

The Chesapeake Paddlers Association Guide to the Support of Swimmers

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The Sea Kayak as Rescue Craft:

Native Americans developed the kayak as a hunting craft which effectively pursued marine mammals and swimming caribou. The modern sea kayak exhibits the same speed and maneuverability on the water and makes an easy transition from hunting to fulfilling a water safety role. More and more sea kayaks are being called upon to provide water safety rescue support for swim events.

This (2005) is the Chesapeake Paddlers Association's third year of providing such service to swim events. Because we encourage every kayaker in our club to be of service, please accept this as our guide to the ideas and practices of supporting swimmers with a kayak.



The Needs of the Swimmer: The primary goal of water safety is to preserve human life. Other assistance can be rendered such as resting support, directions, redirecting wayward swimmers, ensuring swimmers round the proper mark, and, sometimes, food and water. However, the primary goal is to prevent drowning. Under no circumstances should secondary activities interfere with the primary goal.

The race swimmer is a highly motivated individual who has decided to test their ability in a challenging event. There are often large numbers of swimmers aggressively maneuvering for position in a confusion of arms, legs, and whitewater. Sometimes a swimmer gets into trouble. Swimmers are not well instructed on how to summon help nor are they instructed (as of yet) on how to work with rescue kayaks. Hopefully a swimmer will have the ability to signal for help. However, it remains the responsibility of rescue craft to identify swimmers with problems and render assistance.

The Watersafety Team: Very seldom will kayaks be deployed as rescue craft without the support of powerboats. The goal is the effective use of all water safety craft as a team. The primary role of the sea kayak is to spot swimmers in need of help, get to them, offer help, and deliver the swimmer to a larger rescue craft. Each form of watercraft has its advantages and disadvantages. The kayak can maneuver in among swimmers and not be as great a danger. The kayaker is closer to the swimmers at water level and communication is better. Powerboats can carry swimmers quickly to shore, have radio contact, and sometimes have a better view of the swimmers. Of primary importance is that all rescue water craft work together as a team.

The Kayak Team: Experienced kayakers are used to working as a team. Kayaker teamwork is important because other rescue craft may not be knowledgeable of the kayaks abilities. It is not unusual for the beginning of a swim event to be confused. Getting on the water, identifying the course, and coordinating positions many times has to be done by the kayak team itself with little instruction from the water safety coordinator. Usually the more experienced paddlers will take charge.

How an Event Happens: It is important to know how swim events (usually races) happen. Swim events are sometimes singular events or tied with other activities such as running and cycling (triathlon). There is a start, a course, and a finish. The course can be a one-way straight line, a triangle, out and back, or a circle. There may be one big start or a number of spaced starts. Some events have spaced waves of swimmers each wave with a different colored swim cap.

We have observed that most races are divided into three segments that take place from start to finish. They are:

- The Herd
- The sit-and watch, and
- One-on-one.



1. The Herd:
When the race starts swimmers hit the water as a close, compact mass. Swim support can only be rendered from the edge of this mass. For a period of time this mass of swimmers forms a "Herd" with rescue craft patrolling the outside edge. It is a good

idea to position a kayak behind this mass at the start. Often problems happen right at the start - swimmers hyperventilate, or sometimes cramp up from the cool water. It is a good idea to position a kayak as drag until the start has stretched out and reached the positioned rescue boats.

Kayakers can observe swimmers best to their front and sides. It is standard routine to keep another kayak a distance in front of you so that you can watch behind them and hopefully someone is watching behind you.

2. The Sit and Watch: As the race continues, the swim mass stretches out with faster swimmers in front, a bulge in the middle, and slower swimmers bringing up the rear, depending on the course and the number of starts. As the swim mass stretches out it is usually most effective for rescue craft to strategically place themselves along the course and observe the swimmers. The kayak team will coordinate itself to make sure to best fill the gaps.

3. The One-On-One: As the lead swimmers finish the course leaving the slower swimmers bringing up the rear, it is usually most effective for kayakers to cover the stragglers on a one-on-one or one-on-a few basis. Eventually the last swimmer finishes and the rescue craft disperse.

Your Qualifications: Swim events are held on a variety of water types. The majority are protected water such as lakes and tidal rivers. Others cross the Chesapeake or are ocean races. Your skill level can be matched to the type of water. We would recommend participating in protected water events to gain skill before attempting open water events. If you are unsure, get another paddler to be your partner. The basic skills include being able to maneuver your kayak, handle moderate wind and waves (10 knots and 1 ft waves), and to be able to do kayak rescues. Also, you need to be able to do an effective low brace with a swimmer on front of your kayak.

The Observing Role: It usually boils down to the situation that you are alone on the water overlooking a large number of swimmers. There are many other support boaters and kayakers near and you are all aware of what each other is doing but in many ways you are on your own. Your first job is to be observant. We believe in aggressive observation and patrol. It has been our experience that the passive sit and watch attitude is not for us. We are as sharks on the water.

Observing is an art. Do not expect a swimmer in need to send you a clear signal. Some of the things to look for are: swimmers that seem to be slower than the pack; swimmers that keep swimming off to one side. Watch for someone swimming towards a boat. Watch for conversations between swimmers. Keep your ears open for audio signals and of course watch for someone waving to you. Observation must be constant. This is not a social occasion: Even when paddling with a partner, keep to the business at hand. Position your kayak near people who seem to be having a problem. If necessary ask to see how they are doing.

The Rescue: There comes a time when you see someone in need. Sometimes it comes almost as a shock that all of a sudden there a person who needs you in a very big way. There is an instant adrenalin flush and you stroke strongly towards this swimmer. Most rescues are bow on. A lot are with the swimmer facing you. Watch your approach. It is best to quickly slow with a low brace and swing the very front portion of your bow to them from their side so that they can grab on. Hopefully once they grab your bow this panic will stop. If you tell them to grab the bow, remember that some swimmers do not know what a bow is, so just say "Grab On". The greatest danger is that they will try to climb on

up the kayak towards you. Talk to them, calm them, instruct them. Tell them to stay at the bow. If necessary use your paddle to hold them forward. All the time keep a good brace going to steady the boat.

Intelligence must be used in ascertaining the need of the swimmer. Some swimmers just need a short rest. Others have had it and want very much to get out of the water. If you decide to get this swimmer to a larger rescue craft maneuver your kayak to clear water and signal a power boat. Most likely they will immediately respond. You can paddle (forward or backwards) either with the swimmer on your bow especially if you want to keep an eye on them or you can have them move to the stern.

In our experience, it has never happened that a kayaker has had to wet exit their kayak to effect a rescue. It is certainly not required that you dive in to grab a drowning swimmer who is unable to grab your bow. Only you can determine if you are willing to take this risk. This gets into a different form of water safety and training that is better left to other organizations.

A Final Word: It is our feeling that the sea kayak has the potential of being a superb rescue craft. We also feel that there is a tremendous need for them. Kayakers that support swimmers perform an important service and we think highly of those that do. As a member of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association, Inc., we invite you to join us
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