

Questioning Dogma

The Wet Exit Drill

WHY

Wet exit drill, or how to get out of your kayak when it capsizes, is possibly one of the most important things to learn as a kayaker. After all, who wants to be trapped in an upside down kayak?

Eventually, it is possible that the kayaker will learn to roll but, no matter how good you get at the roll, sooner or later you will need to wet exit. Often repeated expressions include "we are all between swims" and "there are only two types of kayaker, those who have swum and those who are going to swim" although in reality, even if we have already swum, we are all going to swim again.

Being upside down in the water, with your legs wedged in a kayak, possible with a piece of fabric or neoprene also holding you in, is a potentially scary and dangerous position to be in. Add in rough water, objects to hit your head on, and being swept by the waves or current towards more hazards and it becomes obvious why having a well-practiced response is extremely useful. Drills are useful in creating this type of automated response in distracting situations.

WHAT

A wet exit practice is important at the beginner level and is a required and expected part of most introductory lessons. As with any skill, it needs to be practiced regularly in order to be of use when needed.

A primary concern, especially among novices, is the possibility of entrapment in the kayak. Although this is very rare, the drill needs to address factors that may lead to entrapment. This starts well before the actual need for a wet exit; checking the kayak for entrapment potential, e.g. damaged or poorly designed footrests, seats, cockpits, wrong type/size of spray skirt etc. and clothing such as long laces or straps on foot wear, loose clothing and the like. During the wet exit, panic seems to be the initial cause of less than ideal outcomes, followed by failure to release the skirt and too much tension in the hips and legs.

Equipment design and selection, and pre-trip checks address some of these issues. Only loose fitting nylon spray skirts for beginners, save the tight neoprene for more advanced paddlers and randed neoprene for experts in molded plastic boats only. Above all, make sure there is a release strap for the skirt that it is in good condition and accessible, and double check that you can easily use it to remove the skirt. Avoid footwear or clothing with loose folds, loops, or straps that can get caught. Additionally, ensure that foot rests are designed to minimize potential entrapment. Full plate/bulkhead footrests are generally safest (and most comfortable) but pedals mounted on the side are more popular for fleet of entry level kayaks as they are easier to fit to multiple users. Bars crossing from one side of the kayak to the other are old fashioned, but still appear now and then. Watch for the potential for things to get caught and also for the potential for feet to slide past the footrest and get stuck. Similarly, anything around the seat or cockpit that could hook on to clothing or body parts should be avoided and if you are putting equipment such as water bottles or dry bags/boxes in the cockpit with you, be sure it will not entrap you. Larger cockpits are general easier to exit from (as long as they aren't so large as to put the release strap out of reach) but may limit boat control if too large.

The Wet Exit Drill needs to ensure that the soon to be swimmer a) keeps calm b) removes the skirt c) gets out of the kayak efficiently. What to do when out of the boat is usually included in the drill but, I'll leave that for another article.

HOW

The classic Wet Exit Drill:

1. Check the water depth to make sure you won't hit your head.
 - a. Check the release strap on the skirt (if worn).
 - b. Tuck your paddle under your arm so you don't lose it.
2. Capsize the kayak.
3. Bang on the bottom (now the top) of the kayak 3 time a) to show you are calm and b) to attract attention.
4. Using both hands, find the cockpit rim and follow it forwards to locate the exit strap. Grasp the exit strap with both hands and roll wrists to remove the skirt.

5. Put both hands on the deck of the kayak just behind your hips and push, removing the kayak from your legs like taking off a pair of pants (trousers if you are not in America) while laying down.

SO WHERE'S THE DOGMA?

The primary thing I want to question is the function of the 3 Bangs On The Hull.

This has been around for longer than I have been paddling (I have been paddling since the early 80's) so it's probably about time it was questioned. I suspect this was initially a game or test invented by an instructor a long, long ago as an easy way to check that their students were cool, calm, and collected underwater. Another instructor saw the exercise and thought "that's a good idea, I'll get my students to do that as well" and it grew from there. It seemed like a good idea, there was little or no questioning, it became dogma.

As for the attract attention justification. I have only heard this added justification since 2010 or maybe more recently. I suspect that as with any dogma it was being questioned more, and as is common when dogma is challenged, some people will create more justifications for that dogma.

Questions:

1. Does it demonstrate calm? Maybe but I have seen some pretty panicked looking 3 bangs. I don't think 3 bangs by themselves are a reliable indicator of calm/lack of panic.
2. Does it attract attention? Possibly but:
 - a. I want to be paddling with people (especially guides, leaders, instructors, coaches) who would notice a capsize immediately, especially if they were close enough to hear the 3 bangs.
 - b. The noise that can be made in this way is easily overpowered by wind, waves, waterfalls, splashing, shouting etc.

SUGGESTION: Getting to the surface (a few seconds quicker) and yelling, blowing a whistle, using radio/cell phone, or even banging on the kayak will be more effective on the off-chance the capsize has not been seen already.

3. Does a few extra seconds in the kayak create other dangers? Yes, in shallow water, the longer you spend upside down the more likely you are to hit

your head on something (think concussion, C spine injury, etc.), and in moving water, you are potentially drifting towards all manner of hazards.

SUGGESTION: If you are not going to roll up, please get out of the kayak ASAP so I know you are okay. Seeing upside down kayaks with no head visible makes me nervous. Seconds count!

4. Does tapping 3 times create confusion? Yes, 3 of anything is an emergency signal. It's not an emergency yet, that's why you should remain calm. If I see an overturned kayak with hands banging on the hull it means, "I'm stuck, I can't get out, come help me!". I have seen people injured when a well-intentioned rescuer got close to try and assist an assumed entrapped/capsized paddler, just as the swimmer surfaced and subsequently hit their head on the would be rescuers kayak or ended up struggling with a swimming rescuer. **SUGGESTION:** bang 3 times ONLY if you need help getting to the surface, if you know how to "eskimo rescue" show you are prepared by searching with your arms, if you really want to show off give the okay sign/thumbs up/drum solo on the hull, etc..

5. This all sounds like stuff that's relevant for more advanced paddlers, on more advanced water, but it's still okay to use this as a drill for beginners, right? If you are assuming they will not become paddlers, I guess there's minimal harm, but otherwise **WHY CREATE A HABIT THAT THEY WILL HAVE TO UNLEARN?** There are better ways to create and assess calmness during a wet exit. I have enough examples of paddlers getting injured or entrapped because they were banging on the hull of their kayak when they should have been getting out of their kayak. **SUGGESTION:** instead of instilling beginners with potential dangerous habits, try a mantra. I often use "Be calm, find the handle, release the skirt, get out of the kayak, breath". Not making a big deal of it and allowing novice paddlers to build up to it in stages will build competence and calm, and you don't need to bang 3 times to demonstrate competence or calm.

Final thoughts

Many instructors and coaches come up with games and exercises to achieve certain goals; this creativity could be seen as a sign of a good educator. Some of them don't work and are best forgotten, some work better than others, some work with a broad range of students and contexts and some are more limited but may be especially useful in just the right situation. It may be that whoever first thought of the "bang 3 times" exercise swallowed their own kool-aid and continued to use the exercise without much further thought.

Alternatively, upon reflection, they may have realized it was not that beneficial and potentially flawed, and subsequently moved on. Either way, it became widely adopted and is one of the longest standing examples of dogma in paddlesport, accepted and practiced by many without question.

Dogma can limit development, reflective practice on the other hand is essential to development. When was the last time you critically reflected on and questioned why you do what you do?

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