

# Batten Down the Hatches!

*It sounds so...swashbuckling. But however mundane, the lowly hatch is a crucial piece of equipment. Here is the lowdown on lids.*

By Chip Walsh

Every kayak has hatches. We need them. When everything is right with them, we hardly give them a thought, but if they become a problem, it can really take the fun out of kayaking.

I recently bought a Current Designs Solstice with strap-down, composite hatch lids, which, it turns out, is one of the better systems, but hatch type was not among my decision criteria. Every time I fumble with the strap system of the Solstice hatches, however, I find myself thinking back to the relative simplicity of the rubber hatches on my previous kayak which has led me ponder hatches. This article shares my pondering.

What are we looking for? Dry interior, easy on/off, economical, and smooth deck profile. The first three are self-evident, but why a smooth deck profile? That last one I didn't think about until I was crawling across the deck while practicing rescues.

There are several types of hatches on composite, fiberglass, and plastic kayaks. I know little about wood boats but suspect hatches on wood boats would make a whole separate article.

I've identified four basic hatch types:

1. Hard hatch and gasket, or on older kayaks, hard hatch over neoprene covers
2. Rubber hatches
3. Screw-in hatches, now obsolete and only found on older kayaks
4. Latched and hinged hard hatches.



On a recent afternoon, I stopped by Annapolis Canoe and Kayak to talk hatches with CPA-member and ACK manager Dave Isbell. I learned that for sea kayaks currently on the market, there are really only two options: hard hatches and rubber hatches. There are almost no sea kayaks with screw-in hatches and the latched and hinged hatches are mostly confined to recreational and fishing kayaks.

A number of rec boat manufacturers are now making sea-kayak-like boats with latched and hinged hatches, and if they sell well, we may see latch-and-hinge hatches spread to sea kayaks, but that's just my speculation. These hatches have latch systems incorporated into the

hatch cover. Opening and closing the hatch is accomplished with a quick rotation of the latch. Then the paddler raises the hatch along a hinged side. These are very easy to use, and so far users are reporting the systems keep the water out, but I wonder how often those users roll or plow through waves that come onto the deck. Some of the latches are embedded in the hatch while others have raised latches, and I would worry about inadvertently opening a latch during a rescue. Attached to the boat at the hinge, the cover will not be lost, but the hinged hatch will make it hard to load gear into the hull from



the side of the kayak on which the hatch is hinged, and I'd worry about breaking or bending the hatch while it is in the upright, open position. Since this type of hatch cover is presently seldom fitted onto sea kayaks, however, we don't need to give that style much discussion.

Hard hatch and gasket type are used by Current Designs, mostly on composite boats, but CD also offers a slightly different system on their plastic boats. Both feature a solid, detachable hatch cover made of the same material as used for the hull. The hatches are tethered to the boat with a small line and clip, which is good, because I'm pretty sure they would sink. On composite boats, the hatches are fastened down by three sets of webbing straps that are joined over the hatch and tightened by neat little toggles. The key to the dryness of the hatch is that, as the straps are tightened, the hatch compresses a gasket all the way around the hatch. Ideally, the gasket seals in a molded groove around the hatch opening.

On the plastic boats, there are only two sets of straps fastening the hatch, and rather than a gasket, there is a rubber hatch cover under the plastic hatch cover.

CPA member Greg Welker tells an anecdote about taking his hatch cover to the camping store when he was shopping for cookware. He wanted to make sure the pot would fit through the hatch. Not such a great plan because the actual hatch opening is several inches smaller than the size of the hard hatch. Moral? Don't judge the hard hatch opening by the cover.

After a year's use, I'm pleased with the performance of the hatches on my Solstice. They have stayed totally dry. The three-strap-system frustrates me when I fumble with the straps and toggles, but it doesn't take me much longer to fasten than a rubber hatch. I haven't had the boat long enough to address maintenance, but I can't help wondering what would happen if, in the future, I have to replace a hatch, and my

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kayak is no longer made. Will I be able to get another hatch? I have heard complaints of toggles being unfastened during practices and of breaking or catching on paddlers doing reentry, but I have not experienced these problems.

While touring, paddlers sometimes report their rubber hatches were chewed and damaged by animals wanting to get at food stored in the boat. Supposedly the hard hatches are more resistant to "chew-throughs." In-hatch food storage is not recommended in bear country, but many campers routinely store food under their hard hatch covers.

### Rubber Hatches

"Rubber" hatches are probably not true rubber but a modern, usually black, rubber-like material. I call them "Valley-style" because the first ones I saw were made by Valley. Other makers of rubber hatches include Sea-Lect and Kajak Sport. By far, this style is the most common seen on sea kayaks.

Rubber hatches snap over a raised rim at the hatch opening, almost like a Tupperware top snaps on. Often there is a smooth, flat depression about an inch wide that runs below the raised lip of the hatch, which I am going to call the race. The hatches are put in place like a spray skirt. Start by getting one side on and then work your hands around pressing the cover down and into place. The raised rim of the kayak has a flared lip. The hatch cover needs to be firmly seated on this lip, and the edges need to be pressed down into the race. Failure to seat the hatch properly results in leakage.

On my tour of sea kayaks at ACK, I noted a number of different sealing systems are used by the different makers of rubber-hatched boats. Due to the wide variety, I don't think one can make a blanket statement about the ability of rubber hatches to keep the hatch dry. Thus, when considering a boat with rubber hatches, I recommend checking on performance by talking with other paddlers who are using the specific hatch type on the boat you are considering.

Most of the rubber hatches now come with a tab along the circumference of the hatch. The tab provides a handle-like spot to grab when removing the hatch. My older rubber hatches lacked this feature and it could be difficult to begin prying the hatch off, especially when the hatch and my fingers were cold. This feature is a real improvement. Most rubber hatches also have some sort of lanyard attaching them to the boat.

A knock on the rubber hatches is that they decompose over time and are pricey to replace, costing over \$100 each. Life expectancy of the hatches varies, but I think if you have these hatches, you will replace

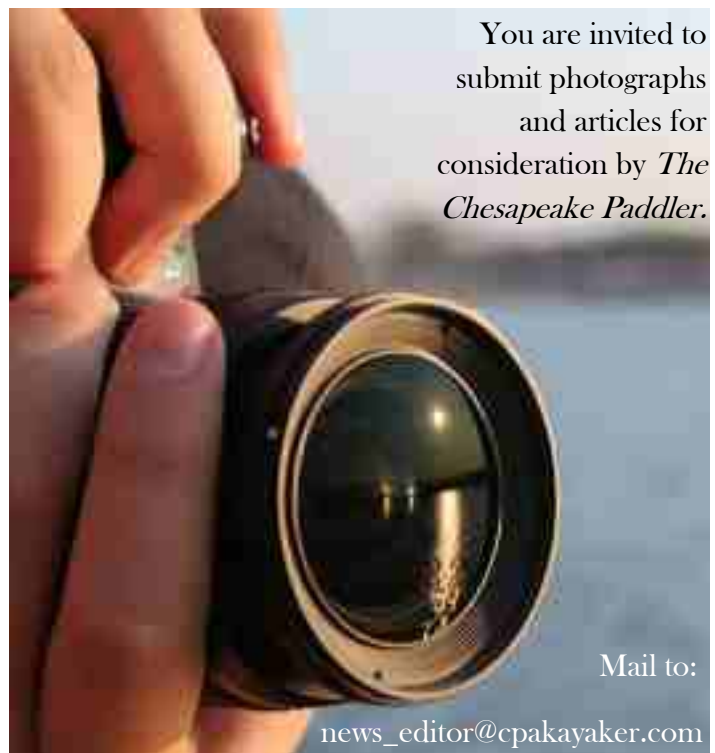
them within five to ten years. A number of factors affect the rate of decomposition. Some makers have now incorporated a hard, plastic center in their rubber hatches. The edge of the hatches where they seal to the rim on the hatch opening is still the rubber material, but it seems that the mixed material hatches may hold up longer than the all-rubber type. In any case, frequent and liberal application of a plastic-protectant like 303 is recommended to make it easier to put on the hatch cover and extend the life of rubber covers.

### Conclusions

Most paddlers are not going to base kayak buying decisions on the boat's hatches, but it is certainly worth thinking about while shopping. For those who will tour with their boats, the size of the hatch opening is relevant and bigger is better.

Hard hatches have the benefit of minimal extra futzing around with the straps, but the challenge of reduced hatch opening size. Long term, there is no guarantee paddlers will be able to buy replacement hatches.

There are many systems of rubber hatches and most work well, but I think I'd scrutinize any individual system before I bought. Also, buyers should talk to sellers about the life expectancy of the rubber hatch since most fail at some point and are expensive to replace. Paddlers facing rubber hatch replacement should consider alternative, mixed-material hatches that have longer life or lower cost. Because so many boats use rubber hatches and so many companies make them, replacement rubber hatches will probably always be available. ♦



You are invited to submit photographs and articles for consideration by *The Chesapeake Paddler*.

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