org](mailto:info@bask.org) and we will pass them on to Eric].

### Signal Situations

Signals should be used when normal conversation is not possible. All signals use only one hand. If you need to talk, HAIL, signal the group to FORM UP -- and then speak normally. If you do not desire complex conversation, first HAIL with hand and whistle or vocal signal (we yell HOYT!!), and then, after you gain attention, give your signals. Remember to always give signals in active voice (subject/verb/object). Use nonverbal inflection to indicate urgency (e.g., horizontally revolve your forearm real fast, as if winding a string on a spool, to indicate GO! GO! GO!).

### When to Use "WHAT?"

Use WHAT at the end of a sentence (or by itself) to indicate a question, a request, or that you do not understand. Here's an example of a question: A person exits a cave and paddles toward you. You point to the cave and raise your palm up (IT WHAT?). You are asking "What happened in the cave?"

In this example, if the paddler did not understand your question, he would signal WHAT? And, if you pointed to the cave, put your palm down above your brow and signaled WHAT?, you would be requesting IT SCOUT WHAT? This means, "Do you wish to scout out that cave?"

The paddler might then respond by shaking his head from side to side, holding his palm up like a tiger claw, and zipping his index finger across his throat: NO! IT'S HAIRY! LET'S QUIT.

You might then salute your comrade, point to the horizon, point to him, do a seig heil, and then raise your palm up. You just signaled, "WILL COMPLY. THE HORIZON, YOU LEAD. WHAT (Ya Wanna)?"

If your companion gives you the thumbs up, points to you, and then sweeps at his ass, he is saying: RIGHT ON! YOU SWEEP. And everyone lives happily ever after.

## Practice, Practice, Practice

The above example illustrates a sample scenario at sea. I could give more, but why - er - I mean WHAT? Everyone speaks a little differently to communicate the same thing. As long as everyone understands every time, there is no problem. Still, it's a good idea to practice the signals at home and in the car on the way to the put-in.

If you are unsure as to the best way to signal, remember the three C's of communication: Clarity, Conciseness, and Correctness. So, make sure you are clearly understood. State your message concisely (simply, yet completely). And make sure you state it correctly, so receivers understand what you mean. At sea, communication confusion can be very costly.

Finally, practice signaling with your group of friends while at sea. This way, communication will be easier and safer. If you practice all the time, it will become second nature and not require conscious thought. Compared to sign language for the deaf, this signal system is easy. So do yourself a favor and learn to communicate at sea.

<b>Word</b>	<b>How signalled</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
I/ME	Point index finger toward self	Yourself
IT/THEM	Point index finger toward object	Object, activity, place, people
YOU Person/s	Point index finger toward person	Person/s
WE/US	Circle index finger at group	All of us
COME	Beckon with index finger	Come here
CUT	Bring index finger across throat	Let's quit
FORM UP	Circle index finger above head	Gather around
GET CLOSE	Put thumb close to index finger	Get in close
GO	Horizontally revolve arm as if winding a spool	Go forward/backward
GROK	Put bunched up fingers on temple	Pay attention
HANG	Hang fingers limply near ear	Wait around, hang out
IGNORE	Throw air over shoulders	Ignore my last signal
LAND	Slam palm face down	Go to shore and land
LEAD	Give seig heil	Lead the group
RAFT	Click side of fist on paddle	Raft up
RELAX	Slowly ease palm face down	Relax, don't be uptight
SCOUT	Put palm over brow	Check it out
SPREAD	Open hand wide near head	Spread out
STAY AWAY	Move hand far away from body	Stay far away (from danger)
STOP	Put fist in air	Stop, hold position
SURF	Move hand in snake motion with palm down	Surf, play in waves
SWEEP	Make whisking motion with hand near arse	Follow the group and sweep
WAIT	Hold index finger up near ear	Wait a moment
BAD	Thumb down	No good, bad move or idea
BORING	Pat yawning mouth with palm	Boring, uninteresting
DANGEROUS	Arm or paddle horizontal over head	Not safe, don't go
GOOD	Thumb up	Good, good move or idea

HAIRY	Make tiger claw near head	Very wild and scary
OK	Pat head with palm Physically	OK, not hurt
SAFE	Arm or paddle vertical over head	Safe to go
STUPID	Slap forehead	Stupid
SURFCHICKEN	Hold fist against shoulder and flap elbow rapidly	Afraid
UNSURE	Rotate down palm from side to side	Not sure, can't decide
BYE	A wave goodbye	Goodbye, end transmission
GOT IT	Form a circle with thumb and index finger	OK, I understand
GREETING	Give Vulcan greeting	Live long and prosper
HAIL	Lightly wave arm over head	Hail, listen up
HELP	Strongly wave arm over head	Help, assistance needed
NO	Shake head from side to side	No, I disagree
WHAT	Place hand near shoulder, palm up	Who/what/where/when/how?
WILL COMPLY	Salute	I understand and will comply
YES	Nod head up and down	Yes, I agree

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