

# Sea Kayak Safety and Rescue

## PART I



Safety at sea is one of the biggest concerns of everyone in the sea kayaking industry. Over the next four issues, Owen Burson is going to explain how we can stay safe in a demanding environment.

The range of rescues you and your group have at your disposal is only a small part of Sea Kayak Safety, more important is your experience and knowledge of the sea as well as an underlying respect for the environment that you have ventured into. A sea kayaker's skills need to be adaptable; consequently you need a wide range of safety and rescue expertise, well practised in a range of sea states. This, the first of four articles will outline the principles of CLAP leadership and SAFE incident management on the sea.





#### LEADERSHIP

Sea kayakers often go to sea to get away from formalised groups or being 'told what to do' by someone. Indeed some folk have an inherent aversion to being led. Paddling on the sea as part of a group does not necessarily require a formalised nominated leader as such, as long as either an agreed plan is being followed, with unforeseen changes of plan being discussed and agreed upon by all in the team or with the group having sufficient knowledge and experience of each other to just get on with it. However, when on the sea and decisions need making, they need making quickly – the sea in a worsening situation is not the place to operate by committee. Not being able to make swift decisions is often the thin end of the wedge to chaos. Reaching those decisions can sometimes be the source of many group making or breaking experiences, so it may be worth considering who will make the call if needed. This should be done before the trip commences as part of the pre-trip discussion.

#### THE CLAP LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

CLAP is used by, and in the training of, formal leaders and coaches. The principle is sound as a method of informal shared leadership often found between groups of friends travelling on the sea.

##### C - Communication

Hand Signals, Voice, Whistle, Paddle and Eyes – meanings must be understood by all within the group. A clear and simple briefing or pre-trip discussion should take place before everyone gets on the water to ensure everyone is singing the same tune.

##### L - Line of sight

If you have no line of sight between the group members you have no control in the event of mishaps.

**A - Avoidance** is better than cure. Individual/group awareness of the environment they are in. The level of commitment and possible consequences will facilitate an awareness that may well avoid the need for rescues.

##### P - Position of maximum usefulness

Is there someone in a position to manage/prevent the most likely incident – not the unlikely worst case doomsday scenario that may only happen once in a blue moon. This can often be achieved in an informal group by pairing up or careful positioning of an experienced paddler.

When rock hopping, surfing or when the water gets colder than expected group awareness can be improved by pairing up with someone. To have two pairs of eyes on each other can vastly improve the odds of mistakes or accidents being noticed and dealt with quickly before the situation escalates into something more serious.

#### INCIDENT MANAGEMENT

Like rescues, leadership and decision making within a team can be developed by exposing the group to progressively more difficult situations; this is sometimes done during the normal course of paddling, but how often are these



skills practised with any pressure involved? Try setting up some incidents; someone being sea sick, a holed boat with no landing places, tired paddler unable to stay upright, difficult landings or damaged hatch cover – how does your group cope and what strategies are in place? When training remember, high challenge-low consequences, plan your practice. The ability and knowledge to prevent incidents worsening is gained by the experience of dealing with the upsides that happen in a controlled way, so before we look at rescues we should take a look at an incident management framework.

**THE SAFE INCIDENT MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK**

**S - Stop**  
Take a deep breath and don't react instantly.

**A - Assess**  
Take a look around at what else is happening around you. What further risks are there to



me, the rest of the group and the casualty? What resources do I have to sort the problem out?

**F - Formulate**

What rescue/course of action is most applicable to the situation?

**E - Execute**

Do it, and then review it.

The review (debrief) process is a very important one if experiences are to be learned from effective and adapted thought processes being put in place either from an individual or a group perspective. Without going too far into the theory of Neuro-linguistic programming, the review process starts and can facilitate the positive reinforcement or elimination of actions or thoughts, for instance, have you rushed in to attempt a rescue only to find you are in the wrong place or set yourself up incorrectly and are making it difficult for yourself again? Repeated positive visualisation of an alternative course of action in any given situation will in most cases result in that alternative course of





action happening in real life. Simply put, if you positively visualise yourself looking for the front of the boat before paddling in, when confronted with a rescue you are far more likely to act in that way when it happens. Reviewing and reflection is where all change starts.

#### A LITTLE ON EQUIPMENT

Having the right equipment is essential for safety on the sea, but it's no good having 'all the gear and no idea'. There is no point carrying what you don't know how to use properly. In my opinion the most important piece of kit the average sea kayaker can invest in is a portable, high powered and waterproof VHF radio; it is of course worth noting that it is a legal requirement that you acquire a VHF operator's licence. These are a day's course usually costing around \$65 - look for your nearest RYA training centre; they will run a few every year. It is also a very handy tool for you to let your local coastguard know that you are about to start some rescue

practise! If you neglect to inform them of your plans you could well find your session being interrupted by the local lifeboat and helicopter search and rescue team who may have had a report of a group of sea kayakers in trouble from a well meaning passer by - it has happened!

#### AND TO FINISH...

Good teamwork coupled with experience based on these principles can minimise the chance of needing to use the rescue that will follow. That said, incidents and accidents will always happen due to no fault of the group or any individual, and the need to be well prepared and well practiced in your rescue will be essential to keeping your group in one piece and everyone getting home safely.

In the next three articles we will be looking at how to do the different sea kayak rescues - so prepare to get well



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Isle of Wight Sea Kayaking runs courses from beginner through to advanced and coach awards in Sea Kayak, White Water Kayak and Canoe throughout the UK, Ireland and beyond. IWSK run the widest range of courses in the whole of the south with some of the highest qualified coaches, the best locations and top quality equipment. For details of courses, trips and expeditions email enquiries@lew-seakayaking.co.uk, take a look at [www.lew-seakayaking.co.uk](http://www.lew-seakayaking.co.uk) or call 01983 209471.