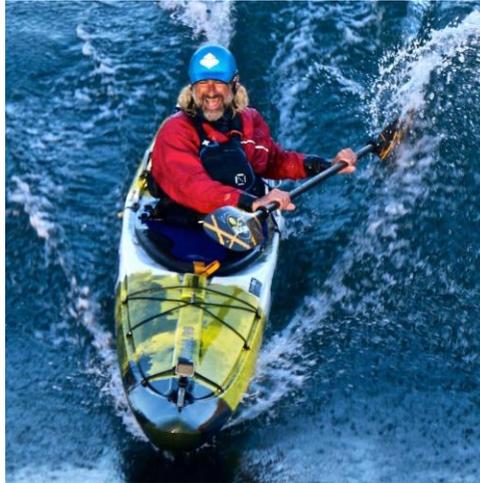


Guest Commentary:

My Most Important Personal Safety Gear

by Chris Audet



As a year round paddler on the coast of Maine, a drysuit is my most important piece of personal safety gear. With wintertime water temps that can go as low as the mid 30's any mishap that involves a body being in the water is potentially dangerous. In a drysuit in cold water you still feel the cold but you are dry, which is huge in staying safe.

Along with the drysuit comes the importance of what to wear underneath. I think there is no set formula that will work for everyone. We all know whether we run hot or cold and how the elements and our exertion level play in. Air temp, water temp, conditions and your own response to cold are all things to consider.

Most of us have heard the term "dress for the water temp not the air." I feel that depends on what you are doing and your proficiency in self-rescue. If you are surfing in dynamic waters and exerting yourself to the point of sweating, then you will have enough residual body heat to keep you warm as long as you can get back in your boat relatively quickly. If you are enjoying a leisurely flat-water paddle in cold temps then an extra layer may be required to keep you warm.

It is also important to know that while surfing in a kayak or paddling in rough water in general, it is unavoidable that you will be doused with water repeatedly even if you stay upright the whole time. So the ability to stay dry even if you do not plan on capsizing is paramount and can keep you from ending your day early due to the cold.

With the advanced materials our clothing layers are made of these days, it is possible to get maximum heat retention with minimal sweating and bulk. The lack of bulk in insulating layers has been most welcome in my drysuit wearing life.

The materials that drysuits are made of give us the opportunity to maximize performance as well. Breathable materials allow sweat to be exported without water being imported, so to speak.

Concerning breathable materials and salt-water paddlers, I have found over the years that salt can get into the fibers and clog the breathability of the garment, so be diligent in rinsing after each use in salt water.



Another note on drysuit care that I learned the hard way: if you turn your suit wrong side out to dry, then do so out of direct sunlight. The seam tape will delaminate after prolonged sun exposure. (In the winter I wear my drysuit in the shower to rinse it then hang it in the house over a large muck bucket to dry. In the summer I hang it in my garage where I have a dehumidifier running.)

There are also some quick field repair tips that I have found success with. I

got a small rip in the thigh of a drysuit courtesy of some rosebush thorns at a takeout. A small square of duct tape on the outside of the tear and another on the inside fixed the problem. The repair actually held for two years. I also repaired a broken zipper tab with a loop created from a zip tie.

As I said earlier I think that my drysuit is the most important piece of safety gear I own for cold weather paddling. When used with an appropriate layering system that works for you it can open up a whole new world of paddling options. With a drysuit, paddling is no longer just a seasonal activity.

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Chris Audet is a Master Maine Guide with a kayak certification, a Level 4 ACA Whitewater & Coastal Kayak Instructor, a BCU 4 Star Paddler and a Wilderness First Responder. He is certified in Swift Water Rescue and has served as an instructor at the Bay of Fundy Sea Kayak Symposium.

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For North America's best drysuit values and more solid information about drysuit use and care, visit Mythic Gear: www.MythicDrysuits.com