

# Night Paddling

by Joanne Schwartz

We know that the Eskimo has a hundred words for snow, expressing the myriad of uses he finds for frozen water and the many ways it affects his life. And a Polynesian sailor has dozens of names for the wind, showing his knowledge of its strength and direction and of the consequences for the next leg of his inter-island sail. Perhaps it's a kayaker who can describe the nighttime sea.

Much night paddling is compelled by harsh circumstances and necessity. Arms heavy from the miles of our day's trip, we reach our planned landing beach. As we sit outside the surf zone, feeling the sets roll under us, the thunder of each wave breaking on the beach roars louder and louder. Instead of a welcome, we know that the dumping surf has raised a wall against our landing. It is safer to paddle on, even all night, until a more protected landing can be found. We share a little food to keep us going and paddle off silently. Another time, the return leg of a day's trip takes us into a strong afternoon wind. Salty spray blows against our faces as we battle the swell and chop. Our speed slows to about a knot and a half. Instead of a two hour passage from Baja's northern Todos Santos Islands to La Bufadora, the rebellious weather now makes the trip back take over five hours. And the last hour, along with rounding a point with offshore rocks and landing in the moderate surf, is cloaked in total darkness. We are careful, very careful.

At other times and for other reasons, we actively seek night paddling experiences. It's 6:30 on a Wednesday evening in early Spring. The wind had been gusting to 15 knots but it has died down to a whisper. We've just concluded a long work day filled with people and meetings, noise and haste. Chatting about the day's successes and problems, a friend and I unstrap our boats from our cartop rack and slip them over the edge of a little wooden dock near the harbor's mouth. The sea's face is calm and slick as glass as we glide away from the flashing red and green beacons at the end of the jetty. With the city lights and sounds now behind us, our eyes gradually acclimate to the night. We have an unobstructed view of the black expanse ahead. But, flashes and sparkles! We're in luck!

Every dip of our paddle blades into the invisible sea leaves behind an emerald green trail. I lift my right blade out, looking carefully, and notice that each drop dripping back to the sea is also bright green. Below my boat, off to the left, is a school of tiny fish, each trailing the familiar green sparkles behind as it swims past. I'm lost in my favorite fantasy world, unaware that my friend has become absorbed in the same light show up ahead. As I paddle hard to catch up, I delight in my bow wake, bioluminescent green against my white gelcoat hull. The minute phytoplankton are playing again tonight! When I join my friend, very little sparkle is left. We've passed through the dense area for now, but we know we can look forward to a shimmering finale to our evening upon our return.

As we head up the coast, my partner looks toward the sky and in an excited voice implores me to do the same. We both sit, still, silent, and breathless, eyes cast far into the darkest sky of the year. We're mesmerized by millions of twinkling stars bringing brilliant life to the void above. In awe, we raft up, passing paddles over both kayaks to lock them together. We look at each other and laugh, slink down deep into our boats, rest our heads on life vest covered combings, and trip into infinity in silence..... a long silence mellowed only by the sounds of shore break perhaps a quarter mile away. It was an hour, or maybe two, before we spoke again, totally absorbed in the comfort of our bobbing floats and the peace of the heavens above. This blackest of nights was a perfect backdrop for the sparkling bioluminescence of the water and the scintillating stars above. Yes, time to head back to the dock, ever so slowly and gingerly.

Whenever the moon is full and high in the sky, it is also cause to venture out for another exploration of the night. I like to paddle straight toward the Old Man in the Moon for maybe four or five miles. Straight out to sea, against the swell and current, if need be. The bright, silver-white moon overwhelms the distant stars and focuses our attention on his face in the Southern sky tonight. We paddle hard, perfect strokes, our stare focused on his, mile after mile. Our slight paddle splash at the end of each stroke is all that distracts us. Sweat runs down our salt-stained T-shirts. Hearts pound with a cadence twice that of our stroke. Moonbeams dance on the swells surrounding us, making it easy to orient each blade on the sea's surface. My friends speak very little, feeling comfort in being able to see each other so clearly under

this giant beacon far above. Having come far enough, we stop and laugh at our silliness in chasing The Man in the Moon. Time now to turn our yaks toward land again, letting the familiar city lights guide our way home. We talk intensely now, inspired by our private thoughts on the way out. We are rich this night.

Sometimes it is solitude I'm after. When a warm Indian Summer night in November coincides with a new moon, I pack a little bagful of chocolate chip cookies and a liter of water and head for the back bay, an estuary where fresh and salt water meet. The avian migration is in full swing so I know the experience will be perfect. Dressed only in a light T-shirt and shorts, I paddle along the cord grass covered islands and muddy low-tide shoreline of the wildlife refuge. After an hour, the sun begins to set so I pay my respects to the day's finale by facing West and toasting with my water bottle. Hues of orange and red now cover the darkened bay, leaving only silhouettes of limestone cliffs and riparian willows to keep me oriented. Paddling on, I see two back lit great blue herons stalking silently. As one finally notices me gliding toward him, he croaks a loud call and they both fly off with deep beating of their wings. A brown pelican, once endangered but now quite common here, stands one-legged on a channel direction post to my left and a flock of a hundred tiny sandpipers swarm in unison just above my head, first this way, then that way, in perfect choreography. The combined low frequency hum of their fast wing flaps sounds with a perfect Doppler effect as they approach and pass overhead. Silver mullet reflect the little remaining glimmers of light as they fly out of the water, splashing all around when I paddle over their school. Ducks quack from the shore, gently clucking as they nestle down for the night. A killdeer plover sounds his distinctive distress call as I round the point of his tiny islet. It is now so dark that I stick my kayak in the mud as I paddle close to try to catch a glimpse of him. I feel like this solo exploration could last forever, but my seven miles have offered me the relaxation and peace I sought. Some night I vow to stay in the estuary until the first rays of dawn nudge me to return to my day's routine.

We have surfed our specially designed surfing kayaks, short boats with flat bottoms and little fins, all summer. On this early September Thursday afternoon, my partner calls from a pay phone on the coast highway, near our favorite break, and says the waves are perfectly shaped, spilling on modest four to five foot faces. The age old cry of "Surf's up!" is all I need to drop my work, load our boats, and head for the coast. We slip into our wet suits and take time to stretch and loosen up before heading out through the three sets of breakers lining the shore. Yes, I crave sliding down the steep faces, carving turns as the wave's power carries me shoreward. It is a truly individual experience that the teamwork of two paddlers can enhance through spotting each other, cheering each other, and even surfing in formation. After we've been out an hour, the few other board surfers who were on the break with us earlier have all gone in. For just a couple moments, we pause to watch the crimson glow of the sun setting. The darkening sky accents the small white moon, already suspended high in the sky. The ocean is now all ours.

With each successive wave, our sight is lessened and the sounds of the crests breaking begin to guide our path down the face. Our control, strong and sure earlier, fades with our sight. Tuning in to the rhythm of the sets, I sense another wave coming so I paddle hard to take off right near its breaking crest. The crackle of the break gets closer and, looking over my right shoulder, I see boiling foam sparkle white in the moonlight. I cut a hard left, carving to stay right in the power pocket, then plunge down the face into the dark hollow at the bottom. I again cut left and look up just in time to see the glimmering white foam about to close out on me. As it crashes down, I thrust out ahead of the white and do another hard turn to kick out of the soup, landing in the calm, black safety of the back of the wave. Sometimes the dark is uncomfortable and even scary. My partner paddles up and signals that we should head to shore. As I nod my agreement, another wave looms up behind us. We both see it at the same time and spin our boats around to face it just as it begins to break in front of us. Paddling with all our remaining strength, we head up the face and over the lip, launching our boats into the air behind the wave and crashing down with sharp claps on the flat water behind the wave. We know we can no longer press our luck. A few minutes later we both land on shore, hearts pounding, and stand together to admire the glowing foam from the safety of the sand. Nighttime surf is the most powerful of all.

The nighttime sea demands a great deal from paddlers. I approach it cautiously at first and then with enthusiasm befitting the enchanting experiences it so readily provides. I love to sense the dark side of the sea, its sounds and motions, its silence and monotony, its myriad ways of playing with sun and moon light. It develops my balance, heightens my senses, and sharpens my responses. Nocturnal paddling offers some of the richest kayaking I've ever enjoyed - and some of the greatest challenges as well. And even though our language might not provide words for the various forms of the night sea I've discovered, these memories will stay with me forever.

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