

COACHING SERIES

BE PREPARED

No. 1

AND STAY

SAFE

In the first of this three-part safety series we will be looking at being prepared, staying safe and what kit and equipment we might carry to deal with incidents on and around the water:

It is important to remember that there is no substitute for professional training in this area and this must be combined with experience in order to effectively use the ideas and techniques contained in this series. This article is not intended to replace formal training.

Avoiding an incident happening in the first place should be one of our primary concerns and our tactics as a team of paddlers should mean that this is a constant theme throughout our time on the water.

By Chris Brain

Preparation is key

Many incidents which occur on the water can often be traced back to ineffective or rushed planning and preparation. For example, the simple task of eating a good breakfast on the morning may give you the energy you need to avoid missing your roll and consequently taking that painful swim later on in the day. This might mean that you don't lose your paddles and that your team don't have to put their rescue skills into practice to unpin your boat too. (All this because you skipped breakfast!)

Every river trip is different, but there are some key points that we need to make sure we cover:

What is our intended plan?

- Is this trip suitable for the team?
- Do we need to adapt the plan to suit the group ability, needs and experience?
- Have we got up to date information on the river and its hazards/features?
- Has anyone paddled the river recently?
- What is the current level of the river and how recent is our information?

Often incidents can occur on the river when a team simply continue with the plan because no one speaks up strongly to either oppose it or hasn't got the knowledge or experience to suggest a viable alternative. Simply continuing with the plan because it is "the plan" does not mean that it is the best or safest option. There have been too many times to count where I have been excited and ready to paddle a river; only to be in a situation where the levels/group/experience mean that it is a risky decision to get on. In this situation I change plans and the group and I live to fight another day.

Emergency plans

- Maps
- Suitable egress points before the intended get out
- Do we have the skills in the team to deal with an emergency?
- Have we run through all of the "what if" scenarios as a team?
- Do we have information/knowledge regarding medical information/history and emergency contact details?

My experience is that river paddlers are sometimes very 'casual' towards carrying maps and navigational equipment especially on rivers we know. We often know where the get on is, where the get off is and details of the grade and rapids, but usually little else about our location. I subscribe to Ordnance Survey's online mapping software, which allows you to save and print maps to scale, which means you can print and laminate them, study them and annotate them as you wish. In the event of an incident we will need to know our exact location and have navigational strategies for how we might evacuate our team. I combine the use of traditional mapping tools, with apps and documents downloaded on my smart phone too. There is everything out there from grid reference apps to mapping software, however I try and avoid relying solely on technology which can run out of battery, fail or be dropped in the water.



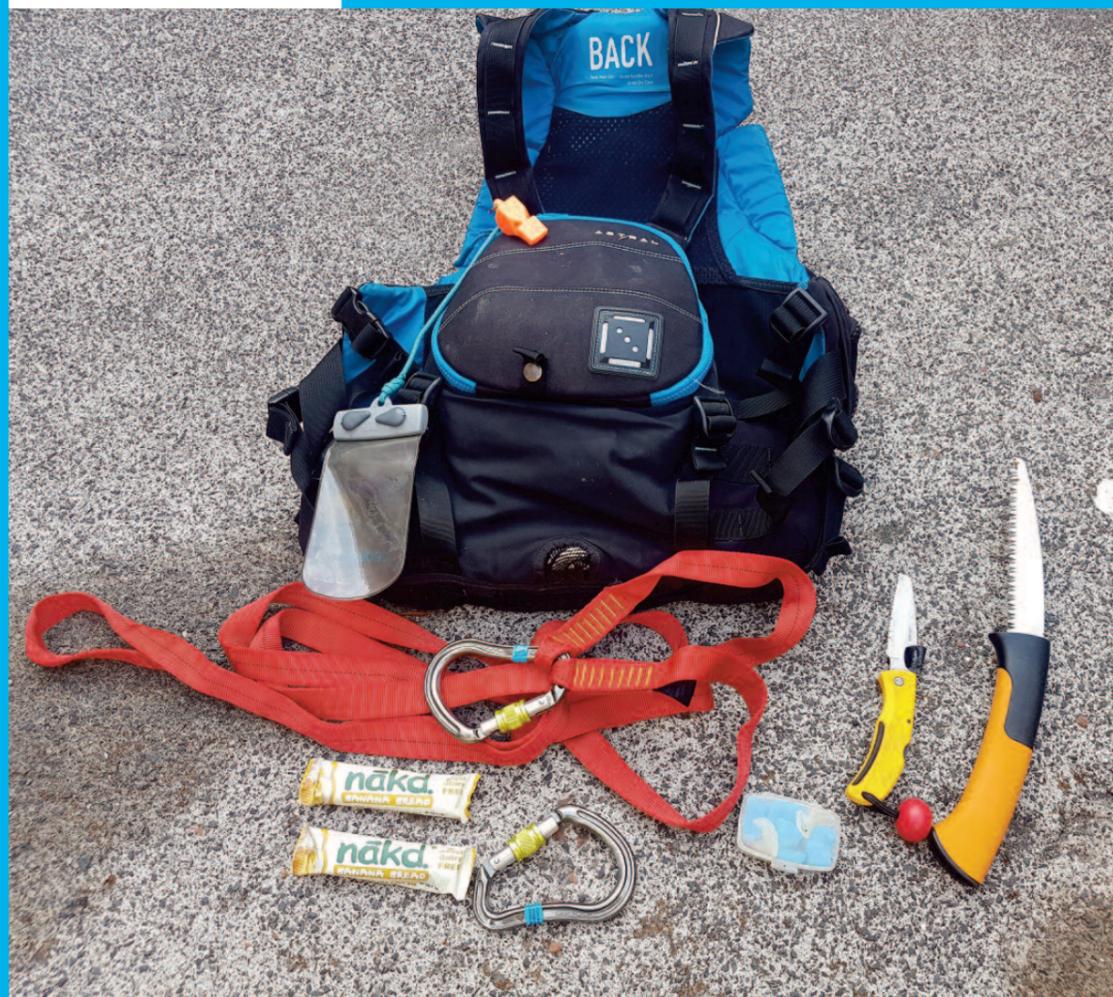
Watershed kit bag

Many coaches and paddlers use watershed dry bags to store their kit. Even though they cost more than a standard bag they are simply exceptional bits of equipment and are completely dry. I also have a set of lightweight bags that keep everything organised too. In the bag I keep:

- First aid Kit
- Vetrup
- Group shelter
- Blizzard survival jacket
- Sol bivvy bag
- Sol survival sheet
- Map
- Repair kit:
Cord, zip ties, duct tape, repair putty, turbo flame, flashband repair tape foam bung, multi tool, stormsure repair patches, micro torch
- Head torch (decent one carried over winter)
- Energy gels and spare food
- Buff and gloves

Kit carried on me

- 5m tape and HMS screwgate karabiner
- Spare screwgate karabiner
- Knife
- Saw
- Whistle
- Phone
- Keys
- Earplugs
- Energy bar/chocolate



What kit do we have in the group?

- Is our kit suitable and appropriate for the intended trip?
- Are we prepared for swims, rescues, first aid, keeping warm and fed?
- Do we have a phone, or other way of communicating and calling for help?

Rivers vary from remote multi-day trips to road side park and play and it is important that the kit we choose to carry with us reflects the nature of our location. Is our kit simply going to get us out to the road at the side of the river and then wait for the shuttle, or do we need to have equipment that is going to get us down the next two days of constant grade 4? One question I get asked regularly is whether I always carry split paddles and how good are they. Having made the investment in a top quality set of VE four-piece splits, I carry them virtually all the time now, the only time I don't tend to is when I am doing park and play with the road very nearby. Our split paddles can be used as a direct replacement when someone breaks or loses their own or can be used simply to reunite a rescued paddler following a swim if their paddles have been recovered further downstream. I think that your splits need to be appropriate to the environment you use them in and there needs to be an understanding of your expectations as to how they will perform. Simply put you don't want to be continuing down grade 5 with a set of wobbly plastic heavy paddles that you wouldn't paddle a dingy on flat water with!

Logistics

- Where will the vehicles be parked?
- Has all the team put dry clothes and food in the car at the end?
- Do we all have the kit and equipment we need?
- Can we place a vehicle at an intermediate point just in case?

Time spent making sure your logistics work can make the whole trip run much smoother. On so many occasions I witnessed paddlers getting to the end of the river and realising that their dry kit is in the car that is at the top (and of course I've done this myself!). I've also been in situations where the keys haven't quite made it down the river and we have had to walk for a shuttle. It might not be an issue in warmer weather, but in harsh conditions it could be the difference between someone being hypothermic or not. Where possible I am a big fan of placing a vehicle at an intermediate point to give us an additional strategy for an unforeseen evacuation. Usually this doesn't add much time to a shuttle, but could genuinely be a lifesaver.

What's in the bag?

One question that I frequently get asked is, "What's in your yellow bag Chris?" What we carry in our boat and with us on the river can make a big difference and could turn a situation from being something major to being a minor inconvenience.

As a starting point you need to ask, what could actually happen and what are we prepared for? We might need to:

- Fix boats
- Fix people
- Keep people warm
- Reunite paddlers with their kit
- Get swimmers out of the river
- Get boats out of the river
- Call for help and get help to our location

To deal with these situations I carry some kit in my boat and some kit on my person.

Dry Bag

- 4-piece split paddles
- Over the winter I often carry a flask and a warm jacket in here too.



Pre-paddling checks

- Check your own kit.
- Check others in the group.
- Boat, paddle and any kit carried checked?
- Vehicle keys, food, water and rescue kit?

An extra few minutes spent checking everything before you set off will be time well spent. Is your kit free from snags and loops and have you minimised the risks (where possible) of things getting caught? Is your kit in good enough condition for the trip? Do you have everything you need for your intended time on the water (and maybe a little longer if there are delays)? Common things that I find paddlers either not paying attention to or forgetting are things like boat fixings, chest harness webbing length, leaving throwbags in the vehicle, not taking water or food (even if just a snack bar and a small bottle of water.) I once started paddling down a pretty committing and challenging rapid, only to feel my seat fall off the rails and slide all the way back meaning I couldn't touch the footrests – a simple check before I got on would have saved that moment of terror! If you ever come to use your rescue skills on the river, you will need your throwbag to hand and if you decide to use your chest harness, it is essential to your own safety and those around you that the webbing is the right length (which for most paddlers means cutting it shorter.) It's a job that only takes two minutes to do – go and do it now if you haven't already (don't forget to heat seal the material so it doesn't fray.)

Leadership and strategies

- Who will lead (will this be done as a team)?
- How will we paddle together?
- How will we make decisions?
- What happens if someone swims? How will we rescue?

Understanding what we will actually do when we get on the water is very important towards avoiding an incident. Even if we are in a peer/equals situation, a little bit of discussion and clarification will make a difference when the going gets tough. Don't wait until you are half way down the hardest rapid of the day to discuss what your signals are and don't wait until someone swims to work out how you are going to handle it. Many paddlers will look towards the most experienced person to make leadership decisions, but it doesn't have to be this way.

Kit carried in boat

I usually carry all of my kit in two main bags apart from my throwbag and water which I have accessible when sitting in my kayak. Each bag is attached to the inside of the boat with another HMS screwgate karabiner, the same as the ones that I carry in my PFD.





This is only a snapshot of what I carry and depending on where I am and who I am with I change my kit and equipment accordingly, however as a leader I rarely carry less than this. With a little bit of careful planning and communication, this kit could be split across a few paddlers if needs be.

It is essential to think about what you are prepared for and what you expect your kit to be able to do. Our kit should be matched to our experience, our role and our skills and of course we are doing our best to avoid getting any of this kit out in the first place!

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