

Solo Paddling Skills

by Joanne Schwartz

A paddler recently told a group of kayakers that he often paddles along the coastline solo. He described the wonderful feeling solo paddling gives him, inspiring others present to do the same. He paddles without a paddle float rescue device (and has never tried to use one). He carries no pump or bailer of any kind, not even a sponge. He has never practiced rescues since his beginning class a year ago where he assisted in ONE three person (H-I) rescue. Yes, he can swim (but has probably never, he admits, swam farther than a couple short pool laps). And of course, he keeps his PFD nearby, under his deck lines.

What would he do if he capsized and his boat swamped, I asked? He prefers not to think about that, he told us. After all, it has never happened to him. And it IS difficult to find friends to paddle with after work, yes, everyone agreed. He guessed he would swim to shore, towing his boat. What about big surf or the rocky coast he paddles along? Hummmmmmm.

Time for a bit of reality. Solo paddling is great fun and very peaceful. I have done a lot of it. But there is an increased level of responsibility a paddler assumes, both for his own safety and that of his boat. I believe in a very simple rule I learned some years back: never paddle in conditions and with equipment in which you and everybody else could not rescue yourselves if everyone capsized at the same time. Know your limitations and don't just naively wish (and pray?) that you will never make a tiny mistake and capsize. Sound advice for individuals and sound advice for groups.

Know how to rescue yourself. It is quite easy for most paddlers, given the kind of fairly calm seas in which most everyone paddles. It is tougher in rough conditions, but practice that too. In most open ocean classes everyone learns three or four different solo rescues. Take a class or read one of the sea kayaking books and go out with a friend and practice. Then practice in varying conditions, especially those conditions under which you are willing to paddle by yourself. And of course, develop your boat handling and bracing skills: these are really capsize prevention skills! Perfect an Eskimo roll. Knowing your limits and capabilities frees you to paddle with confidence and care. Just don't be blind to reality.

And a last word. Paddling with a friend or two doesn't ensure safety. The above rule still holds. Your paddling partners might not know how to rescue you, might not have the presence of mind or of mind or strength to rescue you, or might not be willing to rescue you when you need it (possibly prudent if you're dangerously close to rocks, for example). Encourage your paddling partners to keep current both on their capsize prevention skills and on their rescue skills, especially under the conditions you find yourselves paddling. Every paddler has a responsibility to the group and that responsibility increases when paddlers venture out to open waters where it is difficult if not impossible to swim safely to shore. In fact, that is a good and sobering experience too. Just paddle a half mile (or a quarter mile will do fine) off shore, well past the surf. Hop out of your boat (since you are now comfortable reentering and bailing) and practice swimming with your boat and paddle. Can you make it to shore? Few can. Again just learn your limitations and capabilities.

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