

FACT SHEET: Paddlesports safety

The popularity of paddlesports is on the rise nationwide, according to the Outdoor Foundation's 2015 Special Report on Paddlesports. The Washington State Parks Boating Program is leading a statewide effort to create a culture of safety around paddlesports.

What the data show

One-half of recreational boating fatalities happen on calm water. Nine out of 10 drownings happen on inland waters and a few hundred feet from shore. In many incidences, life jackets were on board but not worn.

- Eight out of every 10 boaters who drowned were in boats under 21 feet.
- In 2017, 138 people died while kayaking or canoeing and 90 percent of those fatalities were due to drowning.



Source: 2017 Recreational Boating Statistics, published by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard and Office of Auxiliary and Boating Safety.

- In 2017, 66 percent of boating fatalities happened in boats under 21 feet long and half of those were in kayaks/canoes.
- From 2012 to 2017, 68 percent of boating fatalities happen on inland waters (38 percent on lakes and 30 percent on rivers).
- The leading cause of death was drowning.
- Since 2012, almost half of all boating fatalities in Washington state involved paddlecraft.

Source: Washington State Parks Boating Program Recreational Boating Accident Report data.

State Parks Boating Program recommends...

While many paddlecraft are easy to use without a lot of training, the Boating Program recommends that people take an education course to help with technique and improve confidence, all of which will enhance their experience. Classes are taught through local clubs and outfitters, city and county parks and recreation departments and online.

Washington state's diverse waterways of rivers, lakes, bays, inlets and coastal areas require different skills, preparation and safety equipment. Regardless of the type of waterway, the following recommendations will help improve safety and reduce the chance of an accident.

- **Always wear a life jacket.** Study after study show that if people wear life jackets, they are more likely to survive if something goes wrong.



- **Learn what to do if the paddlecraft tips over.** Practice capsizing in a safe place and self-rescue where others are around to assist if needed.
- **Pick an activity level that matches their ability and gear.** Skill levels should be suitable for the water and weather conditions before getting underway.
- **Never go out on the water while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.** (Boaters should check their prescription and non-prescription drugs for any side effects that could impede the ability to be alert.)
 - If found guilty of operating a paddlecraft under the influence of alcohol or drugs, the penalty is a gross misdemeanor punishable by a maximum fine of \$5,000 or 364 days in jail.
- **Always check the weather—and know that it can change rapidly.** Check tides, too, if going out on bays, inlets and coastal waterways.
- **Be visible** and wear brightly colored clothes. Paddlecraft are not easily seen from larger boats.
- **Dress for the water temperature—not the air temperature.** Expect to get wet. (Find water temperature info at: <https://www.nodc.noaa.gov/dsdt/cwtg/>.)
- **Bring two forms of communication** that work while wet such as a whistle, personal locator beacon (PLB), flares, a VHF radio and/or cell phone in a waterproof bag.
- **File a float plan** with family and friends that notes where you will put in, your planned travel route, exit location and expected return time. And don't change your course while out.



Required equipment

State law requires that the following equipment be carried on paddlecraft.

- One properly fitted, serviceable, Coast Guard-approved life jacket per person on board.
- A sounding device: horn, whistle or bell.
- At least one navigation light, such as a lantern or flashlight.
- On coastal waters, nighttime visual distress signal such as flares.

Need more information?

- State Parks Boating Program: www.paddlesafewa.org
- 2016 Recreational Boating Statistics: <http://uscgboating.org/library/accident-statistics/Recreational-Boating-Statistics-2016.pdf>.
- 2015 Special Report on Paddlesports, *Outdoor Foundation* <http://www.outdoorfoundation.org/research.paddlesports.2015.html>.
- *Top 10 Safety Tips*, American Canoe Association http://www.americancanoe.org/?page=Top_10.