



C.7(a) EXPEDITIONS IN SEA KAYAKS

Neil Young and Lesley Sleight (New Edition 2010)

While many believe that kayaks were developed in Greenland for hunting, they have developed in many different ways with kayaks now being designed specifically for a variety of leisure activities such as river, surf, touring and competition use. However one of the most versatile craft must be the sea kayak – equally at home on a day surfing in a local tidal race or on a multi-day expedition.

The sea kayak has evolved over many years. It wasn't until the 1970's that the first modern sea kayak evolved from a short river boat and manufacturers have been adapting designs since then. Today there are many specialist kayaks on the market from a Carbon Kevlar and Fibre glass designs at the top end of the market to more durable plastic designs at the basic end. Modern sea kayaking has led to the evolution of sea kayak expeditions with well designed boats that are capable of storing the kit required for multi-day expeditions.

Expeditions are undertaken for numerous reasons – exploration/remoteness/viewing wildlife/personal challenges. I have always found, whatever the objective of an expedition, all of these become important during a trip.

As with any expedition in a remote location, the feeling of arriving at a campsite with only what you can carry either on your back or in a boat is unique, especially so from a canoe or kayak as the chosen campsite sometimes may not be reached by any other method. One of my personal favourite memories has to be sitting on a beach in Vancouver at the end of a day, watching a golden eagle flying above and a brown bear feeding in the seaweed further down the beach. However this may have been beaten when while paddling in a fjord in Western Greenland looking at a glacier calving into the sea, when a humpback whale surfaced about twenty yards away from our kayaks.

As with any journey in a remote location you will have rely totally on the equipment that you carry, so the preparation and planning are as important as the actual expedition. In this article we shall explore many of the key considerations in planning and organising sea kayak expeditions. When planning a venture many of the most important decisions are made well before anybody starts to travel. You need to consider where to go, how long for and how far you can travel each day. Will it be a one-way or a round trip? If one way, consider the dynamics of returning to the start. Can you get maps and of what type? All of this does not reduce the importance of dynamic decisions that have to be made on the day because of weather, group capability or indeed because of problems encountered earlier in the trip. **Do not be afraid to change plans: it is sometimes easier but less safe to continue with the original plan regardless of changing circumstances.**



GROUP SIZE, ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT.

Group size.

The group size is one of personal preference, but can be determined by the trips destination, with time, cost, accessibility and local regulations being factors – remember a small number of craft is much easier to manage, but a larger group, with a very capable ‘second’ does give the option of dividing the group to allow easier and more demanding day paddles. This can reduce the temptation to put less able or experienced kayakers into a situation where they are uncomfortable, just to please some members of the group. Think about the composition of the group: if possible group members should meet and paddle together prior to an expedition. Different people have different skills, both on and off the water.

The larger the group the easier it is for that group to become spread out so decisions made by the paddlers at the front of the group may not be correct for the paddlers further back.

When practising no trace camping, a smaller group is easier to accommodate with sites being easier to find for a smaller number of tents.

Single or Double?

From an organisation perspective, the number of boats is perhaps more important than number of people! 4 double kayaks are much easier to manage than 8 singles. Tandem craft also give flexibility to support either a weaker paddler or, in the case of injury or illness a journey can continue with a strong paddler paddling a boat almost solo. However solo boats carry more equipment and can make splitting the group easier. It is important to ensure that stronger paddlers are paired up with weaker paddlers if the double option is to be chosen.

COMMUNICATION

Within the Group

It is essential to have easily understood commands and signals: these should be discussed and practiced on flat calm water, or the beach. It is very easy to expect everyone to understand the signals that you have used for years – if you do not explain them they are not always obvious.

As a leader you need to decide and explain to a group what to expect and what to do early, as this gives people more time to prepare themselves. A discussion on dry land about the tides, weather, location and plan is always useful. When approaching an area of moving or rougher water, explain to the group what to expect and which line to take: the earlier you do this the more prepared a group will be.



With the Outside World.

Always inform someone of your plans. Leave a copy of your planned route, details of how many people/kayaks, the colour of the kayaks/tents/buoyancy aids, what communication equipment you carry etc. with either the company you are hiring kayaks from, or with someone else who will know you are missing and raise the alarm.

Always have a contingency – if you are using a mobile phone keep a spare or better still a VHF as well. **Remember electronics and salt water do not mix!**

I like to have levels of contingency – I will use the VHF, if that doesn't work I will use the mobile (or satellite phone depending on location), then flares, finally an EPIRB. I would never like to get to the stage of using my last means of summoning help. Always have an evacuation contingency.

SAFETY AND RESCUE, RISK MANAGEMENT AND AVOIDANCE

A sound knowledge of capsize drill, rescues and rescue protocol is essential before a trip. While the group leader will make the decision about any action in any given situation it is important that group protocol is organised before the trip. Ensure that everyone knows what to do (perhaps face the wind and waves, paddling gently to hold position) and to have a clear, easily-understood command to tell people to do this.

Remind people of the importance of keeping hold of boats and paddles. Empty boats drift very quickly in the wind, and move much quicker than someone in the water. It is very disconcerting to have capsized and to be in the water only to see your 'saviour' paddling away to rescue your boat first!

Ensure that everyone is wearing suitable clothing: remember how quickly you get cold once you are in the water, buoyancy aids assist with keeping people warm as well as with helping with floatation. In cold water areas it might be useful to practise a drill where half of the group immediately proceed to land and set up a tent or shelter and prepare hot drinks and food, then once the rescue is completed the remaining group members follow to the temporary campsite with the 'swimmer'. This reduces the time before a person can get somewhere sheltered warm and dry. If you plan to do this make sure at least one complete tent and stove is taken to the shore – starting to erect a tent only to find you only have half, while the rest is still out on the water varies between being frustrating and dangerous.

Remember that if one person is cold, others will be quite chilly as well. Other members of the group may develop shock, or take risks that make other accident more likely. Look after yourself and the rest of the group as well as the casualty, if nothing else it will help with group moral.

Don't rely on one person to sort out an incident – it may be that that is the person who needs assistance, so all members of the group should be able to rescue and as many of the group as possible should carry and be trained to use towlines.



EQUIPMENT, STOWAGE, TRIM AND REPAIR

Equipment

The amount of space available in a sea kayak is limited and everything has to fit in through small hatches. Remember to share – it is pointless for each paddler to carry a stove when several people could cook together. Think about what you are likely to need: can you use the same piece of equipment for several purposes, again spread it out between the group? Experiment beforehand, maybe drawing a packing diagram of what works.

Think about what equipment you need, personal should include paddling and spare clothing, and safety equipment. Communal should include, cooking, communication, camping, treats (sweets etc) as well as any little off water comforts.

Think about what you might need access to during the day, I carry a small first aid and repair kit in my PFD, as well as an EPIRB, radio and some sweets. But remember if you carry lots of kit the floatation may be compromised.

Where possible make sure essential equipment is carried in more than one boat, if someone has all of the fuel and that gets water in it the expedition will have to be abandoned.

Storage and Trim

When packing your boat try to load the boat so the heavier items are closest to the cockpit and close to the centreline, ideally low in the boat. Think about what it is essential to keep dry: your sleeping bag, spare clothing, first aid and matches being the most important. Some people find it easier to use lots of small dry bags, others fewer large dry bags which are packed once inside the kayak. Pack your boat so that any equipment you might require on the water is near at hand, and kit that you need immediately to set up camp is easily unpacked without unloading the boat completely. If you can, pack your boat so that some kit (or food) which is not required for several days can be left packed.

Because storage is limited it is very tempting to pack kit around your legs in the cockpit, but the risk of entrapment is so high that you should never do this. The amount of kit carried on deck should be limited – think about how anything carried would impede a roll, rescue or tow.

A laden sea kayak handles very differently from an empty boat, and it is much easier to hurt or strain yourself in paddling or lifting a fully laden boat – it is important that the team have paddled laden boats before embarking on a multi-day journey. The skeg, or rudder, is much more important when paddling laden boats, even paddlers who rarely use a skeg on day paddles are likely to want to use it on expedition. It is very easy to load a kayak so the trim is incorrect making the boat difficult to handle unless the skeg is used: once loaded it is much more difficult to alter the trim in a sea kayak than in a canoe. If unsure load your boat slightly bow heavy, at least this can be compensated for by using the skeg, a stern heavy boat is much more difficult to paddle.



Repairs

We all hope that nothing will need repairing – but on any multi-day venture something will wear or break. Duck tape, surfers' wax and ready-mixed epoxy filler should be part of all repair kits, but most importantly think about how to make repairs and ideally avoid situations where they will be needed.

In summary, training and well prepared emergency procedures are very important. The above paragraphs will hopefully give paddlers some ideas to build on and will help people start to plan a safe and enjoyable adventure.

COOKING AND WASTE

Cooking

Personally I like to cook communally, as it gets everyone together during the evening, it means as leader you can see how everyone is and see that everyone is eating. Let's be honest – dried expedition food isn't always very appetising and an expedition might be seen as the ideal way to lose weight. If you choose to cook individually or as tent groups find a reason to get together each evening, for each person to bring a small treat for whole group can be a nice idea.

Waste

When sea paddling there is rarely a need to carry out biodegradable toilet waste, but remember to toilet below the high water line or ideally into the water, then 'flame' the toilet paper, or for the adventurous use seaweed or perhaps a sponge. In areas of low rainfall it is important that all toilet waste is deposited below the tide line as liquid waste will quickly smell.

In areas of specific scientific interest, or some protected areas all waste may need to be carried out.

REFERENCE

The BCU handbook or the BCU website will provide information on many aspects of paddlesport.