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# CANOE SAFETY BRIEF

May 2018

Nothing can replace professional instruction and experience. Know your limitations. We highly recommend hands-on training, especially self-rescue and rescuing others. If this is not possible watch online training videos and practice. Ask your MWR Customer Service Representative for more training information.

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## TRIP PLANNING

- It is unsafe to paddle in weather, wind, temperature, and water conditions that you are not prepared for. Check weather reports. Weather can change instantly.
- Plan your route; leave a float/paddle plan with someone you trust. The *Paddle Ready App* is a great resource with float plans, safety and gear checklists, accident reporting, paddle locations and more.
- Never paddle alone. Paddling with a friend will be more fun and increase safety. Companions can come to your aid if needed. Canoeing with a two or more crafts is safer.
- Ideally, paddle with someone who is more experienced—it's a great way to learn.
- Don't paddle where you don't want to swim! Stay close to shore so you can reach it in an emergency, it's great risk management...and more interesting.
- Start your trip going into the wind and return going downwind, or paddle one-way (point A to point B) downwind and have a vehicle waiting at the take-out.

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## COLD WATER AND TEMPERATURES

- Prepare to get wet! Dress for immersion. Avoid cotton clothing. Dress in layers. Wear clothing appropriate for the area and conditions.
- Protect your feet. Footwear will help protect your feet from common cuts, punctures, and bruising when carrying the boat to and from the water, and getting in and out of the boat.
- Cold weather and water. Cold water is extremely dangerous. It quickly robs body strength, diminishes coordination, and impairs judgment.
- Immersion in water as warm as 60 degrees can initiate "Cold Water Shock". When a paddler capsizes and is suddenly immersed in cold water, the body's first instinctive reaction is to gasp for air, followed by increased heart rate, blood pressure, and disorientation. This can, and has led to cardiac arrest. Not wearing a PFD multiplies the problem. No PFD combined with cold water shock is often fatal.
- Cold water or weather can also lead to dangerous hypothermia. Typical symptoms include shivering, impaired judgment, clumsiness, loss of dexterity, and slurred speech.
- When paddling in water 60 degrees or less a wet suit is a must, and a dry suit highly recommended.

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## OTHER ITEMS

- Don't lose your gear, tie or bungee equipment in the boat.
- Use a dry bag to keep your gear dry.
- Waterproof cell phone.
- Keeping your body fueled with high carbohydrate foods and lots of water helps prevent hypothermia. Bring snacks and a water bottle.
- The sun's rays are intensified by reflection off sand and water. Use sunscreen.
- Have a towel and a change of clothes in your vehicle.
- Eye glasses strap.
- Insect repellent may be needed.

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## ON THE WATER

- PFDs should be worn. Washington State law requires a PFD and signal device—such as a whistle.
  - Never exceed the watercraft's carrying capacity, verify maximum number of people and carrying weight.
  - Care for and your group members. Watch for signs of fatigue, hypothermia, proper use of equipment, and other problems that may arise.
  - Get in and out of the canoe in shin deep or deeper water. Keeping weight low, slowly step to the center of the boat. Don't let the boat hit the bottom.
  - If the boat capsizes, hang on, stay with it; hold on to the paddle and secure it. Never get separated from your boat, it's your greatest safety asset. If you fall in and it's breezy or windy your boat will literally sail away from you.
  - Stay close to shore, if the boat capsizes, swim it to shore, empty it and continue paddling.
  - Practice defensive paddling and avoid others. Determine where other boats—especially power and sailboats—are and set course accordingly. Never cross in front of other watercraft.
  - Rivers, currents, open water, big waves, surf, and moving water are especially dangerous; they require advanced skills and/or specialized equipment. MWR doesn't provide this equipment.
  - Don't mix alcohol or drugs and paddling—never boat under the influence.
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