



## **C.7(b) EXPEDITIONS ON THE WATER – CANOE**

**Dave Watkinson - 2008**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Using an open canoe for an extended journey or remote expedition venture allows for great scope, great pleasure and endless adventure.

It is a craft that is highly versatile with a proven historic background in travelling on open water, down rivers of varying volume as well as up. It can be sailed, poled, snubbed, portaged, tracked and lined as well as conventionally paddled.

Such versatility can require a raft of skills and judgments and the canoe's versatility can be an undoing (a technical word for an epic) if unfamiliar techniques are piloted/attempted in anger in the field.

It has to be said that a laden canoe is a different beast from an empty craft in all aspects of its control, and from a leadership perspective will draw deeper on the knowledge and skill of the paddler or person responsible for others.

There are plenty of skills and leadership books out there and they are generally very good and a useful resource. I have attempted to add some additional findings and experiences from expedition ventures in open canoes

### **GROUP ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT**

#### **OPEN WATER**

When paddling tandem supervised or unsupervised, if a capsize occurs you have double trouble to deal with. Equipment loss is an important factor if in a remote setting but must not become a distraction from the person or persons in the water.

A sound knowledge of personal and group capsize protocol needs to be organized prior to any trip.

Parameters need to be discussed and decided daily in relation to the weather forecast, the river volume/forecasted volume, wind speed and direction; even tidal flow if on estuaries sea lochs or open sea.

It is essential to have clear commands and signals for a series of situations: whistles, paddle, arms and radios; a well-documented series of signals is available in canoe skill books for moving water, however on open water, such as large lakes (rafted and or under sail) additional signals will need to be discussed for example:

- Re-group/come closer together
- Drop sails

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- Come to my location
- Swimmer or object overboard

A practiced emergency procedure should be an inherent part of any sailing/rafted canoe activity in open canoes; as predominantly this will be down wind a great distance can very quickly be generated even with a slick and rehearsed procedure.

I suggest that the following to be key components of the procedure:

- Shout and alert
- Keep sight of the person/object
- Collapse/drop sails
- Crew to spin in their seats to face up wind and towards the person/object overboard
- Maintain a rhythmic in time paddle sequence to enable either forward up-wind momentum or, in stronger winds, to hold position allowing person/object to move downwind to your location
- All other craft to adopt the similar strategy to prevent mass separation.

Greater awareness/observation of conditions is vital. I have observed large squalls sneak up on groups who were only looking where they were going and never glancing back; or when rafted or under sail, hood up, sheltering from the wind or in a state of relaxation at not having to paddle. It can be a rude awakening.

The advanced driving skill of looking way ahead comes into play with open water, for example avoidance of windward shores with wave action or, as on a few frustrating occasions, being led down a blind cul-de-sac inlet on a lake, or being sucked into a river at the end of a lake.

If rafted and or under sail pro-active steering will save a needless paddle.

## **LADEN CANOES ON MOVING WATER**

The advantage of increased stability and a canoe full of comforts and luxuries has to be balanced against some inherent challenges, the most common being:

- stowage and trim
- recovery if swamped
- capsize

## **EQUIPMENT STOWAGE AND TRIM**

Based on the assumption you are trying to keep equipment dry, a lost article containing essential items such as food or sleeping bags, would prove challenging to say the least.

There are two lines of thought for me on this, barrels and/or dry bags. The final decision is yours, my role is to explore the pros and cons of each system.

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**Barrels:** they come in different sizes and have a water tight seal on the top; they make great seats and provide protection for their contents. They can also provide a means of carrying/catching fresh water; the drawbacks are few and can be mostly overcome. They are awkward to transport perhaps on a portage (though harnesses have been manufactured). They can pose some difficulties in loading kit into them and also fitting them into the canoe. They may cause excitement at airports and check in desks, so call first.

**Dry bags:** again they come in different sizes, and design. Look for ones with a fitted harness for carrying, and an effective seal system. Smaller dry bags can be used inside a day pack, and clear dry bags can be used to protect maps, charts, GPS and the first aid kit.

It is worth taking a repair kit with patches and glue for serious holes that may appear, but in general some strong tape inside and out will suffice.

As with both systems it is essential that they are water tight; the dry bag system requires more management to ensure success. A combination of both systems is possible: I carry food in dry bags and put delicate items in a barrel. I tend to use a small barrel for the "Dunny". All you need one container for that outdoor toilet experience: it is worth clarifying the arrangements as, depending on where you are, you may be carrying out waste in the small barrel (BDH container) or you may be wishing to carry the necessary items such as trowel, toilet paper, lighter to burn paper and some antiseptic liquid to wipe inside - and not anything else!

## STOWAGE

My preferred method is to encourage people to have one large stowage system that you don't plan on opening until its time to access those pieces of kit you desperately want to keep dry: sleeping bag, spare clothes etc. Then to have a small easily portable pack which contains essential items such as waterproofs, hat, head torch, sunglasses, drink, food, mug and cutlery for example

I have found two distinct methods of stowing kit. Situations arise where you need to have equipment relatively fixed and not sliding around such as in moving water; once fixed the drawback is that you are unable to shift and change the trim of the canoe. However smaller items do need to be lashed or tied/fastened to something, as in the event of a swamping or capsize they will all bob off into the deep blue yonder or sink!

For those who do lash kit in, it is useful to remember that although nothing will come out of the boat on recovering the laden canoe it will predominantly require the contents to be unloaded to allow for rescue and emptying out.

One method is to snugly fit in barrels or dry bags with the intention of them floating free upon capsize or swamped, as long as they are tethered on a short length of rope. In my opinion this tends to make recovery and rescue more favourable

Thus the above method allows for trim to be shifted I have also used a dry bag on a lanyard to throw into an empty canoe as a towline.

## TRIM

On extended trips and expedition ventures with laden canoes, shifting kit and people around in the boat can be difficult, (and very difficult if you are using a spray deck).

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Being conscious of the basic effects on the canoe of trimming can be an essential aspect in defusing a situation, notably:

- bow heavy into the wind
- stern heavy down wind.

Or on one occasion I witnessed a tandem team pull onto a shore in a strengthening breeze, the bow paddler jumped out and the canoe and the stern paddler were blown back out into the lake. After much signalling and a bit of thought, by shifting weight and making the canoe bow heavy, progress against the prevailing weather was achieved.

When rafted or sailing, trim again needs careful consideration. In general when sailing downwind the trim needs to be bow light, this can be achieved by positioning the bow paddlers on the central thwart or by shifting bags around, thus preventing swamping by a combination of rain, waves, or the subsequent pressure wave between the two canoes that arises when rafting.

The essentials of laden canoe paddling are to my mind:

- preventing too much forward speed on moving water
- keeping (and correcting) the laden canoe facing down-stream and not at acute angles to the current, which would promote a higher risk of broaching
- strong management and organization to maximize response times when operating as a group.

In summary, training and back up needs to be a build-in necessity. Whether (ideally) prior to, or when in country, familiarization and practice in aspects of the above paragraphs will go a long way to achieving a safe, enjoyable adventure.

Check out the British Canoe Union website for further information and publications: [www.bcu.org.uk](http://www.bcu.org.uk)

Also recommended is "*The Path, the Thrill and the Song of the Paddle*" by Bill and Paul Mason.

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