

The Chesapeake Paddler



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Reflections on the history of the CPA



The Chesapeake Paddlers Association got its start in the late 1980s and early '90s by a group of pioneering sea kayakers led by Chris Conklin and Ron Casterline. Some of the early group included, from left, [unknown paddler], Jerry Collins, Greg Welker, Barb Conklin, Chris Conklin, Diane Dickey, Les Dickey and Ron Casterline.

By Greg Welker

Over the last several years I have apparently become one of the few sources for the history of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association (CPA). I think I ended up as the default historian simply by being about the last full-time active paddler from the original group that made up the early years of the CPA. Last summer I found myself sitting at the Pier 7 Pirates after paddle dinners telling stories of how Pier 7 started, or on the forum explaining how the weeknight paddling groups became known as “piracies.”

Now, I realize that I may be the of the only ones around who remembers some of our history and I think there may be at least some entertainment value in writing some of it down for posterity, or at least for the newsletter. However, since I did not start with the club with the intent to write a history, I will need to make a few disclaimers here in the beginning.

What I am writing is based on my experiences, what I have seen, heard, and been told over my years in the club. While a fact-filled, footnoted account of the club history would be great, there isn't that much actual documentation.

Between Jenny Plummer-Welker and myself we have a fairly solid collection of club newsletters that go back to about 1997, and I have some that go back further. I also have copies of old CPA newsletter articles that I have scanned and saved over the years.

I have been lucky enough to have some photos of early club events, and even some old emails as the club first started communicating on the world wide web and by email. Another original source item I will use in this writing is my kayak trip log, where I have recorded essentially every time I was in a kayak since buying my

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first boat.

I will also do some legwork and see if my memories match those of other long-time members with whom I am still in contact. However, reader be warned, the memories of those of us who are older club members are sure to have a few glitches and blank spots that will become apparent.

I suspect that some items of history will always have as many versions as there were participants in the actual event. So, with all of these caveats, I offer my account of the *Chesapeake Paddlers Association History – To the Best of My Recollection*.

I start sea kayaking and meet the CPA

I have long been active in the outdoors, whether backpacking, cycling, or hiking. In the mid-1980s I became interested in bird watching and wildlife photography. As my photographic interests began to focus on waterfowl, I found that I needed a way to get closer to the birds in the marshes and swamps. In 1990, I began to research my options for watercraft. Canoes were one option, but I felt that they would not be able to handle the open water I would need to traverse to reach many of the areas where the birds would be found.

I started looking at sea kayaks. At that time, sea kayaking was essentially unknown in the Chesapeake Bay area. For boat purchases, the retail options in the Washington DC area where I was living were limited to essentially REI and Hudson Trails. The common plastic boats available at the time were Aquaterra's Chinook and Spectrum. REI carried two glass boats – Current Design's Solstice (there



Early CPA trips established the basic principles of safety that endure today. From left, Greg Welker, Joq Martin, Dave Mood and Don Polakovics get ready to launch at a 1996 trip from Broomes Island.

was only one version then) and the Pisces.

After reading the few books on sea kayaking I could find (remember – no internet back then) I decided on the Pisces as my boat of choice. I purchased the boat in April of 1991. The next weekend found me at the Allen's pond, the neighborhood duck pond. I put the boat in the water and STEPPED into the boat. Luckily, the resultant fall landed me in the cockpit and not in the pond. So began my sea kayaking.

Two kayak trips later I was paddling out of Piscataway Creek and north on the Potomac River when I saw another sea kayaker in the distance. You need to remember, sea kayaks were rare – this was the first time I had seen another person with a sea kayak! We met on the river, and the paddler told me about a group called the Chesapeake Paddlers Association. He told me the phone number to call for information about the club, and I repeated it to myself for the next two hours all the way back to my parked vehicle where I could write it down.

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The author's first sea kayak, the Current Designs Pisces. Kayak models and dealers were limited in the early 1990s.

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To this day I don't know who that lone sea kayaker was that I encountered. After getting home I called the number and ended up speaking to a gentleman by the name of Chris Conklin. We talked about the "new" club, how to join, and I was invited to my first CPA club paddle. So started my association with CPA and the sport of sea kayaking.

My first trip with CPA was similar to the experiences of many people paddling with the club for the first time. Not only did you need to learn new faces and names, but you had to learn the gear, the boats, and how to paddle.

On that first trip out of John Firth's house on the Gunpowder River Delta, one individual stands out for me for the patience he displayed. Steve Fleming and his wife both paddled, and Steve took the time to patiently paddle alongside me trying to teach me how to paddle.

I don't know how many times I ran into his boat, but he kept at it until I finally figured out how to paddle straight. Other individuals in that first paddle or two were Chris and Barb Conklin, Les and Diane Dickey, Ron Casterline, Mike Hughes and Chris Holtz among others.

The origins of the Chesapeake Paddlers Association

CPA formed in the late 1980s and early '90s during the very early days of sea kayaking in the Chesapeake. These were the days when sea kayaks were so rare that when you saw someone drive by on the beltway with a sea kayak you very likely already knew them. If you didn't recognize them you turned around and followed to meet them. Sea kayakers were rare and were generally very independent people. My understanding is that the idea of forming a club in the Chesapeake Bay area began when Chris Conklin and Ron Casterline met each other.

I've never been clear on how the two of them met, although Ron had been sea kayaking for a while in the New England area before moving to Maryland. In the July



Skills development and mentoring were also early priorities of CPA. Jenny Plummer-Welker practices rolling as Diane Dickey looks on.

1992 newsletter Chris notes that he has been paddling for five years, making his start in sea kayaking about 1987. Chris first started collecting the names and contact information for fellow sea kayakers back in 1988 (as noted in the July 1993 newsletter).

In many ways Chris and Ron were the two original pillars of the club. Chris was the visionary and group leader who had the goal of a sea kayak club that spanned the Chesapeake Bay area.

Like any good leader, he constantly reinforced in us the club vision and the key components of safety, group trips, and organization. It was Chris who did the paperwork of keeping the member list, typing and xeroxing and mailing the newsletter and its calendar of club events. Ron was the skills teacher, the one who stood beside you as you learned wet exits, talked you through rescues, and spent countless hours teaching me to roll.

Unfortunately, I got to do my first wet exit before I got my first lesson on how to do one. If you think your first wet exit was scary, try doing it for the first time when you had only read about how to do it! Ron was paddling beside me, he put me back in the boat using a two-boat rescue, whereupon I did my second wet exit because of the sea nettle that I sat on when getting back into my cockpit. My kayak log reads:

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"3 hours @ Cray's (Carr's) Wharf down off MD-214 with the Chesapeake Paddlers. First accidental capsized while surfing a wake. Reentry by use of 2nd kayak. Easy. Nettle sting. 6 miles."

I remember soaking in the bath tub a long time that night ...

As I mentioned above, Chris Conklin was the editor of the newsletter and the keeper of the membership list. He was also the treasurer, and what later became known as the "Coordinator" of the club. When a new member joined the club for \$10/year, they would receive the most recent copy of the membership list, which came out once or twice a year, and a back copy or two of the club newsletter.

The newsletter would typically contain trip reports, the calendar of events, and an article or two by Chris on topics such as swim support strategies, group trip rules and organization, safety standards, etc.

It was through the newsletter that, as a club, we put in writing the practices we were learning through the school of hard knocks. The newsletter also put in writing for the club what were becoming the standards for trip leading and club safety. The May 1992 newsletter contained the following article on group trips and minimum standards:

Notes on Group Trips and Minimum Standards

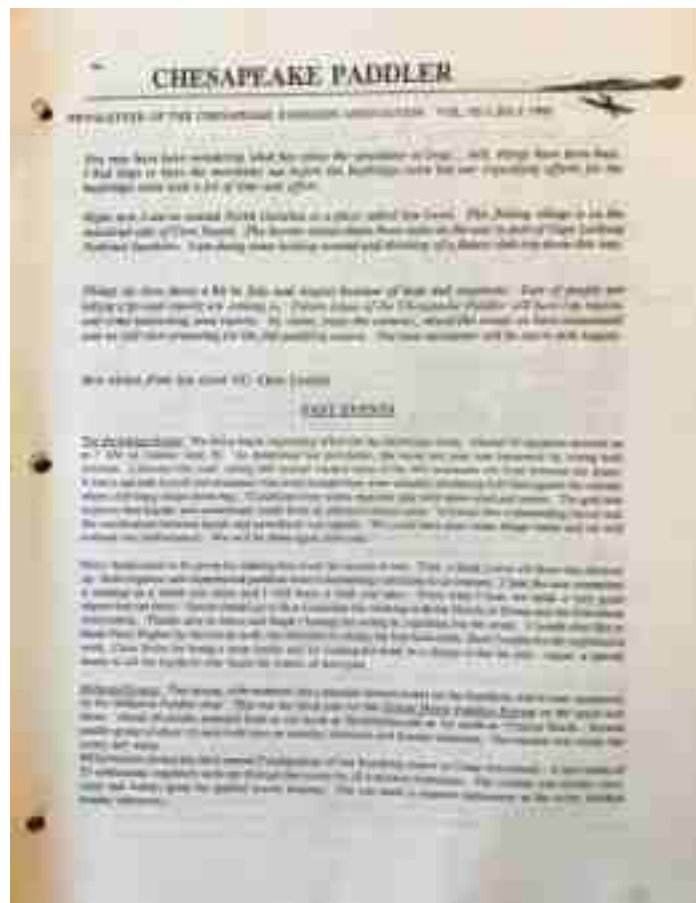
By Chris Conklin and the Chesapeake Paddlers Association

GROUP TRIPS

A paddle group is two or more kayakers (6-8 seems good). Groups can be loose informal impromptu gatherings of paddling peers, more controlled announced club trips, commercial trips, or highly controlled instructional activities.

It is your decision to paddle with a group. By deciding to paddle together you acknowledge a common bond which involves a group decision making process, a concern for the welfare of fellow paddlers, and an acceptance of minimum standards.

Joining a group does not relieve you of personal responsibility. You have the right to say no. If you



Early CPA newsletters were simpler in layout but covered similar topics such as supporting the Bay Bridge Swim, a paddlers retreat and a sea kayaking course.

feel uncomfortable or that the situation is beyond your capabilities, inform the trip leader.

A group trip may have an individual or individuals because of greater experience or for other reasons can be thought of as trip leaders. There are numerous of trip leading styles. And these styles can vary with considerably. There is a range of decision making possible. Trip leaders and experienced paddlers may make the decisions. There may be a group consensus process. Consultation with less aggressive paddlers is important.

In traveling as a group it is usually a good idea to make sure all paddlers know the destination and route. Distance separation between paddlers varies with conditions. In less demanding conditions greater separation is tolerated. As the situation becomes more challenging there is a necessity for a group to keep in closer contact.

When there are differences in paddling speed, faster

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paddlers need to slow down to stay with the group and slower paddlers need to work at keeping up. Sometimes trip leaders may make special arrangements when great differences in paddle speed exist. Trip leaders often assign lead and drag paddlers. Have a plan if separation occurs.

In route, never leave a group without permission.

The three most common tension increasing incidents on a group paddle are: 1. Paddlers separated from the group. 2. Group crossing of traffic channels, challenging water conditions, or open water crossings. 3. Capsize procedure: one or two boats help - others depending upon instruction will either raft-up, head into the wind, or seek shelter.

THE EIGHT MINIMUM STANDARDS

1. *It is your responsibility to make sure your boat and equipment are in good repair and available before a trip.*
2. *Except in the most benign conditions, PFD and spray skirts are worn at all times while on the water.*
3. *You are required to have a PFD, spray skirt, paddle float, and pump. Other gear may be required depending upon the type of paddle.*
4. *You are required to know and practice individual and group rescues.*
5. *Dress for the water temperature.*
6. *Let someone know where you are going.*
7. *Stay with the group.*
8. *Know your capabilities and limits.*

It is in this article that you can see the formulation of the current club safety rules and trip leading ethos. You have the idea of trip leaders, lead and sweep (called drag in the article) paddlers for a group, and the idea that you paddle to the least common denominator of the group's speed and skill. The eight minimum standards reflect the beginnings of the minimum gear requirements, self rescue requirements, and dressing for the water.

The newsletter also carried trip reports, such as the one below from the December 1991 edition.

It was a great event. Even back then we were hitting up local outdoor stores for giveaways! Unfortunately, High Island no longer exists, having eroded below the waves as is the fate of many of the islands that were in the Chesapeake.

An enduring legacy

If you have paddled with CPA for any length of time you can see Ron and Chris' legacy within the current club. It's there in our core values for group values and safety requirements and for teaching new paddlers.

Many of CPA's early members have moved away from the area or on to different stages of their lives. The last time I saw Chris Conklin he was out riding his motorcycle and scouting new launch locations for himself and Barb. Ron Casterline retired to the beaches of North Carolina and I get the occasional holiday card from him. Les and Diane Dickey are retired and living in southern Maryland and keep track of CPA via our Facebook posts. ♦

(Future issues: History of CPA Piracies)

An early trip report from the CPA newsletter in December 1991.

High Island Paddleout Picnic and Rodeo Saturday Sept 21: This event comes under the heading of "something different". About twenty paddlers showed up on a beautiful clear and the seasons first slightly cool day for the first annual (I sure hope we have another) High Island Paddleout Picnic. This was Ron Casterline's idea and it took us a year to get it scheduled and it turned out great. High Island is a small island on the Rhodes River about three miles in from the Chesapeake. There are two launch sites within a mile of the island: Carr's Wharf and Chotes Wharf. This gave us double access to the island and paddlers launched from both wharfs.

We had a spectacular pot luck picnic. Ron then started pulling events out of his bag. We started with a short race a quarter mile out around a floating dock and back. Ed Schramken and Tom Hartnack came in first and second in Seda Gliders. Judy McClasin and REI kindly donated prizes for the events. Everyone got orange whistles and various other prizes. The next event was a relay using hand paddles. The third event was a tennis ball pick-up, Barb Conklin pick up the most tennis balls getting a mini-hammock prize (...ok...she had help from an xxx anonymous downer paddling a green orion - the mini-hammock Barb won has been seen hanging between trees on tropical islands in the Florida Panhandle). We did not have time for the kayak tug-a-war which I was looking forward to. Eventually wanderlust took hold and we all paddled to the Smithsonian Reserve leaving the island to the Indians. Later we reluctantly left the island each heading to their landing. This was a great event and thanks Ron for organizing it.