

Sea Kayak Safety

Safety is a relative and not an absolute. Therefore, we must ensure we are aware of the risks involved in sea kayaking and train and prepare accordingly.

Questions

- When did you last practice rescues in 'real' conditions - not on sunny days in calm bays? 2 months, 6 months or over a year ago?
- How long will you last in Scottish waters before hypothermia sets in?
- Do you carry any way of raising the alarm on your person?
- Do you consider the abilities of all your paddling colleagues before heading out to sea?

Beyond carrying 'lucky talisman's' like VHF radios or flares, there is quite a few things we can do to reduce the level of risk we expose ourselves to and to solve incidents before they deteriorate into the 'poo zone'. We can split the areas which we need to consider into 3 key parts.



Just remember 'PEE'

P.E.E.

People	Equipment	Environment
Fitness Nurition Dehydration - prior alcohol & caffine intake? Enough energy in body? Existing illness? Properly clothed Adequate spare clothing? Shore contact primed? Practiced rescues, bracing, towing and rolling recently?	Functional Waterproof Accessible - flares / radio from sitting in your cockpit? Practiced with it in 'real' conditions? In date Charged up Know what rest of your paddling buddies are carrying?	Swell Surf Fetch Wind speed Wind direction Tide Races Overfalls Wind Vs Tide Lee or weather shore No landing zones Water temperature Air temperature Parking / Access

Pre Float Checks

Do you have a routine before you head out paddling? If not it's a good idea to become a little bit like a regimental drill sergeant to ensure you remember to do everything as Neptune, Thor and Njord will catch you out if you even give them the smallest gap. Neptune, Thor & Njord are ancient gods (Norse & Greek) responsible for the sea and weather - more relevant rather than Murphy.

- Read or heard relevant weather forecast
- Aware of tides for where you are journeying
- Aware of any potential swell (weather from previous few days)
- Planned appropriate journey for prevailing conditions and people involved
- Checked your kit and ensure it's all with you
- Someone on the shore knows your journey details & ETA
- Checked route for 'bale out' beaches and harbours and point of no return for open crossing or exposed coastal section

'Pish Poor Preparation leads to a Pish Poor Paddle'

Pish - Good Glasgow slang for rubbish!

If things start to go wrong....

Don't make a mountain out of a mole hill. Nip problems in the bud and step back and ask the question is anything else likely to go wrong or have risks increased?

- Delegate if possible; don't commit all your resources
- One person take charge and provide clear leadership
- Think big picture; where's wind / tide taking us and where's nearest beach, cove or harbour to land at?
- Personal safety, group safety and then casualty's safety
- Don't wait until your right in the 'poo zone' to talk to the coastguard.
- Remember ABC but especially A - if someone hasn't got any airway they will have major brain problems after 3 minutes.
- If one person is showing signs of hypothermia then its very likely that other member of your group will be suffering too.

The 'Toys'

It's best to spilt the 'toys' into two categories:

- Those that raise the alarm (primary)
- Those that attract your rescuer's attention (secondary)

So should be aiming to have at least two 'toys' in both categories in order to give yourself a sporting chance of raising the alarm and getting back to terra firma. Remember if you can't get to it whilst your sitting in your cockpit - then it's in the wrong place....

Tool	Pro's	Con's	Cost
VHF Radio	Multiple opportunities to make distress call (50 - 75) Everyone with a radio on hears your call Coastguard get an instant fix on your position if they hear the call	Electronics + sea water = soggy circuits! Waterproofed units available. Low aerial height = limited range Need to be licensed (radio and operator)	£100 - 160
Parachute Flare	Major attention grabber Lasts for over 30 secs Fires to 300m hence greater visibility	Needs someone to see it and call coastguard It's a primitive firework at the end of the day Flares only have a self life of 3 yrs (chemicals become volatile)	£20 - 25

Miniflares	8 cartridges in the pack, hence multiple opportunities to raise alarm Slim-line pack size	Very difficult to operate with cold hands Not waterproof Limited height (80m) and duration (8 secs)	£20 - 25
Smoke Flare	Very potent visible flare	Duration and potency reduced in high winds	£10 - 15
Pinpoint Flare	Very visible at night or in poor light conditions Cheaper cost	Extremely hot flare with cinders. Will burn through anything...	£8 - 14
Mobile Phone	You get to tell someone what the problem is and exactly what you need Almost everyone owns one - convenience	One person to one person communication unlike VHF radio Difficult for coastguard to triangulate your position Not waterproof Poor reception out at sea level or at base of sea cliffs.	£20 - 200
Float Plan left with shore contact	The absolute fail safe. Gives the coastguard and rescue agencies a major head start and increases your odds of being found quickly.	Your shore contact needs to remember that you are overdue and do something about it.	2 / 3 mins
Whistle	Audible way of raising the alarm	If the only option you have left is to blow your whistle, you are up the creek.....	99p
Strobe	Very, very visible at night and low light conditions Cheap in comparison to flares.	Not much use on bright days. Battery powered so limited operating life.	£15 - 25
Bright coloured clothing with retroreflective tape sewn on	Helps your rescuers spot you. Retroreflective tape greatly aids your chances of being spotted at night	Sharks? Paddling buddies needing to wear sunglasses around you...	£Varies

The worst case scenario

The worst case scenario for a sea kayaker is to end up in water and separated from your kayak and or paddling buddies. This situation arose earlier off the Summer Isles, NW Scotland at the end of March 2005 and resulted in a mildly hypothermic paddler being airlifted to hospital. See the www.UKseakayakguidebook.co.uk (Almanac/Safety & Rescue/"Rescue of a Kayaker in the Summer Isles") for an incident report and discussion.

So what can you do to increase your survival odds and chances of being found?

- Adopt the H.E.L.P. (heat escape lessening position) - one hand over mouth & nose to keep spray and water at bay, arms close by body and legs crossed.
- Ensure all clothing openings are sealed up.
- Stay with your sea kayak; it's more visible. Tie yourself to it, if you're offshore.
- Attract attention from passing vessels by using your personal flare, strobe and whistle.
- Hope your shore contact hasn't gone to the pub for the night!
- Stay positive and focussed.
- Use your paddle as a signalling pole (bright blade colours or strips of retroflective tape helps) as does a paddle leash connected to you in the first place!
- Ensure you put a hat on your head to prevent heat loss. Black scull caps are a bad idea - bright colours increase your chances of being spotted. Remember when you in the water the only bit sticking out is your head! Reed is the only manufacturer on the market to produce a bright yellow scull cap at present.



Useful Resources

www.mcga.gov.uk - Maritime & Coastguard Agency

www.rnli.org.uk - Royal National Lifeboat Institution

www.ukseakayakguidebook.co.uk - UK Sea Kayak Guidebook; online forum & a variety of excellent articles and trip reports

www.seapaddler.co.uk - Sea Paddler; various articles

Sea Kayak Safety DVD - Olly Sanders & Leo Hoare

www.rockandseaadventures.co.uk

Sea Kayak Safety & Rescue - Doug Alderson & Michael Pardy

'Good overview of foundations of safety and how to rescue'

www.amazon.co.uk

Sea Kayaker Deep Trouble - Matt Bronze & George Gronseth

'A must read for any sea kayaker; analysis of 22 incidents and lessons learnt'

www.amazon.co.uk

Sea Canoeing & Kayaking Safety - Maritime & Coastguard Agency leaflet
'useful introduction to the topic and good advice'

Mcmurdo Pains Wessex (flare manufacturer)

Video clips of different types of flares being let off.

www.mcmurdo.co.uk

Scottish Coastguard Coordination Centre Phone Numbers

Emergency	999 or 112
Stornoway	01851 702 014
Aberdeen	01224 592 334
Shetland	01595 692 976
Clyde	01475 729 988
Forth	01333 450 666