RESCUES

John Kirk-Anderson

Introduction

Most sea kayak instruction books include a chapter on rescues, and several books have been dedicated to the subject. It is recommended that paddlers study as many sources of information as they can, BUT also they then go and try the rescue techniques in the worst conditions in which they will paddle.

The techniques described here are suggested as a starting place for individual practice, from where the paddler will discover what works for them.

In presenting these techniques, I have used these guidelines:

- Rescue/re-entry methods must work with loaded kayaks, in rough conditions.

- Techniques that require lifting are unsuitable.

- Any kayak used on open water should have a minimum of two watertight bulkheads, leaving the cockpit the only area to flood.

- In New Zealand's temperate climate, there is less urgency to remove a person from the water than in some other regions. This must be balanced with the advantages of draining a kayak before re-entry.

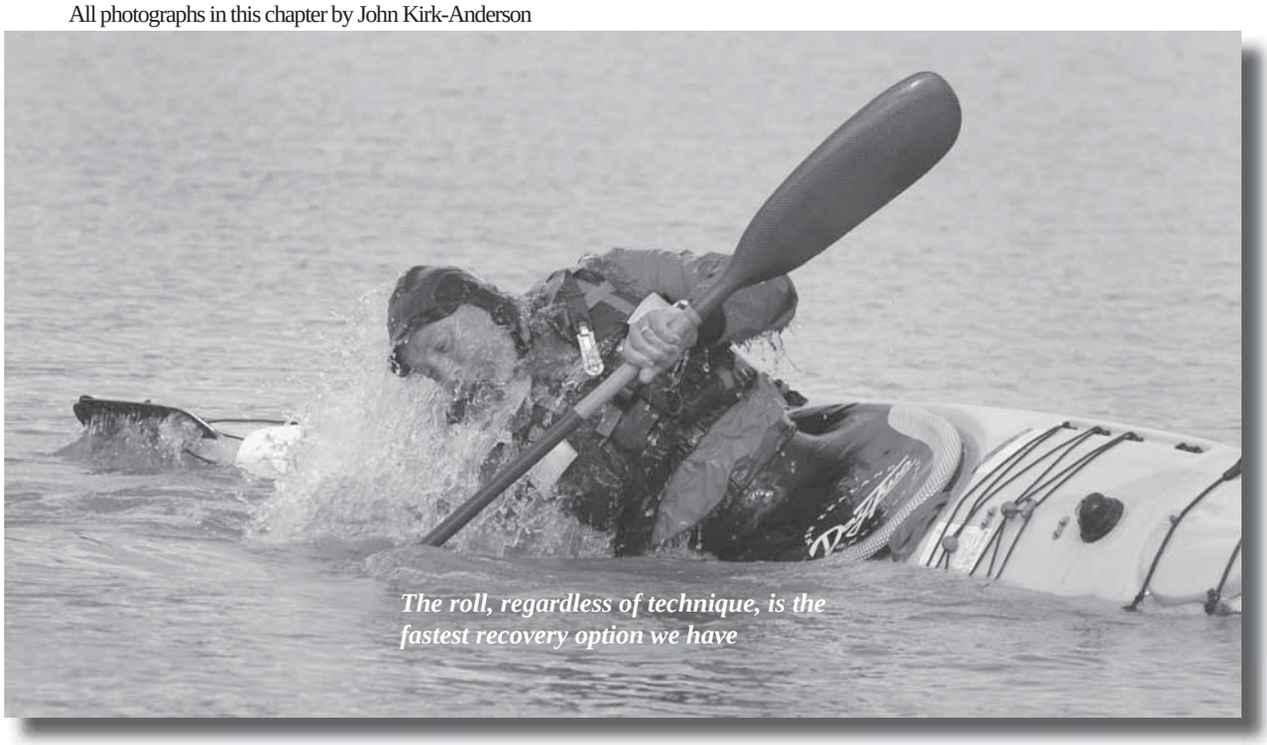
- After one capsize, further capsizes are likely, and should be anticipated.

- If conditions have caused one kayaker to capsize, it is likely that others in a group are close to the same fate. This means the rescue will also involve group management issues. These issues are beyond the scope of this article.

- If the method chosen is effective, safe, and comfortable for you, then it is a good method.

In any capsize causing wet exit, maintain hold of paddle and kayak at all times. A paddler in the water will stay in place, but a loose kayak will quickly be blown out of reach. This can change a minor incident into a potentially fatal event.

All photographs in this chapter by John Kirk-Anderson



The roll, regardless of technique, is the fastest recovery option we have

The rescues/recoveries/re-entries that will be discussed are:

- Roll
- Re-entry & Roll
- Paddle-float
- Scramble
- T Rescue
- Double rescue

Additionally, the use of a towline to assist in the control of a rescue will be covered

ROLL

Rolling a sea kayak is not an advanced skill, and can be learned by most paddlers. Ensuring that the roll works in adverse conditions requires a lot of practice, and it is when this practice is neglected that we hear creative excuses for failed rolls.

Any roll that works is a good roll, regardless of style or lack thereof. Having said that, a roll that rights the kayak using body rotation, not arm strength, that protects the shoulders, and that leaves the paddler in a stable, supported position, is more likely to be successful.

Sea kayakers should be able to roll on both sides, as wind and surf, the most common forces causing capsize, will prevent a roll back against them. This is more important than learning a variety of rolls.

RE-ENTRY & ROLL

It is sometimes questioned why, if a kayaker who can roll has failed and wet-exited, they would then succeed with the additional problem of a cockpit full of water. The answer is that rolls usually fail because of a rushed set-up, and a re-entry and roll allows a second chance. It also requires no other equipment and is very fast.

An obvious disadvantage is that the kayak still holds water, and the spray deck is not usually fastened. Some paddlers, with remarkable breath-hold capacity, are able to fix their spray deck before rolling up.

For a re-entry and roll to be successful under duress, it must have been practised until it can be performed smoothly, with no time wasted while setting up.

A suggested method is detailed below.

After wet-exiting, move to the side of the kayak you will roll back up to, i.e. the side INTO the wind or waves.

Orientate your paddle correctly and take hold of the sides of the cockpit

Keep the kayak upside down, and face the stern. If the kayak is on your right, have the right paddle blade forward, with the paddle shaft alongside the kayak.

Hold the paddle shaft and the cockpit rim together, with the hand furthest away from the hull, ie. if the kayak is on your right, hold the paddle and rim in your left hand. Reach under the kayak and take hold of the other side of the cockpit with your other hand.

To enter the cockpit, either roll the kayak onto its side and slide your legs in, or submerge and do a back somersault (easier than it sounds!), bringing your legs between your arms and into the cockpit.

Roll the kayak onto its side as you slide your legs in

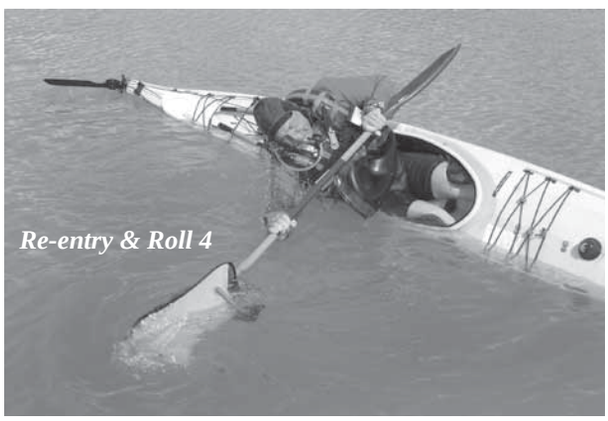
Use an extra second to ensure that you are properly seated and that you are braced in the cockpit properly. This is very important, as the roll depends on this fit.

Reach up towards the surface, take hold of the paddle and roll up. The kayak will roll slower than usual due to the open cockpit scooping up water and so a sculling-type roll may be of more use.

Using a paddle float on the paddle makes this very easy, and many paddlers who cannot roll are able to achieve this.

Once securely seated, roll up

Once upright, the challenge is to maintain balance, in the conditions that caused the initial capsize, while paddling a kayak with a flooded cockpit and while refitting the spraydeck. A low volume cockpit and foot-pump make this task easier.



Using a paddle float for a re-entry & roll makes it much easier

PADDLE FLOAT RE-ENTRY

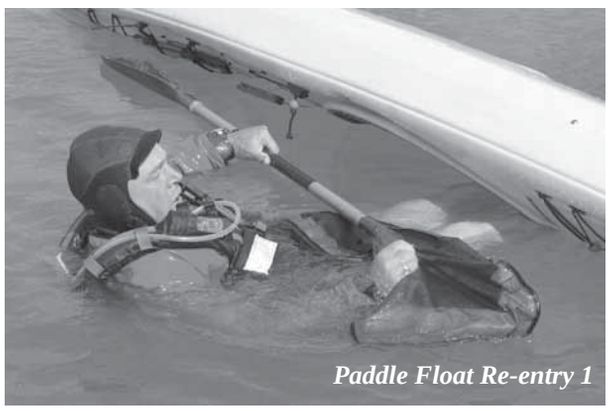
A paddle float, either inflatable or rigid, allows the paddle to be used as an outrigger to maintain balance while re-entering the cockpit and pumping out. While reliable and trusted to work by many paddlers, it still needs practice to ensure success under duress.

Assuming that equipment is well maintained, problems with this technique frequently arise in the following areas: Separation from kayak while setting up; paddle moving while attempting to re-enter, leading to failure; over-balancing during re-entry; difficulty changing from outrigger to paddling.

All of these potential problems can be avoided with practice.

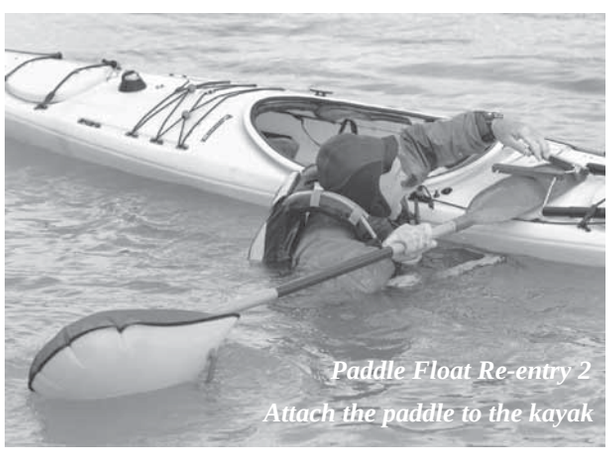
A suggested method is detailed below. After capsizing, leave the kayak upside down and move to the cockpit area, on up-wind side. Hook both legs into the cockpit, keeping contact while leaving hands free.

Remove the paddle float from storage and put it on the paddle, inflating if required. Quickly right the kayak. The faster it is rotated, the less water the cockpit will scoop up.

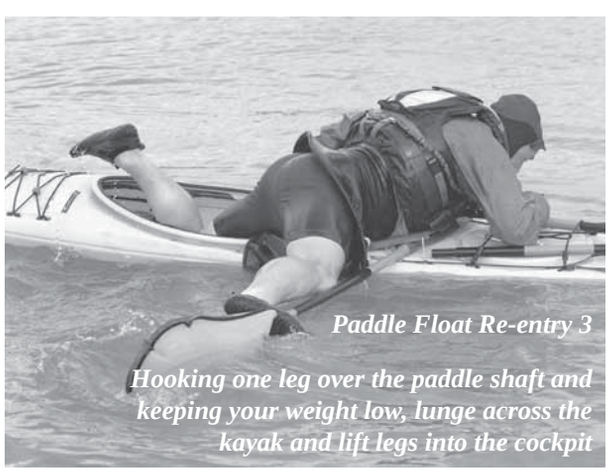


Hook your legs into the cockpit to keep in contact with the kayak. Fit the paddle float and inflate if required

Either slide the paddle blade under the rear-deck fittings, or hold the paddle shaft against the rear cockpit rim if the design is suitable and your hands are big enough.



Floating on your stomach on the bow side of the paddle, hook the foot that is towards the stern of the kayak over the paddle shaft and lunge across the cockpit



While still face down, lift your other leg from the water and position it in the cockpit.

Keeping your weight and balance over the paddle, turn towards the paddle's side and transfer the other leg from paddle shaft into cockpit

Keeping your weight over the paddle shaft, twist around in the cockpit

Favouring your balance over the out-rigger paddle, fit the spray deck and pump out the cockpit, as required.

If the paddle was held against the cockpit rim it should be brought in front of the body and used as a brace. If it was held in place by deck fittings, leave it in place until you are ready to paddle.

Remove the paddle from the fittings, then remove and store the paddle float.

SCRAMBLE

The Scramble, Cowboy, or John Wayne rescue involves clambering back onto the kayak and maintaining balance while re-entering the cockpit.

This method may be a viable rough-water rescue for some paddlers, but I have never seen it work to my satisfaction.

I have, however, written an incident report on a sea kayaker who relied on this method and, after a capsize while solo paddling, tried using it many times to re-enter his kayak as he was being blown off-shore. His life was saved only by the vigilance of a shore-based observer, a prompt response by emergency services, and advanced medical care.

For these reasons I cannot recommend it and therefore will not discuss it further.

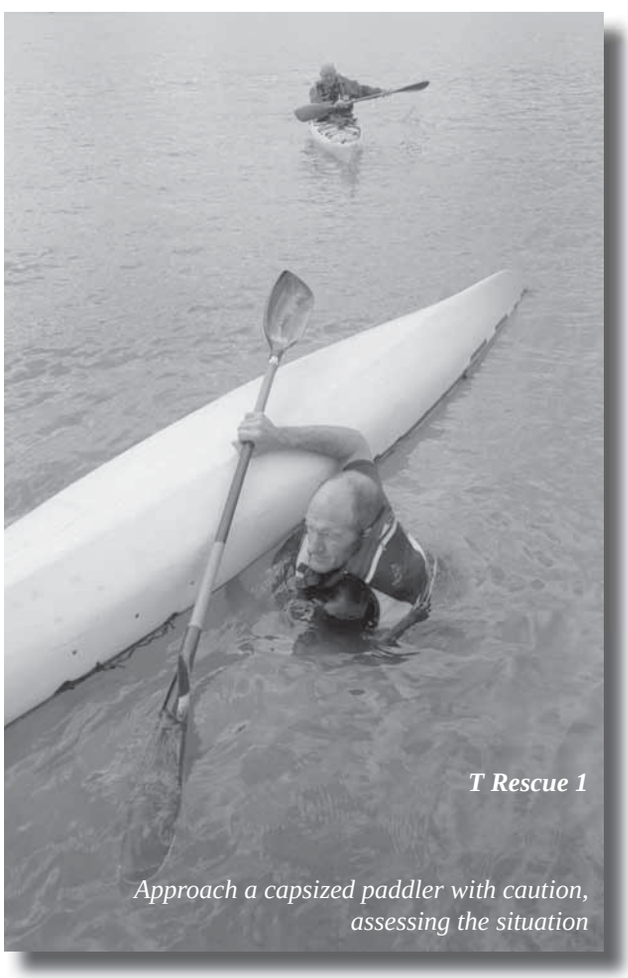
T RESCUE

The T Rescue is a method used by a kayaker to drain the kayak of another paddler who has capsized and wet exited, and to then support the kayak while the paddler re-enters.

Here is a suggested method. On witnessing a capsize and wet exit, the rescuer should move quickly to a position downwind of the person needing assistance, and then paddle upwind to contact them. Moving in from this direction keeps the closing speed low, and avoids the danger of a kayak surfing onto a person in the water. It also allows the rescuer to make verbal contact and establish how co-operative the capsized paddler will be. Do not approach if you believe the state of mind of the capsized paddler would put you at risk.

Most paddlers, on wet exiting, will promptly roll their kayak up the right way. If they don't do this, instruct them to do so.

Move in and take hold of the bow of their kayak, and instruct the paddler to work their way along the kayaks to the bow of yours, staying in the water, where they are to remain until told to re-enter. At this stage they are to keep hold of their paddle, rather than pass it to the rescuer.



Have them right their kayak. Take hold of the bow, and get them to hold onto your bow

Secure your own paddle in such a way that you can immediately use it if required. Some paddlers place it under deck lines, I lay it across my spray deck and 'trap' it using my body.

If their kayak is on your right, take the bow toggle in your left hand and with your right hand, reach as far down the decklines on the right – starboard – of their kayak as possible.

By taking hold of their bow toggle and deck lines you have enormous support from their kayak, which has become a large outrigger

Keeping hold of their kayak, capsize towards your left – port. As you do so, their kayak will be drawn across your boat and rotated upside down. Hold this position until the water is drained out before righting your kayak and rolling their kayak back upright.

Keeping hold of their kayak, lean away from it, drawing their boat over yours

While this sounds daunting, it is very stable as you are holding onto a very long out-rigger – their kayak.

Feed the bow of their boat under your right arm and bring the kayaks parallel to each other, bow-to-stern.

Rolling the kayak over, drain the water from the cockpit

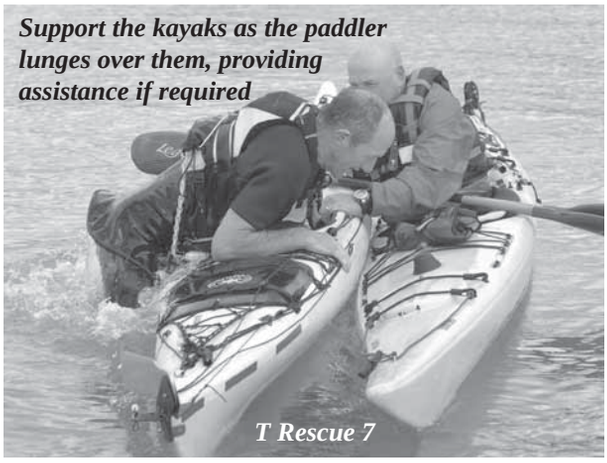
Instruct the paddler to work their way along the side of their kayak, until just behind their cockpit.

Bring their kayak alongside. Brace the kayaks by leaning over theirs and locking the paddles against your body

Take their paddle and your own and brace them across both kayaks. Place them under your arms, and use your left elbow to trap them against your body. Hold the side of their cockpit closest to you with your left hand, and the far side with your right.

Instruct the paddler to float on their stomach, facing the kayak and with with their legs towards the surface. With a kick and lunge they must drive themselves across the kayaks, reaching for the decklines on the left side of your kayak. You can assist with your right hand if required.

While staying face down, and with more of their weight over your kayak, they put their legs in the cockpit, before rotating towards you and sitting down.


Support the kayaks as the paddler lunges over them, providing assistance if required

T Rescue 7

At this point, do not be tempted to breath a sigh of relief and paddle off. They need your assistance until their spraydeck is on, their paddle is correctly orientated in their hands, and they have regained composure.


T Rescue 8

Continue to support the paddler until they are ready to paddle

They may well need to be on an assisted tow until they are ready to paddle again.

Many paddlers will have variations on this method, and that is to be encouraged. The only requirements are that it is safe and it works.

DOUBLE RESCUES

Double kayaks can present a challenge in a rescue situation, and it has more to do with the paddlers than the craft. As doubles are usually more stable than a single kayak, they are often used to team up weaker paddlers or those with little experience.

In addition, the craft themselves are more difficult to manoeuvre and typically have more freeboard, meaning access from the water is more difficult. Their cockpit design usually means a greater flooded area than a single kayak, with the accompaning stability problems.

DOUBLE KAYAK ASSISTED RESCUE

With these issues in mind, an assisted rescue will require more direction to be given and the likelihood of a lengthy period of pumping, once the paddlers are back in their seats. It is unrealistic, and potentially dangerous to body and equipment, to attempt to drain a double kayak using a T Rescue as described previously.

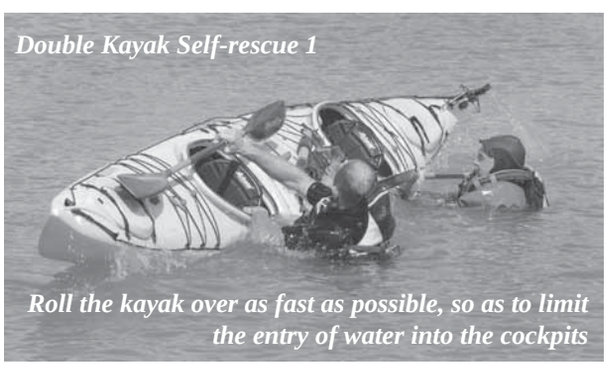
Often the best that can be done is to raft alongside and provide stability while assisting the paddlers aboard. Aids to this, such as a rescue sling, will be discussed in the section on self-rescues, which follows.

With the greater time that paddlers are in the water or sitting in flooded cockpkits while pumping, the risk of heat-loss must be anticipated and action taken to avoid this.

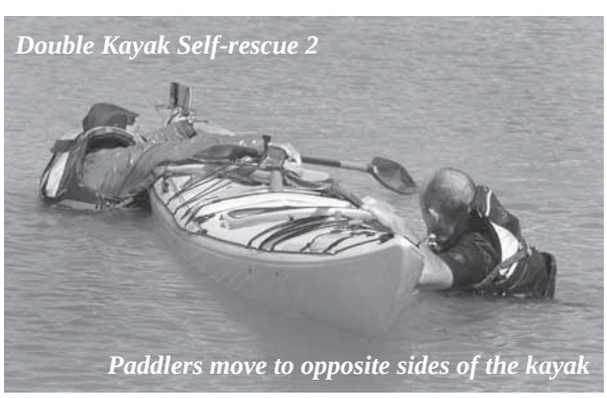
DOUBLE KAYAK SELF-RESCUE

A self-rescue for a double kayak requires co-ordination between paddlers, and aids such as paddle-floats and rescue slings are an advantage.

Here is a suggested method. On wet exiting, the paddlers should right the kayak. This can be done by reaching underneath and taking hold of the sides of the cockpits. Working together, they pull down with the hand furthest away, while pushing up with the hand closest. The faster this manouvere is completed the less water will be scooped up.


Double Kayak Self-rescue 1

Roll the kayak over as fast as possible, so as to limit the entry of water into the cockpits


Double Kayak Self-rescue 2

Paddlers move to opposite sides of the kayak

The paddlers should then move to opposite sides of the kayak. The rear paddler should then enter the cockpit by lunging up onto the deck, and, keeping their weight low, twisting into the cockpit.

Double Kayak Self-rescue 3

The rear paddler enters first, counter-balanced by the front paddler

The other paddler has counter balanced the rotating force of the first paddler entering.

The rear paddler should now fit their spray deck and provide paddle brace to counter the action of the other paddler entering. This brace needs to be on the same side as the front paddler is getting in from. A paddle float can be of benefit at this point, as the brace will need to be maintained in a sculling action.

Double Kayak Self-rescue 4

Using a sculling brace, the rear paddler supports the entry of the front paddler.

Once the front paddler is seated, they should fit spray decks and pump out as required.

Double Kayak Self-rescue 5

Using a paddle float gives the brace more support, while a rescue sling helps the front paddler into the kayak

A rescue sling can be very useful to assist in getting a paddler from the water into a kayak, either in a self or assisted rescue.

The sling, a length of webbing tape or cordage, is used to provide a leg-up so the paddler is not trying to lift their body weight using their arms alone. Looped around the cockpit rim, tied to a deck line or secured to a paddle across the kayaks, the length of the loop needs to be adjusted so that when the paddler stands in it, their hip is level with the cockpit rim.

In use, the paddler deploys the sling, faces the kayak and places the foot closest to the stern into the loop. Using leg strength, they stand up in the sling and turn towards the stern. If adjusted to the correct length, they can now lean forward at the waist, swing their other leg out of the water and into the cockpit, before bringing the other leg onboard and turning over.

Preparation can make this a more useful technique. Pre-setting the length, selecting an attachment point, and using a piece of plastic pipe in the loop as a spreader to provide a step are all useful preparations.

TOWING

The ability to tow another kayak can help prevent the need for a rescue, clear a kayaker from a dangerous location while a rescue is effected, and help with support following a rescue.

Towing, by its nature, introduces cordage into an often-chaotic situation, with the attendant risk of entanglement. For this reason towing must be approached with caution, using tested equipment and practised skills.

The towline can be attached to the body or the kayak of the tower, and to the bow of the towed boat. It MUST include a quick-release mechanism that works under load. It should have some means of absorbing the shock loads that are applied and it must be long enough to allow at least a kayak-length distance between boats.

Shorter tows also have their uses, and a contact tow can work for moving a kayak short distances.

If a kayaker is having trouble maintaining direction or progress, a towline can have almost miraculous benefits. Without the struggle to maintain control, the towed kayaker can concentrate on forward speed, often to the extent of the tower doing no work.

The psychological effect of a tow can also work in other ways. Some people are so ashamed of the idea of being towed that they speed up to avoid one. Other people will refuse the offer of assistance to the detriment of safety.

For a short distance, a contact tow provides support for a sick or injured paddler. A short line connects the towed kayak's bow to the foredeck of the towing kayak, so the tower can still paddle

If a kayaker becomes incapacitated, possibly by nausea or injury, a rafted tow may be required.

If a kayaker has capsized in a situation that would make an assisted rescue hazardous i.e. close to rocks on a lee shore, a tow can be used to clear them from the area. Or, in a similar situation, if an assisted rescue is endangered it can be held by a tow.

Following capsize and rescue, paddlers are often left surprised and with a loss of confidence. Having someone raft alongside to offer practical and moral support can be of great benefit, and a towline on the raft can keep the group moving while the person recovers.

A point to be aware of during a rafted tow is that with no exercise to generate heat, paddlers being towed will quickly cool. It is much easier to retain heat than regain it, so plan for this with extra clothing and a hat.

In a rafted tow, attach the line to the person needing help, with the supporting kayaker free to move away as required. This allows more control rather than tying everyone together.

If more than one kayak is available to do the towing the load will be much reduced, and for this reason it should be used when resources permit. Multiple kayaks can be linked together either in-line, or in a fan arrangement. Which method is used will depend on the equipment used, the sea state and personal preference.

The group leader should not be involved in the tow if possible, as this limits their ability to monitor the situation.

A short tow can be used when a kayaker needs assistance, but room to manoeuvre is limited, i.e. in a rock garden or a cave. A contact tow works when a kayaker needs to be moved a short distance and requires support to stay upright.

Towing is a skill that should also be practised for when it is required for real, there is seldom time to rehearse.

SWIMMING WITH A KAYAK

Never let go of your kayak and paddle. Doing so can turn a minor incident into a potentially fatal event

SUMMARY

Rescues are a skill that should be practised and developed until you have a method that works for you. Try them out in realistic, but safe, conditions and be ready to improvise.

John Kirk-Anderson
NZOIA Level 2 Sea Kayak Instructor
BCU Level 4 Coach Sea

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

Sea Kayaker Magazine's Handbook of Safety and Rescue
Doug Alderson and Michael Pardy
Rocky Mountain Press
ISBN: 0-07-138890-7

Sea Kayak Rescue
Roger Schumann and Jan Shriner
The Globe Pequot Press
ISBN: 0-7627-0745-3

Sea Kayak Safety & Rescue
John Lull
Wilderness Press
ISBN: 0-89997-274-8