

Staying Alive on the Water

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I've been thinking a lot about rescues. Maybe it's because every time I open a paddling magazine or view the list of topics for symposia, sea kayak rescue in all its guts and glory is dissected and nauseum. To add to the nausea, I thought I would weigh in. Here are some thoughts about that most humbling piece of paddling – saving a life.

Lemons Can Get You

If you haven't heard of Jim Raffan's model of lemons – it's the simplest trick in the book, yet most people don't use it near enough. Really briefly – every time you head out and forget to think about a possible risk and more importantly how you might lessen or get rid of it entirely – consider yourself in possession of a lemon. A common example is not knowing your paddling partner's skills – that's a lemon! Now imagine you've got yourself a couple, and you're trying to juggle them. Two aren't so bad, but hey – a couple more have just popped up. The juggling isn't going so well, and you're now in the land of accidents. Maybe you won't have one, but the likelihood is strong – all because you didn't destroy your lemons before they got out of hand. If all you ever think of when paddling is getting rid of these dastardly little fruits, your paddling life will likely last longer, which I imagine is a good thing.

Do No Harm

Don't go in for some heroic extrication if you're not reasonably sure of staying on top yourself. This means hanging your ego on that clothesline in the sky. You're likely not god's gift to kayaking so don't pretend. And you are no good to anyone if you're upside down in the drink.

A Bird in the Hand

Get whoever else is still on top in a position where they'll stay on top. It's a pretty dumb rescue if you haul somebody back in, but while your back is turned, two others go in the drink. How do you stabilize? With a skilled group, have them maintain sea position with each other into the wind. We call it a "hover" and it can also work fine with stern to wind, depending on the situation. Last thing you want is a group trying to round up going broadside to waves and current. If they can stern hover quickly, that's great – all depends on the wind and their skills. If you have an inexperienced group, it may be all you can do to simply get them to raft up. It won't be pretty, but they'll stand a better chance of staying right side up. The raft becomes a big sail, so you may have some chasing to do. If you've played your cards well, there's someone else capable of managing the group while you work the rescue. If not, consider yourself in lemon city.

Make Contact and Don't Let Go

Once you decide to go in, there's no half measures. Sometimes swimmer and boat are separated, and you'll have to make hard and fast decisions. Most often, you need to get the swimmer first – but if you can just as quickly get the boat to the swimmer, then consider it. It's not a lot of fun to deal with someone in rough water conditions if you don't have a boat to put them back into. Conversely, imagine proudly tagging the boat and then looking around for the swimmer who has just slipped beneath the waves. Whatever you decide, go fast – and once you've got them – don't ever let go.

Talk Loudly and be Tough

Think about it – as a rescuer you're in wild wind, crashing waves and this sorry dude is thrashing about getting colder by the second. He is not going to listen unless you're really loud, really clear and really direct. I've been on both sides of this and it's simply no time for your kinder, gentler side.

Bum in the Seat

This is where most rescue instruction starts – yet it's the most straightforward part of the whole affair. Too many bottles of wine and fine campfires have been wasted on endless natter about which rescue works best. Truth is, none of them work well in cold water, big waves and a scared swimmer. Pull whatever tool and trick you can to get their

sorry arse back in. Once in – don't even think about letting go. Who cares if the boat is full of water or you're about to wash up on a rocky coast. Your first priority is to simply hang on to them and sort out your next step. If you are a clever sort, you have someone in the wings able to tether on and get you and the swimmer away from harm. If you're not so clever, consider another lemon added. But there is always a good old contact tow, and when push comes to shove, it really works. About to tip over? Maybe you can bring another boat alongside your boat to add stability. It works and it takes a load off you – plus you've got someone else to blame if it all doesn't turn out so hot.

Dry Boat, Happy Camper and All's Well?

My you're a clever one aren't you. Things have calmed down and you're considering letting go – DON'T. When you least expect it, that's when your rescuee is apt to go over again. Hang on, share one of your soggy chocolate bars – do whatever it takes to pass the time. Only when you are absolutely sure that they are ok should you even think about letting them once again be the captain of their own ship. Sometimes you just don't let them - get the crew to shore for a cup of tea.

Speaking of Tea

This is one of the most powerful risk management strategies we have, yet not often talked about. Even old Nelson had a cup before he took out Napoleon's Navy at Trafalgar. In the end it didn't go so well for him, but he sure won the battle. The very act of gathering a group together, preparing and sharing a hot drink brings stress down, allows for critical thinking and gives you pause to consider the next move. You get a chance to check yourself and your mates for heat loss and emotional state – without making a big deal. Focussing a group's energy with a tea break will prevent a lot of wasted time and precious calories as you plan your next move. It saves lives.

Three B & E's

I use break and enters to remind me to squash lemons. No, I didn't do any that I remember thanks very much, but I sure knew what it meant when one of the kids on our street got busted for it. Before I head out on the water I do a focussed review of the following and think of it as a series of circle checks that I ask everyone to verbally affirm so we're all on task – much like a first aid situation:

- B ***Boat*** (bulkheads strong?, straps done up?, skeg working? etc)
- B ***Body*** (am I ready to go physically and mentally?)
- B ***Buddy*** (is my chum all set? Is the group clear on plans and do they have the necessary skills and judgement?)
- E ***Equipment*** (is gear complete and functioning?)
- E ***Energy*** (are we hydrated, full of calories and ready for the day – even if it involves rescue or route change)
- E ***Environment*** (are wind/waves safe to paddle, what about landing options? upcoming weather?)

What If.....?

This is a game I play a lot, imagining things that can go wrong, and mapping out how I would respond. It keeps me sharp yet relaxed – because instead of my imaginings going wild, I've thought about how I'll deal with it. I'm squishing lemons in my mind....before they spill out in real life.

The Leg Over Double Hitch One Handed Twirl with a SideTwist

Sure as shootin' the latest rescue will likely fall apart when conditions get bad enough. Be humble always - be loud when you need to be heard and quiet when you need to listen. Hang on tight and when you're finally on shore – give an extra squeeze to your camp tea with the squashed lemons, and thank your lucky stars.....