



UNITED STATES COAST GUARD
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

MARINE SAFETY ALERT

Inspections and Compliance Directorate

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Safety Alert 07-96

SEA KAYAK SAFETY ADVISORY

In May of 1995, a group of sea kayakers paddling near Harpswell, Maine unexpectedly encountered strong currents that resulted in three kayakers being separated from the group and set out to sea. While their friends were set offshore, the main group was able to land their kayaks on a small island. Because a member of the group now ashore carried a signal mirror, the group was able to attract the attention of persons on the mainland, who in turn notified the Coast Guard. Based upon information from persons ashore, an intensive 5 hour effort was launched that eventually located and recovered the missing kayakers. This incident underscores the need for proper planning and signaling equipment, and revealed some of the inherent difficulties in mounting open water searches for objects as small as sea kayaks.

Based upon this incident and the tremendous growth in popularity of sea kayaking along the Maine coast, the U.S. Coast Guard reminds all sea kayakers to carefully consider and adopt the following procedures to increase their safety:

Voyage planning: When planning a voyage, no matter how short or simple you intend it to be, take a few minutes to leave a float plan, including departure/arrival times, number of people and color of kayaks with a responsible friend. If it's a spur of the moment trip, write a plan just before you go and leave it in an envelope marked "FLOAT PLAN" on the dashboard of your vehicle. Make sure to *always* monitor the weather before and during your trip.

Know your limitations: You alone are the best judge of your own physical limitations, the capabilities of your kayak, and most importantly, your ability to operate your craft and gear. Respect the indiscriminate power of the sea along the exposed Maine coast, and carefully avoid operating in restricted visibility, including fog, rain, and darkness.

Choose your gear carefully: Make sure your kayak and paddling gear is in good condition. Properly dress for the prevailing conditions and include extra clothing and provisions to allow for changes in weather, no matter how nice the day appears. Make sure you've prepared for emergency situations by including safety equipment such as pumps, sponges, a survival knife, paddle float, and most importantly, a high quality, high visibility personal flotation device.

Signaling capability: Sea kayaks are exceptionally difficult to see from a distance, especially in marginal conditions. Compensate for this fact by choosing brightly colored sea kayaks and clothing, use retroreflective tape and carry advanced signaling equipment. In a sea kayak you're disadvantaged by size. Buy the most advanced signaling equipment available. At least one kayak in a group should carry an electronic communications device, preferably a VHF marine radio or cellular phone. All kayaks should carry a whistle or air horn, signal mirror, and strobe light.

Commercial vessel traffic: Stay well away from commercial vessels, and avoid crossing channels and thoroughfares, especially in restricted visibility. Large vessels often cannot deviate from their course and fishing vessels should be expected to operate on highly erratic courses as they tend gear. Advanced grade flares such as this hand flare can greatly increase detection.



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