

Environment and Paddling Levels

The table below shows the basic relationship between a paddler's skills and the sea conditions at hand. Many aspects not shown on the table also contribute to the relative safety of a situation, such as the number of paddlers in the group, their health, the time of day, and local geography. Making the necessary judgments to match the skill level of the paddler with the environmental conditions is an important part of deciding to head out to sea. When the paddlers' level of skill meets or exceeds the maximum predicted environmental level the situation could be judged as safe.

| | NOVICE | BEGINNER | INTERMEDIATE | ADVANCED |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| BASIC SKILLS | First season of paddling. Two days of instruction. Practices forward paddling and turning. | Second season of paddling. Additional week of instruction. Practices, edge control, bracing, rudder strokes, draw strokes. | Additional week of instruction. Practices rough water rescues, capsize recovery, rolling. Takes overnight trips, paddles a loaded kayak. | Practices in surf or whitewater. Practices rough water rescues. Rolling in waves and current. |
| KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE | None | Understands that there is much to learn and wary of overextending themselves. Experienced day trips in several locations. | Understands marine weather reports and forecasts, uses compass and chart, tide and current tables to predict sea conditions. | Extensive broad knowledge and the ability to combine information to make complex decisions in new situations. |
| SELF RESCUE | Wet-exit and paddle float reentry. | Wet-exit and paddle float reentry. | Rolling successful 50% of the time. Reenter and roll with a paddle float. | Rolling successful near 100% of the time. Reenter and roll. |
| JUDGMENT | Unable to judge conditions for themselves. | Can judge existing conditions for themselves. Checks marine weather forecast. | Uses current tables, weather forecast, and charts to judge conditions for themselves. | Able to judge conditions for themselves and others in the group. |
| LEADERSHIP | Should paddle with person of greater ability. | Day trips with other beginners. | Leads short trips in conditions appropriate for the group. | Leads multi-day trips in conditions appropriate for the group. |
| ENVIRONMENT * | | | | |
| WIND kn | < 10 | < 15 | < 20 | > 20 |
| WAVES ft. | < 0.5 | < 1 | < 3 | > 3 |
| SWELL ft. | < 1 | < 2 | < 3 | > 3 |
| CURRENT kn | < 0.5 | < 1.5 | < 3 | > 3 |
| LANDINGS | Easy, sheltered enclosed water. | Easy, sheltered open water, within a large bay. | Frequent landing opportunities, open coast, may require maneuvering around rocks or small breaking waves. Travels out and around prominent headlands between large bays. | Infrequent landing opportunities, open coastal, surf, difficult maneuvering around rocks with breaking waves. Travels along open crossings and inaccessible shoreline. |
| *At each level there are combinations of environmental conditions that would make conditions unsafe. | | | | |

Taken from *Sea Kayaker Handbook of Safety and Rescue*, Doug Alderson & Michael Pardy, Ragged Mountain Press, Maine 2003

Remember, when things start to go wrong the "lemons" start to line up (e.g. a combination of 2 or more of the following factors will contribute to diminishing levels of safety in an exponential curve: poor planning, inadequate skills, deteriorating weather, equipment failure, communication failure, fatigue, illness, etc). Murphy's Law will probably apply.