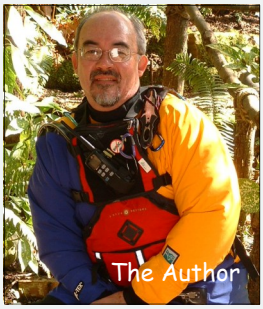
EDITOR'S NOTE: While living in Granby, Ted Wang was an active member of RMSKC. He participated in club events on the Colorado River, Lake Dillon, the Three Lakes (Granby and Shadow Mountain Reservoirs and Grand Lake), Boulder Reservoir and other locations along the Front Range.

In October, 2008, he moved to Bellingham, Washington, where he has easy access to Puget Sound, the San Juan Islands, and the waters of British Columbia. He is active in the Whatcom Association of Kayak Enthusiasts [known as WAKE], serving on their new Safety Committee, and tries to paddle at least once a week, rain or shine.

LESSONS BEING LEARNED IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

By Ted Wang

Since my arrival in Washington state in late October, I've been gaining an appreciation of the differences not only between Colorado and the Pacific Northwest but also between the occasional vacation trip and regular paddling in this kayakers' Mecca. In the following article, I'm hoping to pass along some of the lessons I've been learning so that RMSKC members considering paddle trips in this region may be better prepared for the conditions they'll find here.


The Author

Club members who've paddled on the Grand or Summit County lakes and reservoirs are familiar with rapidly changing weather conditions and cold water, familiarity that is valuable in adjusting to the Pacific Northwest environment. Having the appropriate personal gear and a correctly outfitted kayak takes on added importance when the weather is fickle and the water is frigid. Having a clear realization of the risks involved and the skills to manage the conditions is essential. Yet, as the sign to the right illustrates, even experienced paddlers can meet with disaster.

"FOLLOWING SOME OF THESE STEPS MAY SAVE YOUR LIFE AS IT WOULD HAVE SAVED JIM & BRANDEN'S LIVES. PLEASE DO NOT PUT YOUR FAMILY THROUGH OUR NIGHTMARE."

MARY JO & MIKE GRAN
BRENT ROBINSON
VICKI TALBOTT & PETE WOLFF

CLOTHING

Water temperatures in Puget Sound and around much of British Columbia tend to be in the mid-40s F in winter and only slightly higher in summer. Rain, as everyone knows, is frequent, and I have already had two paddles where rain turned to snow in mid-trip. Virtually no one paddles here in anything other than a full dry suit, with plenty of synthetic or wool layers underneath, with a strong, neoprene spray deck for a tight cockpit seal. It's better to be a bit too warm than not warm enough! People plan clothing for the atmospheric conditions in addition to possible immersion. Wind chill is frequent, with the higher humidity in maritime environments adding to the discomfort. Gloves are essential; ten minutes in water at these temperatures can completely destroy the dexterity needed to re-enter a boat or hold onto deck lines. A waterproof hat or hood is required, given that a very high amount of body heat is lost through the head. Extra clothing should also be carried in dry bags "just in case."

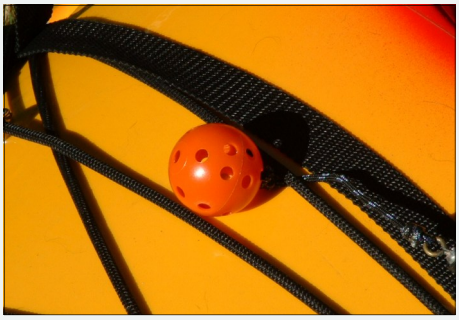
BOAT OUTFITTING

A spare paddle is always carried. Mounting 2 1.5" x 15" waste tubes (available from plumbing or comprehensive building suppliers) on the bow to accept the shafts of a two-piece paddle will protect the joints and also aid in preventing the paddles from being torn away from the boat in heavy seas. These waste tubes have an elbow on one end, which can be cut to size so that the tubes lay flat on the deck. Rescue gear, such as a pump and paddle float and any deck bag are also carried on the bow. In cold water, you don't want clutter on the rear deck should you have to re-enter while on the water!

(Continued from page 22)

I like to have a paddle leash, but launchings and landings may occur on steep beaches and/or in surf and the risk of entrapment or getting entangled in a leash is very real. To avoid serious problems or the indignity of falling into the drink while landing, I have removed the clip that attached the free end of my leash to the deck bungies and replaced it with a practice golf ball (the "wiffle ball" type works well). Now I just slip the ball under the bungee cord so a quick jerk will pull both the ball and leash free.

Fog is common and can arise quickly. Therefore, having a deck compass and the knowledge to use it can be important when crossing a channel or otherwise out of sight of land. Getting a bearing to your destination (or where you've been) before the fog socks in is vital. Many paddlers here affix reflective tape to their paddles and boats to aid in rescue after dark. DOT (Department of Transportation) tape is good, although not inexpensive, and there are other options available.

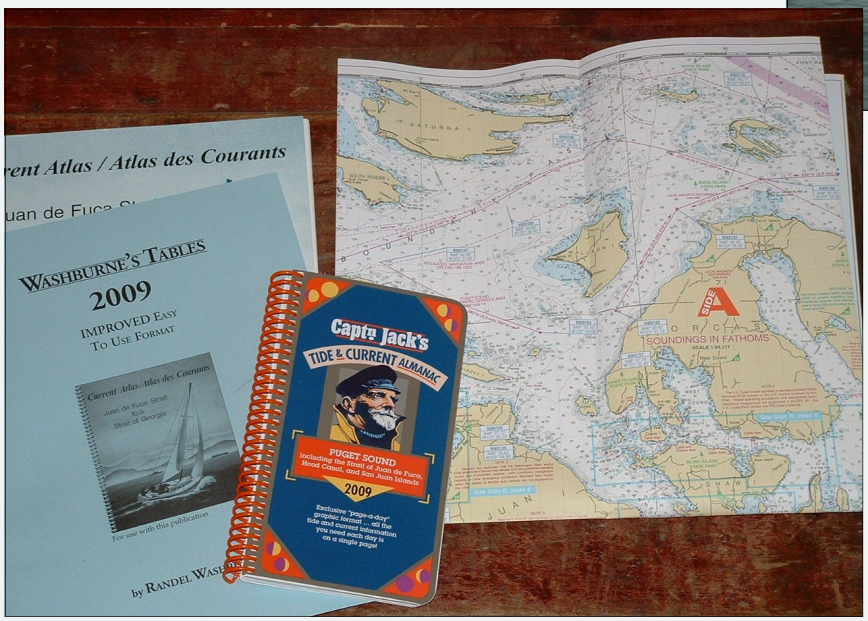


PLANNING

Tidal exchange, currents, wind speed and direction, shipping channels or other constricted traffic areas, and shoals, reefs and rocks along the route are all factors that must be taken account of before getting on the water. There's no real substitute for local knowledge, but looking over charts, tide tables, and a tides and currents atlas (if available) provides a great deal of very important information. Fortunately, the San Juan and Gulf Islands are covered by an excellent atlas, and an annual tide table is published that integrates with the atlas.

Fog on Birch Bay; January, 2009

Understanding the relationship between currents and wind direction/velocity is an important safety consideration. For example, an ebb tide meeting an opposing wind can cause large breaking waves to form rapidly. The amount of fetch, the distance of open water across which wind is blowing, will have much to do with how rough conditions are or will become. If you've paddled in Baja, you probably have encountered katabatic winds that sweep down canyons; we have similar downslope winds. These are all things to consider when planning an outing in the Pacific Northwest.



A FINAL WORD FOR THIS ARTICLE

None of these considerations is intended to discourage anyone from paddling in this spectacular and wonderful area. The ever-changing conditions, coasts that range from rugged cliffs to sandy beaches to estuaries, and the salt air combine to make paddling here sublime. However, thorough preparation is important, for safety's sake as well as simply to enhance the experience by eliminating worries.

Our boats, after all, are called "sea" kayaks. They were designed and built for exactly the sorts of conditions found in this area. In the future, I hope to pass along some additional "lessons learned" and some trip reports. If you have questions, you can email me through the members' forum or directly at: tedwang@comcast.net.

Burrows Bay, with kelp in the water and Mt. Baker in the background

Winter paddling: Lake Whatcom in the snow; February, 2009

Related Website

Ted's new paddle club, *Whatcom Association of Kayak Enthusiasts*, known as WAKE in northwest Washington, organizes incredible opportunities for its members. You will be in awe of their skills and the happenings they enjoy.

Check out their website:
http://www.wakekayak.org/