
Group Kayak Expeditions: Planning & Procedures

by Tom Holtey

Putting together a group paddle? Do it right. In this article Holtey outlines the details of organizing a group paddle, from choosing Lead and Sweep Paddlers to coordinating a "Float Plan."

Related Article: "[Group Kayak Expeditions: Formations & Communications](#)" Safety is a concern to all boaters and other outdoor sports enthusiasts, especially when on group excursions. By educating yourself and fellow paddlers of the possible dangers, admitting your limitations and being aware of theirs, and preparing with plans and equipment, you can eliminate most unfortunate situations. Maintenance, preparation, planning, and practice are the keys to good safety protocol. Here are some tips:

MAINTENANCE:

Inspect your equipment regularly for defects and damage. Leaks are the most critical thing to look for:

- Check the hull of your kayak for cracks or holes
- Inspect the gaskets of your hatches for wear
- Also look for a worn or poorly fitting drain plug
- Even a broken strap eye can cause a performance problem if it prevents the use of your knee straps.

Take care of this before you are on the beach to so that your companions and the launch are not delayed. Use a check list to make sure that all the necessary equipment is ready and also in good shape.

PREPARATION: THE FLOAT PLAN

Group organization is important to eliminate any confusion or miscommunication. A float plan is a good place to start. The plan should consider:

- Where and when you will be paddling;
- The starting place
- The ending place
- The route your group will take
- How many people are going
- Who they are.
- Let some responsible person, who is not going on your trip, know of the plan
- It would help if the plan is in writing

PLANNING:

Everyone needs to know the plan as well. Have a group meeting prior to launch in order to accomplish the following:

- Make the plan clear to all members
- Choose a lead kayaker and a sweep kayaker
- Assess each individual's strengths and weaknesses
- Paddlers should buddy-up with those who have similar paddling styles and speeds

Regular head counts while on the water is a good idea.

The **Lead Kayaker** should be a strong paddler, with experience and a good idea of where you are going. It is his job to:

- Lead the group, making decisions on where to go and where not to go
- Paddle at a pace that everyone in the group can keep up with

No one in the group should pass the leader.

The **Sweep Paddler** should also be a strong experienced paddler who might be inclined to paddle at a slower pace. It will most likely be this person who will have to assist a paddler in distress. They should have experience in kayak rescue techniques. It is the responsibility of the sweep paddler to:

- Have a well stocked supply of safety and signal devices
- Not let anyone fall behind them.
- Keep an eye out for the paddlers ahead of them
- Maintain the pace of the slowest paddler

It is helpful if the lead and the sweep can communicate via VI-IF radio or cell phone. It is best to keep the group close together but in some conditions that can be hard to do.

PRACTICE:

When planning a trip that involves several days paddling in areas unfamiliar to some of the group, practice sessions in varied conditions are a valuable idea. Holding surf clinics, for instance or rescue demonstrations; getting together for short excursions in wind and waves, etc. will make these conditions less challenging.

Maintenance, preparation, a plan that involves all members of the party, and practice will greatly reduce mishaps and confusion. There is always room in your gear bag for common sense, so bring it and use it on every trip.

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