

Know What You Know, Know What You Don't Know



We're in the midst of summer, and several times each week we're seeing news reports of accidents involving kayaks and stand up paddleboards. Most of these articles report on deaths (mostly drownings), but a few of them are about injuries, near misses, and successful rescues by the Coast Guard or other agencies. Most of these accidents are caused by paddler inexperience, ignorance, or poor judgment. Only a few are caused by things that an intelligent paddler couldn't have reasonably foreseen and avoided.

Of course we regret these accidents and sympathize with the people who have lost a family member, partner or friend. But most of all, this makes us angry and frustrated, because the great majority of these accidents, deaths, and rescues are so *easily* avoided. It only takes a reasonable assessment of a few factors and the most basic attention to safety.

Here's what you need to ask yourself and take account of:

- What is my skill level? Is it sufficient to handle any conditions that might reasonably occur?
- What conditions are prevailing and what conditions might be reasonably expected?
- Is my equipment adequate for any situation that might reasonably be expected?

Although the questions are few, the answers can be complex. For example, knowing what conditions you might encounter requires a good understanding of (depending on where you go) weather, ocean currents, tides, river dynamics, boat traffic, and perhaps a few other factors. Knowing what equipment will be adequate requires experience and knowledge of possible conditions and of the equipment itself, and the skills to use it.

But the very complexity of the second and third questions informs the first question and can make that a very easy one to answer. If you don't know how to assess conditions, if you don't know what equipment might be required, then *ipso facto* you are not capable of handling the situation. It's not possible to possess skills for situations that you're not familiar with or don't understand.

That doesn't mean you can't go paddling. It means that you paddle on in conditions that you do understand. Until you build more experience, that might mean that you only paddle in beautiful weather on well-protected waters and stay within sight of your launching site. It may mean that, regardless of conditions or setting, you do not go out alone.

It isn't hard to stay safe if you retain a consciousness of what you know and what you don't know. All that's needed is to be able to say to yourself "I *know* that I'll be safe." If you can't say this to yourself truthfully, with an emphasis on "*know*" rather than "think," then you're not acting with due regard to safety.

Other than that, there's one more thing that's fundamental to safety: you never, ever go out without a PFD (life vest). And that means wearing it, not strapped to the deck bungies. If you are highly skilled and you understand the possible risks, you know that you never go out without it. If you are a raw beginner and you don't understand the risks, then accept this as *the most basic, essential piece of knowledge* for paddling safety: you never go out without a PFD, regardless of conditions. Ever. We could go on and on about drysuits, signaling equipment, assisted rescues and other safety advice, but that one rule -- wear your PFD -- is key.

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For more information on water safety and drysuits, visit [Mythic Gear](#).