

## INTRODUCTION

People paddle canoes, kayaks and rafts for a wide variety of reasons. Whether you prefer the thrill of paddling whitewater or surf, the adventure and solitude of exploring wilderness waterways, or the simple relaxation and exercise of paddling a local lake or river, there are basic practices that are essential to having a fun and safe experience on the water.

## I. Dress for Success

Always wear a lifejacket (personal flotation device or PFD) appropriate for the water activity, and dress appropriately for protection from sun, heat, rain, and cold.



### Lifejacket (PFD):

- Wearing a properly fitted lifejacket is essential for a safe paddling trip.
- Lifejackets should fit snugly and float you comfortably.
- Inflatable lifejackets should not be used for whitewater or surf activities.

### Clothing:

- Dress in layers using clothing made of synthetic fabrics such as polypropylene, nylon, neoprene and polyester fleece
- Carry extra clothing during cool or cold weather trips and store it in a waterproof container.
- Carry a waterproof jacket designed for splash and rain protection.
- Wear a wetsuit or dry suit when combined air and water temps total less than 120 degrees.
- Lightweight, synthetic, long-sleeved shirts and pants provide great sun and bug protection.

### Headwear:

- Wear a hat with a bill or brim to help shield your head and face from the sun.
- In cold weather, wear a synthetic hat or skullcap to prevent heat loss.
- Wear a helmet when playing in whitewater or surf to protect your head from rocks if you capsize.

### Footwear:

- Wear secure fitting river shoes or old sneakers to protect your feet from sharp rocks. Be careful to avoid shoelaces catching in or on the boat.
- In cold weather/water, wear neoprene booties or socks.

## II. Bring Essential Gear & Supplies

Besides having a properly outfitted boat and a paddle, you will need the following:



- **Water / Water Bottle:** Adequate hydration is imperative in any outdoor pursuit.
- **Sponge or Bilge Pump:** Both can be used to remove water from your boat, making your boat lighter and you more comfortable.
- **Dry Bag:** One or more dry bags provide watertight storage for extra clothing, food, cameras, camping gear, etc.
- **Food:** Eating provides the fuel you need to sustain energy and keep warm.
- **Sunscreen:** Use a waterproof sunscreen with a SPF of 30 or higher for the best protection. Sunburn is a serious risk on the open water.
- **Insect Repellent:** Mosquitoes and other biting insects like water even more than you do.
- **Whistle or horn:** A loud noise alerts others if you need help.
- **Throw Bag or Tow Rope:** A throw bag for whitewater or tow rope for open water - a nylon bag containing a coiled buoyant rope - is an essential piece of rescue gear.
- **First-Aid Kit:** Have a first-aid kit tailored to the trip and the health considerations of all participants.
- **Spare Paddle:** Carrying an extra paddle provides insurance should someone lose or break their paddle.

**GEAR DOESN'T HELP YOU IF IT BREAKS.  
TO HELP MAINTAIN YOUR PADDLING GEAR:**

- Keep it clean,
- Store it in a dry environment, protected from UV light, sources of heat, and vermin,
- Replace it when worn or damaged.

**Note:** Other gear may be needed depending on your specific type of boat and activity, paddling destination, length of trip, or local rules and regulations. Additional gear commonly used by paddlers include: spray skirt, extra boat flotation, paddle floats, compass, map, nautical charts, carabiners, flares, two-way radio,

portage yoke, knee pads, Personal Locator Beacon (PLB), and lights. State and Federal laws set specific requirements for some waterways. Make sure you know how to use the equipment you bring!

## III. Prepare In Advance

Some advance preparation and knowledge will make a big difference in the quality of your trip and the safety of participants.



- Know waterway characteristics before launching, including distance to destination, water level, speed of current, tidal influences and the presence of hazards such as difficult rapids, downed trees, or low-head dams. Guidebooks, resource managers, other paddlers and the Internet are potential sources of good information.
- Be aware of any weather conditions that might impact your trip, including upstream rain and snowmelt, fog, wind, or offshore storms.
- When planning a trip, consider the paddling skills, fitness level, health, and swimming abilities of all participants. Assume a conservative pace.
- Be able to effectively control and propel your boat.
- Make sure you know how to right and re-enter your craft in the event of capsizing.
- Plan for emergencies. Always know where you are and how to contact emergency services. Cell phones are not always reliable, especially in remote areas.
- Inform others (friends, family, resource manager) of your trip plan. Trip plans should include: name and address of trip leader, number in party, route information and anticipated time of return.
- On one-way trips, plan a takeout shuttle - typically a car placed at the final destination.
- Inspect equipment prior to EVERY trip.
- Load your craft properly. An unbalanced craft is hard to handle or difficult to keep upright. Keep weight low and centered for the best stability and craft handling.
- Knowing basic first aid, CPR (Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation), and be able to recognize the symptoms of hypothermia and heat illness.

## IV. Be Safe On the Water

Being safe on the water always starts with **wearing your lifejacket (PFD)**. In addition, please consider the following advice.



## Basic Safety Practices

- Recognize that federal regulations restrict paddling near military vessels and installations and that there may be restrictions near bridge pilings and other areas.
- Never go boating while under the influence of alcohol.
- Do not stand up in a canoe or kayak and avoid weight shifts that may cause capsizing. Whenever possible, keep points of contact with the boat when moving.
- Avoid paddling alone.
- Know your skill level and avoid weather or water conditions that exceed your skill.
- Constantly scan for potential hazards and changing weather conditions.
- Pay attention to signs and safety warnings.
- Set a reasonable pace so everyone can stay together.
- Avoid having loose rope in or dangling from your boat. They can rapidly become entrapment hazards.
- Never tie anyone in or to the craft.
- Recognize when others in your group are tired or having difficulty and adjust pace. Look out for everyone in your group. Designate a "sweep" boat to bring up the rear and make sure you don't lose stragglers.
- Communicate effectively on the water. Wind and water sounds can make hearing others difficult. Whistles and hand signals can help.
- Always be prepared for the unexpected flip.
- Sun and wind can be very dehydrating - make sure you drink plenty of water.

## Swift Flowing or Whitewater Rivers

Along with basic safety practices, safely paddling on swift flowing or Whitewater Rivers requires additional practices specific to these paddling environments.

- Make sure your boat has adequate flotation to prevent swamping in rapids.
- Be able to read water, recognize key river features, ferry across moving current, and utilize eddies.
- Know the difficulty level of rapids to be encountered and the recommended routes through them.
- Recognize and avoid hazards such as tree branches and other strainers, rocks, low-head dams, powerful hydraulics (reversals), and underwater obstructions.
- Avoid floating or paddling over a low-head (submerged) dam.
- Stay away from partially submerged trees, fences, bridge abutments or other in stream obstructions - these present a significant pinning hazard.
- Be practiced and proficient at self-rescue, craft re-entry, and using a throw-bag.
- Generally paddle on the inside of bends in the river.
- Lean into - not away from - rocks or other objects that pose a pinning hazard.
- Keep your craft under control at all times. Avoid drifting into others.