

# ACA Safety & Responsibility Code for Paddlers (version 2.0)

## Safety

### Basic Safe Paddling Practices

- 1) Always wear a properly fitted PFD (lifejacket) while on the water.
- 2) Never go boating while under the influence of alcohol.
- 3) Do not stand up in a canoe or kayak, and avoid weight shifts that may cause capsize.
- 4) Avoid weather or water conditions beyond your skill level.
- 5) Be able to effectively steer and propel your boat.
- 6) Never float or paddle over a low-head (submerged) dam, fallen tree or other in-stream obstruction.
- 7) Dress appropriate to weather conditions (including air and water temperature).
- 8) Do not paddle alone.
- 9) Inform others (friends, family, resource manager) of your trip plan.
- 10) Carry a supply of food and water adequate for your trip length.
- 11) Learn about your route in advance, especially potential hazards.
- 12) Never overload the boat with more weight or persons than it is designed to safely accommodate.
- 13) Plan for emergencies.

### Additional Safety Skills

- 14) Learn how to self-rescue in the event of capsize.
- 15) Be proficient in proper paddling technique and learn to read the water.
- 16) Only take on challenges for which you are physically and mentally prepared.
- 17) Learn rescue skills necessary to assist others in your group.

## Responsibility

### Environmental Ethics

- 1) Never litter. Always pack out trash.
- 2) Conduct all toilet activity at least 200 feet from any water body. \*
- 3) Pack out human waste in sensitive or heavily used environments.
- 4) Do not disturb wildlife.
- 5) Minimize impacts to shore when launching, portaging, scouting or taking out.
- 6) Avoid building campfires, except in established fire rings, or in emergencies.
- 7) Consult the *Leave No Trace* website ([www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org)) and local resource managers for additional guidance.

\*Exact procedures vary depending on the specific environmental characteristics (climate, soil, etc.) of your paddling or camping location. Consult **Leave No Trace** ([www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org)) for specific guidelines.

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## Expanded Safe Paddling Practices and Skills:

### 1) Always wear a properly fitted PFD (lifejacket) while on the water.

- A PFD must be worn to be effective.
- It should fit snugly.
- When tugged up on (at shoulders), no portion of the PFD should rise above the wearer's nose.

*Note: Over 80% of all canoeing related fatality victims were NOT wearing a PFD at the time of accident.*

### 2) Never go boating while under the influence of alcohol.

- Alcohol impairs judgment, and good judgment is a critical component of paddling safely and avoiding hazards.

*Note: Alcohol use was a likely factor in over 25% of all canoeing fatalities.*

### 3) Do not stand up in a canoe or kayak, and avoid weight shifts that may cause capsizing.

- Because canoes and kayaks are narrow, they are less stable than larger boats.
- It is important to keep weight low and in the center of the craft.
- Shifting positions, reaching for gear, pet movement, leaning over the side and standing up can easily result in a capsizing.
- If occupant movement is a necessity while on the water, learn to move correctly (maintaining three points of contact), and be sure all occupants in the craft are wearing a PFD.

*Note: Occupant movement and weight shift are factors in roughly 50% of all canoeing fatalities.*

### 4) Avoid weather or water conditions that are beyond your skill level.

*Weather conditions* that require specific knowledge and skills include: wind, cold air temperature, cold water temperature, heavy rain or snowmelt, and fog.

- Wind can push the canoe or kayak off course, and strong wind causes big waves.
- Cold air or water makes the consequences of getting wet very dangerous.
- Heavy rain and snowmelt upstream can quickly turn a slow moving river into a pushy, raging torrent.
- Fog can make route finding extremely challenging.

*Water conditions* that require specific knowledge, skills, and awareness include: river current, waves, tidal flow, size of waterway, remoteness, and other boat traffic.

- River current, waves and tidal flow, necessitate specific paddling techniques, can require more physical conditioning, and increase the risk and consequences of capsizing.

- Paddling in large or remote bodies of water significantly increases the consequences of any mishap and can expose paddlers to additional, area-specific, risks.
- Paddling on such waters requires emergency preparedness and constant monitoring of weather conditions.
- The presence of other boat traffic such as large ships and boats, and high-speed watercraft requires caution due to an increased risk of collision and the presence of heavy wakes.

## **5) Be able to effectively steer and propel your boat.**

Knowing basic paddling techniques for propelling the craft forward or backward and turning it right or left is essential to safe and enjoyable paddling.

- To propel the craft forward, the paddle blade should be kept close to the craft during the stroke and the blade of the paddle should be fully submerged in the water at the mid-point of the stroke.
- To turn vessel left, take a wide-reaching forward sweep stroke on the right.
- To turn vessel right, take a wide-reaching forward sweep stroke on the left.
- Steering is more complicated when two persons are paddling in the same craft (tandem paddling). The person in the rear of the craft is responsible for steering.
- Take a canoeing or kayaking course from an ACA certified instructor.

## **6) Never float or paddle over a low-head (submerged) dam, fallen tree, or other in-stream obstruction.**

- Low-head dams, fallen trees, and fences are extremely dangerous for paddlers.
- Low-head dams are small, river-wide structures that allow water to flow over them. Despite their unthreatening appearance, these dams – often called drowning machines – create a dangerous and often inescapable reversal current (hydraulic, undertow).
- Instream obstructions such as fallen trees or fences are also extremely dangerous. By allowing water to pass through, but not a person, these obstructions – called strainers – can cause a person to become trapped by water pressure.

## **7) Dress appropriate to weather conditions (including air and water temperature).**

- Never wear cotton when paddling in cool temperatures.
- Dress in layers using synthetic fabrics such as polyester fleece.
- Carry a waterproof jacket designed for splash and/or rain protection.
- Wear insulating clothing designed to protect you in cold water when the water temperature is less than 60 degrees Fahrenheit (Examples include: [Lotus Water Heater™](#), [NRS Hydroskin™](#), [Kokatat Outercore™](#), [Rapidstyle Fuzzy Rubber™](#), [IR Thermo Skin™](#)).
- Always wear a wetsuit or drysuit when both the air temperature and water temperature are below 60 degrees Fahrenheit.
- Wear a hat and sunscreen.
- Store unused clothing in a sealed dry bag while on the water.

## **8) Do not paddle alone.**

- Paddling alone leaves no margin for error and makes dealing with an accident or health emergency more difficult.
- It is good to have at least one experienced paddler in any paddling group.

**9) Inform others (friends, family, resource manager) of your trip plan.**

Trip plan should include:

- Name and address of trip leader
- Number of people in the party
- Route information, including departure point and final destination
- Anticipated time of return

**10) Carry a supply of food and water adequate for your trip length.**

- Always carry more water than you think you will need.
- On warm or hot sunny days carry additional water.
- For long day trips or multi-day trips carry extra food for emergency situations.
- For multi-day trips always carry a means to treat or filter water.

**11) Learn about your route in advance, especially potential hazards.**

- Know the distance to your destination and the distance between access points.
- Know the characteristics of the waterway, such as speed of current, and the skill level needed to paddle it safely.
- Know about the presence of hazards such as difficult rapids, low-head dams, or upstream dam releases.
- Know where to go in case of an emergency.
- Know how the trip changes at higher water levels or in varied weather conditions.
- Consult available guidebooks and/or the Internet in advance.

**12) Never overload the boat with more weight or persons than it is designed to safely accommodate.**

- A heavily loaded canoe or kayak is more difficult to propel.
- A heavily loaded canoe or kayak is more difficult to turn.
- A heavily loaded canoe can swamp more easily than one with a light load.
- Water is very heavy and should not be allowed to accumulate inside the craft.

**13) Learn how to self-rescue in the event of capsize.**

- Be able to re-enter a capsized canoe or kayak.
- Kayakers should be able to perform an Eskimo roll in the environment they are paddling.
- Whitewater paddlers should know how to properly swim in swift current and rapids.

**14) Be proficient in proper paddling technique and learn to read water.**

- Be knowledgeable and practiced in the basic paddling strokes.
- Know how to brace with a paddle to prevent capsize.
- River paddlers should know how to recognize and use river features such as eddies.
- Open water and ocean paddlers should know how to navigate with a compass.

- Whitewater paddlers should be able to recognize difficulty of rapids and be able to pick the best route through (or around) them.
  - Take a canoeing or kayaking course from an ACA certified instructor.
- 15) **Only take on challenges for which you are physically and mentally prepared.**
- Honestly assess your skill level and the risks associated with each paddling endeavor.
  - Be willing to walk away at any time from a challenge for which you feel unprepared.
  - Never allow peer pressure to override sound judgment.
  - Be sure to consider any health issues, fatigue, or mental distractions that could increase your risk.
- 16) **Possess rescue skills necessary to assist others in your group.**
- Know how to assist a capsized paddler with uprighting and re-entering the craft.
  - Know basic or wilderness first aid and CPR (Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation).
  - Whitewater paddlers should be knowledgeable and practiced in using a “throw” bag in swift water.
  - Take a course, such as Swiftwater Rescue, that teaches proper rescue techniques from an ACA certified instructor.
- 17) **Plan for emergencies.**
- Have an evacuation plan should someone be injured.
  - Have a first aid kit appropriate to the type of paddling activity you are engaged.
  - Think through worst-case scenarios and proper responses in advance.

## **Expanded Environmental Ethics:**

### **1) Never litter, always pack out trash.**

- Carry a bag or container specifically for trash removal
- Secure trash in your boat so it will withstand wind or capsize

### **2) Conduct all toilet activity at least 200 feet from any water body. \***

- All solid human waste must be buried 4 to 8 inches deep or packed out. \*
- Used toilet paper or sanitary napkins should be packed out. In wet conditions, where no wildfire hazard exists, toilet paper may also be burned in the hole with waste (cat hole) before filling in hole with dirt.
- Urinating directly in the water may be advisable on certain desert waterways or at sea (*Consult **Leave No Trace** ([www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org)) for specific guidelines*).
- Never dispose of any foodstuff in the same location as human waste, since it will prompt animals to dig up the waste.
- Check with the local resource manager for location-specific guidance.

*\*Exact procedures vary depending on the specific environmental characteristics (climate, soil, etc.) of your paddling or camping location. Consult **Leave No Trace** ([www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org)) for specific guidelines.*

### **3) Pack out human waste in sensitive or heavily used environments.**

- Raft supported trips should carry portable toilet systems designed for river use.
- Portable toilet systems should be compatible with locally available dump stations.
- Paddlers on canoe or kayak only trips can carry specially designed disposable bags to facilitate packing out solid waste (such as the WAG bag from Phillips Environmental Products).

### **4) Do not disturb wildlife.**

- Observe wildlife quietly from a distance.
- Utilize binoculars or telephoto camera lenses to obtain closer views.
- Maintain 50 to 100 yards distance between you and marine mammals.
- Never attempt to feed wildlife.
- Never leave food or trash accessible to wildlife.
- On multi-day paddling trips in bear country, store food and trash in specially designed bear resistant bags or canisters.
- Watch for and avoid any wildlife dens, nesting or spawning areas.
- Never allow your craft to drift into wading or swimming wildlife.

### **5) Minimize impacts to shore when launching, portaging, scouting or taking out.**

- Do not drag boats on the ground when launching or taking out.
- Launch or take-out on sandy beaches or rocky areas.
- Avoid disturbing (marring) soft ground, especially on sloping terrain such as riverbanks.
- Try to avoid stepping on vegetation.

### **6) Avoid building campfires, except in officially established fire rings, or for emergencies.**

- For overnight trips use a camping stove for cooking.
- If you must build a fire, utilize established fire rings if available.
- Obey all resource management agency guidelines and regulations regarding campfires.
- Thoroughly douse campfires with water and verify they are completely extinguished before leaving unattended.
- Scatter ashes and return any disturbed terrain features to their original condition.

### **7) Consult the *Leave No Trace* website ([www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org)) and local resource managers for additional guidance.**

## **Standards of Conduct\***

- 1) Obey all rules and regulations.
- 2) Respect private property. Only use public lands and access points.
- 3) Be considerate to others on the water.

- 4) Give fishermen a wide berth.
- 5) Never change clothes in public view.
- 6) Respect local culture and standards of conduct.
- 7) Give back to the waterway.

*\*By observing these standards of conduct, paddlers reduce the opportunity for conflicts that may result in reduced waterway access and burdensome regulations.*

## **Expanded Standards of Conduct:**

### **1) Obey all rules and regulations.**

- Be informed about all applicable rules and regulations before launching your vessel.
- When paddling on multiple use waterways, know the generally accepted rules of navigation (*Boating's Rules of the Road*).
- Avoid paddling near areas of heightened security, such as military bases and nuclear power plants.

### **2) Respect private property. Only use public lands and access points.**

- Do not cross or occupy private property without permission from the owner.
- When utilizing private property with permission, never litter or engage in any behavior likely to upset the landowner.
- Help landowners police and maintain access areas they makes available for public use.
- Be informed about the navigability status of the waterway and what constitutes the high-water mark.

### **3) Be considerate to others on the water.**

- Paddle in control and avoid drifting into others.
- Avoid interfering with the recreational activities of others.
- Be courteous and polite when communicating with others.
- Never engage in lewd or inappropriate behavior.
- When playing in hydraulic river features such as waves or holes, whitewater paddlers should yield the right-of-way to boats traveling downstream.

### **4) Give fishermen a wide berth.**

- Pay attention to location of fisherman and of their fishing lines.
- Avoid passing within the casting range of fishermen whenever possible.
- If one must pass within casting range, time passage to when the fisherman has reeled in the line.
- Pass by fishermen as quickly and as quietly as practicable.

### **5) Never change clothes in public view.**

- Utilize available changing facilities or restrooms.
- When no changing facility is available, utilize vehicles, tents, changing apparel or landscape features to change clothes beyond the view of others.

### **6) Respect local culture and standards of conduct.**

- Respect local community standards of decency.
- Always assume others may be offended by public nudity.
- Avoid using offensive language.
- Enrich your experience by learning about the heritage and culture of the places you paddle.
- Support local businesses with your patronage whenever practicable.

#### **7) Give back to the waterway.**

- Volunteer for organized waterway clean-ups and improvement projects.
- Report pollution or other waterway degradation to appropriate officials and ACA.
- Support causes and organizations that are working to safeguard the nation's recreational waters.

*Note: This document is currently under review by the ACA Safety Education and Instruction Committee. Please check back for updates and revisions in the near future. 2/23/04*