

# Kayaking Safety

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with contributions from the BASK membership*

**If you only read one page on this website, make it this one.**

The following is a general statement adapted by Sacramento Sea Kayakers with permission of the Bay Area Sea Kayaker's regarding sea kayaking trips and safety. There are also suggestions of some specific skills important for paddling in certain areas (such as the open Bay, exposed coast, etc).

Our intent is not to dictate a set of rules or to tell anyone how or where they should paddle. The purpose is to inform new members, and remind all members, of the way our trips function and of what we consider to be a relatively safe way to sea kayak, based on a considerable amount of past experience. This is open to review and revision. If anyone has any better ideas, please make them known to the Sacramento Sea Kayaker's Safety Officer, Richard Welch.

Our goal is to function as safely as possible. However, be advised that risk cannot be entirely eliminated when paddling a kayak.

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## Personal Responsibility

- On any SSK trip, **each and every participant is responsible for his/her own safety**. Use your own judgment. Never blindly follow anyone into a situation you are unsure about.
- **Be prepared to take care of yourself**. This does not mean that the other members of the group won't assist anyone who needs it, but such assistance should never be taken for granted, especially in difficult conditions. Be aware that, despite all good intentions, there is always a real possibility of being separated from the group.
- **Be sure your skills are adequate for any given trip**. There is nothing wrong with bailing out at the put-in; everyone has done it.
- **It is up to each and every participant to know the trip agenda**. Use a map or chart, carry a compass, and consult with the trip host if you are not familiar with the area. Approach the trip as if you were planning it. Trip hosts have been known to screw up or bail at the put-in; don't be over-reliant on them.
- **Assume that benign conditions will deteriorate and always be prepared for the worst possible scenario**. Also be prepared to take advantage of conditions that turn out to be better than expected.
- **Make sure you have the appropriate equipment for the trip**. Check to be sure your kayak and other equipment is fully functional and in good repair. In cold water, wear a wetsuit or drysuit. Always wear a helmet in surf and ocean rock gardens.

## Trip Initiator/Host

- **The trip initiator is the trip organizer, not a tour guide.** Commercial outfitters get paid to be responsible for their customer's safety. Sacramento Sea Kayakers is a club, not an outfitter, and does cooperative, not guided, trips. Trip initiators are no more responsible for the safety of others than anyone else in the group. Everyone has to paddle their own craft; a "leader" can't do it for them.
- **Trip initiators are not responsible for evaluating participants' kayaking abilities.** However, they have the right to eliminate anyone who they feel is not prepared with the adequate skills for the particular trip. Participants should evaluate their own skills, but try to be realistic; it might save embarrassment later when you become the subject of a safety talk.
- **The trip host can organize (or not organize) the trip in any way he or she wants.** Feel free to talk to the initiator beforehand to find out how the trip is to be structured. If you don't like the way a trip is organized, you can always initiate your own trip and do it your way.

## Skills

The following list of skills is not all-inclusive or absolute. Judgment and common sense are as important as any of the skills listed below, but are more difficult to quantify objectively. Assess your own skills honestly. This is only a general guide of suggested skills for various areas.

### For the easiest SSK trips in sheltered water:

1. Previous basic instruction (beginning class or equivalent).
2. Ability to perform basic paddle strokes with reasonably good boat control
3. A working knowledge of assisted rescues.

### For exposed areas of SF Bay, including any crossing longer than two miles:

*The above plus:*

4. Ability to paddle with good boat control in 2-3 foot chop and brisk wind while traveling in any direction.
5. Knowledge of tidal currents and overall wind patterns for the area you are paddling.
6. Ability to hold a course during crossings, taking wind and current into account, using ranges and/or compass.
7. Ability to paddle several miles without becoming totally exhausted.
8. Knowledge of shipping lanes and ability to deal with boat traffic; familiarity with "Rules of the Road".

### For the Open Coast:

*The above plus:*

9. Ability to launch and land though surf.
10. Ability to paddle in large seas (6-8 feet or larger) and strong wind (15-25 knots is common in northern California) in reasonable comfort.
11. Good boat control in rough water and following seas; good balance and reflex bracing.
12. Eskimo roll or reliable self rescue skills.

The best way to learn most of these skills is in a "controlled" situation: Take classes from one of the local outfitters listed in our Links section, attend SSK skills practice sessions and workshops, practice in areas with easy bail-outs, and fine-tune your skills (especially strokes) on easy trips. Above all, take your time, learn in increments, and have fun.

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