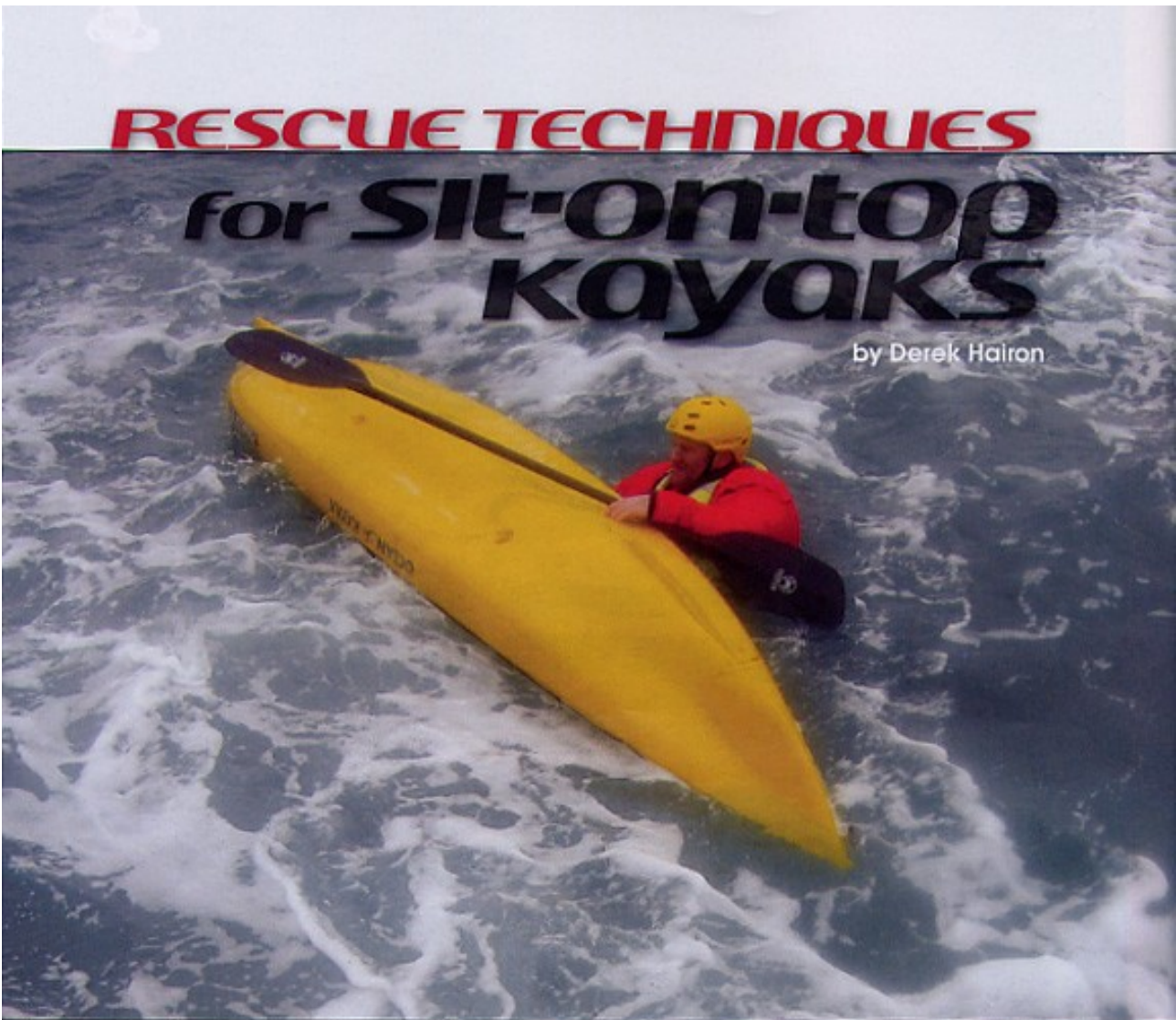


RESCUE TECHNIQUES

for Sit-on-top KAYAKS

by Derek Hairon



Capsize. It's going to happen at some stage. You may have been pushing your skills to the limit, made a bad decision to nip through a channel, or made a small error and flipped over.

Rescue skills are the last thing many sit-on-top kayakers think about. I have lost count of how many people I fish out of the water whose first comment is "I didn't think you could capsize a sit-on-top".

Knowing what to do is crucial for a quick and efficient rescue. Practice is the difference between a capsize being a new challenge and an opportunity to laugh about later, or a potentially fatal event.

SOME BASICS

Do not paddle alone and ensure you stay in contact with your paddling partners. It is no use being 200m away from each other.

Plan your trip according to the weather and water conditions. Factor in your personal skill levels and those of other paddlers. If you are the most experienced paddler in the group ensure that you only attempt trips within the limits of the others in the group. It's no fun to flip over in an area of rough water to discover that the rest of the group do not have the skills to rescue you.

Be honest. If you are not happy with the conditions say so. Others are probably thinking the same thing. If you are pressured by other paddlers to go afloat when you are not happy with conditions it is time to find new paddling partners. The great kayak trip will still be there tomorrow. Leave it for another day when you feel it is right for you.

GETTING STARTED

Most paddlers underestimate how buoyancy aid pockets loaded with safety kit and kayak deck fittings will make getting back on board difficult. It is harder than you think to just swim back to shore wearing a buoyancy aid, wet suit, paddle and other kit.

Learn what it feels like to swim ashore pulling or pushing the kayak. Most are surprised at how hard this is. It will remind solo paddlers of the risks they take if no one is around to help them.



Start off without lots of kit attached to the sit-on-top. Add equipment as you get proficient. Try out these methods in calm locations and then in safe deep water locations where you experience choppy or rough water.

Carry a knife in case you get snagged in any deck lines or ropes attached to the kayak.

FLIPPING

Grab hold of the kayak and paddle as soon as you can.



An alternative is to reach onto the upturned hull and flip it over. During an accidental capsize people often instinctively adopt this method as they try to get out of the water.



ASSISTED RESCUE

This is a fast and stable method. It creates a raft-like platform with both kayaks side by side.

If your partner is nearby they may already be able to help flip your kayak over.

The rescuer should try to face their kayak the opposite way to the upturned craft. It is easier to give instructions and see what is happening.



The rescuer reaches right across the kayak, and can assist by pulling the victim on board.



The rescuer keeps very low. Ideally your armpit should almost be in contact with the deck of the kayak.

Some rest their elbow and arm across the deck to help stabilise the kayak as you climb on.



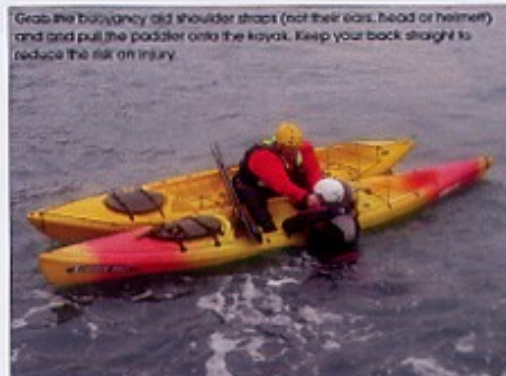
It takes longer when you do not communicate with each other. Time yourselves to measure the difference talking or not talking makes.

Do not let go of the victims kayak until they have sorted themselves out and have got their breath back in case they fall back in.

SIDE SADDLE

This method comes with a safety warning. Take great care to avoid back injury.

The rescuer swivels side ways and puts their legs and feet into the other kayak.

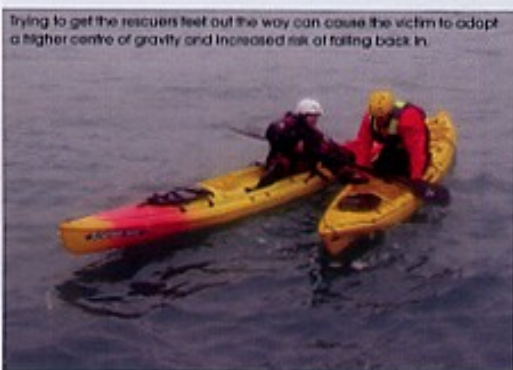


Some prefer this method, but it depends on the design of the kayak, size and build of the paddlers. If your feet are not able to reach the far side of the victims kayak your back takes a lot of the strain and you risk injury. Both Steve and Krista found this method put strain on their backs as they reached over to grab the victim.

There is a risk that as the person climbs on board the rescuer can become unbalanced and fall in.



The rescuer's feet can also get in the way as you try to sit down.



Trying to get the rescuer's feet out the way can cause the victim to adopt a higher centre of gravity and increased risk of falling back in.

GETTING BACK ON BOARD

An alternative method of climbing back on board during an assisted rescue is to climb up the stern of the kayak. This is much harder than it looks and can be very difficult if you have hit on the rear deck. It is hard for the rescuer to help pull you on board.

PADDLES

If your paddle is not attached to the kayak by a paddle leash, pass it to the rescuer so it does not drift away.



Grab hold of your paddle before it drifts away.

It is surprising just how fast a paddle can drift away from you. Consider buying or making a paddle leash. This is a means of attaching the paddle to the kayak by a long length of cord or elasticated cord.

I prefer the leash to be attached to the kayak as it gives me more freedom to move about.

If you do not use a paddle leash check the layout of your sit-on-top. Some have built in elasticated straps that act as paddle holders.

If you use a leash carry a knife on you in case you ever get tangled in the cord and need to cut yourself free.

LESS AGILE PADDLERS

Less agile paddlers present special problems if they lack upper body strength to climb on board. Consider this factor when planning trips. It is essential that you find the best rescue method to use. You may need to select easier trips in order to build in an extra margin of safety.



A strop can help less agile paddlers get back on board.

A strop can be made from a pre cut length of rope (non floating or weighted is best) or improvised with a length of tow line shortened to make a loop. The victim then puts their foot in to the loop to stand up and flop onto the kayak. You need to work out how best to fasten it to the kayak.

CONCLUSION

Think of rescues as another kayaking skill to learn.

Whatever method you adopt to deal with a capsize, ensure you take time to practice and adapt it to meet your needs and those of the group.

What is easy for one person can be hard or even impossible for another.

Sign up to a safety course. This will enable you to practice and find out what is best for you rather than by trying to learn by trial and error.

INFORMATION ON THE WRITER

Derek Hailon is the author of *Sit-on-Top Kayak a Beginner's Manual*, British Canoe Union Level 5 Sea Kayak Coach and Director of Jersey Kayak Adventures Ltd, one of the leading specialist sit-on-top kayak outfitters in the United Kingdom. He has kayaked for over forty years. Derek first learned to kayak around the incredible coastline of Jersey in the Channel Islands (which has some of the largest tides in the world) after his father built him a sit-on-top kayak. He has undertaken many kayak expeditions, most notably a circumnavigation of Ireland in fifty-eight days and expeditions to Alaska, Canada, as well as white water kayaking in Nepal.

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