

When to Wear a Drysuit

Reflections on the Death of Douglas Tompkins

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Douglas Tompkins (photo from [National Geographic](#) by James Q. Martin)

Probably no sea kayaking death has ever received more public notice than that of Douglas Tompkins, the founder of outdoor clothing company The North Face. Tompkins died of hypothermia after his double kayak capsized in a storm in a lake in the Andes Mountains. There are innumerable news articles about the accident; [here's one](#).

Tompkins did the outdoor world and the environment great good, and we have no wish to cast aspersions on his memory. But his high-profile death from hypothermia demands an analysis, to help us understand the dangers and hopefully identify a solution.

Tompkins and all five of his paddling partners were experienced paddlers. He was not, however, dressed appropriately. It's reported that he was not wearing a wetsuit and that he may have been wearing a drytop, but even if so, he was apparently not wearing drypants.

Many whitewater kayakers who have a reliable roll wear drytops without drypants, depending upon their sprayskirt to keep water away from their lower body and their roll to avoid the necessity of a wet exit following a capsize. But should a wet exit be necessary, a drytop without drypants does not keep you dry. Water can enter through the torso opening (i.e., the waist). Drytops provide *no* thermal protection if you're in the water.

The North Face does not manufacture paddling drywear, and to the best of my knowledge, it never has. Nonetheless, as the company's founder, Tompkins made his fortune persuading outdoors enthusiasts about the importance of proper gear to avoid exposure, and he was probably more knowledgeable than most about the dangers of hypothermia.

So how did this happen? Tompkins and his colleagues apparently underestimated the potential danger of the situation, and overestimated their ability to cope with problems that might arise. Among the confidence-inspiring circumstances that probably influenced their decision to paddle without proper thermal protection were these:

- All six were experienced paddlers and outdoorsmen.
- They launched in calm conditions.
- Their planned route for the day was short.
- They remained close to shore.
- One presumes that their kayaks and other paddling gear were in good condition.

