

# A Christmas canoe conundrum

Rode Island has become the second American state after New Mexico to require all paddlers to wear buoyancy aids at all time or face \$100 fines for not doing so. This affects all users of canoes, kayaks, paddleboards, windsurfers and more. It does not affect swimmers who, unlike paddlers who capsize, do not have large and conspicuous floating objects to hold onto.

## Rules for the worst foreseeable outcome

American states generally have such a requirement for children, typically those under 13, and a few have a blanket requirement in winter months, when colder weather would encourage paddlers to wear more anyway.

Rode Island's Department of Environmental Management say that this is in response to three kayak paddlers without buoyancy aids who drowned last year in the state. Their website gives this as a simple statistic without

any information on the circumstances. One would expect to wear a buoyancy aid on white water, in rough conditions, where there are strong currents, if not a good swimmer or when one's health is unreliable. A significant proportion of drownings generally relate to impairment by alcohol or drugs. DEM's bland statistics throw little light on the reasons for the fatalities. They could have said how many people were not wearing crash helmets or high visibility jackets. What the figures also do not show is how many people had correctly assessed the risks and enjoyed their paddling without problems or restraints. Because of the Gulf Stream we generally have warmer air and water temperatures than on the far side of the Atlantic, especially in the early part of the year, but we would also want to consider wind and wave conditions, whether they are likely to change, and to dress accordingly and take suitable clothing with us. A hot day on a calm watercourse or small lake would not need competent paddlers to take excessive precautions. Of 10 paddling fatalities in the state from 2018 to 2021, four were not wearing buoyancy aids, unlike the other six, who were.

A buoyancy aid will help in some circumstances but it will not stop an unconscious person from drowning, contrary to what DEM claim. For that a full lifejacket is required, as being promoted by our national coach, Oliver Cock, 60 years ago, as worn by nobody in the paddling world today. EU regulations have a standard for buoyancy aids which is short of the lifejacket standards and does not keep the face of an unconscious person out of the water.

Carrying a buoyancy aid is appropriate in many circumstances, for use when necessary. DEM claim it is like a car crash, you cannot put on your safety belt when it happens. With a capsize, however, the problem is usually the long period of time afterwards, starting when you grab your boat, after which putting on a buoyancy aid in the water would be satisfactory, often to keep warm. Those who don't want to be seen, especially if fines result, will secrete themselves away in hidden locations, making them harder to find if they do need help.

Top sprint and marathon paddlers would be horrified at compulsory buoyancy aids and there are many paddlers in more relaxed circumstances who would be equally concerned. A working rule for some canoeists is that if you need to wear your spraydeck then you also need to wear your buoyancy aid. Certainly we should encourage paddlers, particularly novices, to wear kit with which they feel comfortable but not impose a blanket rule. It is not unusual for long distance paddlers, such as transatlantic or those on major circumnavigations, not to bother with clothes at all once clear of spectators. It has not been unknown for a paddler circulating in a stopper to remove his buoyancy aid to break free by swimming deep.

This was one of five enforcements brought in by DEM this year, the others largely applicable to powered craft. Like the others, it seems most would be better addressed by education for application where appropriate. We need to be advised how to assess the circumstances at the time, not have rules imposed by somebody in an office for the worst foreseeable situation, assisting only a tiny proportion of those on the water.

Recently a group of us inspected a water authority reservoir for possible use for supply of a canal. A standard list of kit that had to be worn included helmet, hi vis vest and safety goggles. It did not include buoyancy aid. It did include safety boots, ie steel toe caps and soles. Presumably somebody in an office, possibly insurers, had a list. My list would have included buoyancy aid rather than weighted boots. I believe in the appropriate equipment for the circumstances.

After all, you wouldn't want to have the way you drive imposed on you by somebody who did not know how to drive a car and didn't know the current road conditions, would you?

Stuart Fisher

Oh, Santa, I would like  
A new canoe for Christmas  
But I don't know if  
I want it long or short  
Because I am not sure  
If I am going to paddle  
Out on the ocean  
Or take up white water  
Canoeing as my winter sport.

I also I like a nice quiet  
Picnic and yet I nearly  
Always canoe alone  
And, while short and fat  
Are easy for sticking  
On the top of the car,  
Long is easier for paddling  
Swiftly on home.

I could, I suppose, just  
Settle for a sit on  
And have myself a wet bum  
As that would also be  
Handy for the days when  
My Jack Russell and my  
Lady friend want to come.

A Canadian might be handy  
If I wanted to fetch home  
Holly and a Crimbo tree  
But I can say I enjoy  
The paddling motion  
And I would rather stay away  
From anywhere that is  
Pure wilderness or where  
Bears and blackflies might be

Or I could just leave it to  
You and the elves to sort  
Out a canoe for me  
And accept what I find  
In under the Christmas tree  
And be happy with what  
I am given to paddle  
And not be so fussy or look  
For so much canoeing flexibility.

It might be that the canoe  
That I have already is  
Actually the chosen one  
Because, when you have  
Access to half a dozen or so  
Already, to buy yet another  
Even at Christmas is actually  
Being a bit paddling dumb.

Kevin Pyne

### Publisher contact

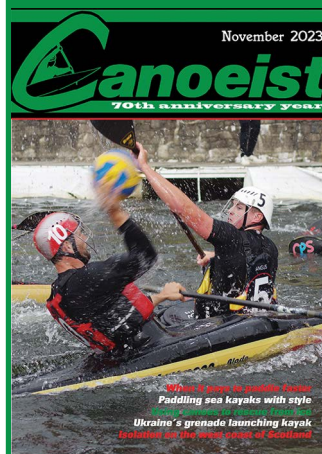
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Confrontation between Dragon and Ulster during the open final of the national polo championships in Liverpool.