

A Guide to Safe Paddling

Sea kayaking can be a safe and rewarding activity if common sense prevails and you take certain precautions. Before putting in for a day's paddle, check that you have the following:

Always Take:

- A kayak in good, serviceable condition, with plenty of secure buoyancy, fore and aft
- A paddle
- A spraycover that fits your boat
- An appropriately sized personal flotation device (life jacket) and attached whistle
- Clothing suitable for all conditions
- A bailer or pump
- An accessible spare paddle (minimum 1 per group)

In Any But The Most Benign Conditions, Also Consider:

- An accessible flare pack
- A flashlight (even if you are only planning a day trip)
- Self-rescue aids
- Rain gear, and extra clothing in a waterproof bag
- A tow line (minimum of 25 feet)
- Charts, tide tables, and current tables if appropriate
- A compass
- A knife
- Matches or a lighter
- First aid kit
- A weather radio

MITA'S Recommendation: If you are new to ocean kayaking, we strongly urge you to go with someone experienced your first time. For a list of outfitters and guides, go to <http://www.maineakayakguides.com>.

Sea kayaking demands sound judgment and caution, no matter how experienced you are. Your most vulnerable time, though, is when you have the most to learn—as a beginner. Following are some basic cautions and precautions to help you through the early stages.

- **The greatest single danger to sea kayakers is hypothermia. Cold water kills, so dress appropriately and learn about hypothermia. See pp. 305-307 for more information.**
- Thoroughly familiarize yourself with your boat, and be sure you are using it as it was designed to be used.
- Start gradually in moderate weather, close to shore, with an experienced companion. Experiment with strong winds only when they are blowing toward shore.
- Develop your paddling skills, including turning and bracing.
- Learn and practice a self-rescue method appropriate for you and your boat, including deep-water re-entry.
- Practice group rescues so you can help others.
- Make a habit of carrying safety equipment.
- Leave a float plan letting someone know where you're putting in and when and where you plan to return. Leave a full description of your car.
- Read up on sea kayaking, weather, oceanography, and cold water survival.
- Listen to a marine weather forecast each day you are out.
- Avoid paddling alone.

- Learn the principles of navigation and seamanship.

Precautionary Notes:

Make sure you know how to deal with the following situations. Consult local experts or available literature for more guidance.

Weather

Avoid paddling when whitecaps are visible until you thoroughly appreciate their effect. Wind can upset a kayak, make it difficult to turn, and slow or stop your boat. It can also create unmanageable waves and prevent you from holding a course.

Fog can result in sudden and total disorientation. You will need a compass, but you may also gain some orientation from sounds (such as beach surf, bells, and fog horns) as well as from steady wave and wind directions.

Current

You will encounter two principal types of current at sea: reversing tidal current and continuous ocean current. Strong current can aggravate conditions caused by adverse weather, particularly when current and wind are opposing. They can also cause difficult eddy and wave conditions even on still days from the sheer force of their flow.

If you find yourself in rough weather:

- Read your chart to help identify danger points.
- Use available information to estimate slack or favorable current and time your passage or crossing for that period.
- Paddle in current under controlled conditions to familiarize yourself with its effect.
- Exercise caution when the current and wind direction oppose each other.

Topography

Topography affects wind and water conditions in shallows, beach surf, headlands, cliffs and river mouths.

Shallows: Waves steepen and break heavily on shallows. Avoid those areas when waves are large or when strong currents are forced to flow over them.

Surf: Waves steepen and break on beaches and shoals. Generally, try to avoid landing in surf with a loaded kayak. Avoid surf on rocky beaches.

Headlands: Conditions are frequently more difficult off headlands with chaotic seas due to increased wind (funneling), accelerated current and rebound waves.

Cliffs: Cliffs limit landing sites and can cause chaotic rebound wave conditions.

River mouths: Difficult wave conditions occur when a river outflow runs against the waves.

Human Hazards

Watch for powerboats, ships, tugboats with barges, and all other watercraft. Make yourself visible and never assume you have been seen or have the right of way.

...Finally

The basis of safe sea kayaking is sound judgment, self-responsibility and technical competence. Join a club, take a class, read books, and/or consult local experts to learn all you need to know about the sport. Remember that where you paddle, others will follow.

Excerpted from *Before You Go...A Guide to Safe Paddling*, by the Trade Association of Paddle Sports, 12455 N. Wauwatosa Rd., Mequon, WI 53097; (414) 242-5228; www.gopaddle.org.