

Chesapeake Paddler



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Clear the Decks! and Get Ready for Action

by Tom Noffsinger

There's an old naval expression, "Clear the Decks," that urges seamen to stow gear, leave the deck of the ship and prepare for battle. That same mentality applies to sea kayakers, particularly as you start paddling in rougher conditions. You're not preparing for exchanging cannon fire, but if you have lots of gear on your deck, you may be in for a different kind of battle altogether.

I'm a big advocate of having as little gear on the deck of my boat as possible when on an open water paddle, or even when teaching or leading trips on flat water. The reasons are simple – safety and efficiency. The more items I have on my deck, the more there is to get in the way.

Bilge pumps, paddle floats, deck bags, water bottles, camera cases and all the other stuff that some paddlers carry on their deck can snag lines when towing, get in the way of having someone climb on the back deck for a rescue or may snag a PFD during a layback roll. The biggest issue seems to be interference with t-rescues, specifically people trying to get up on their back decks. Frequently when I see people practicing t-rescues, they either:

- cannot get up on the deck at all due to the clutter or,
- they remove the items and hold them in their hands while trying to get up on the back deck (!) or,
- they remove the items and throw them into the cockpit, only to have to remove them again in order for the paddler to re-enter the cockpit or,
- if they do get up on the cluttered rear deck, they have a hard time sliding their bodies around to get into the cockpit because a PFD strap gets caught on the pump, or something else is digging into their chest or side.



Clean deck (top) versus cluttered deck

If you ever have to do a t-rescue in a serious situation, you do not want any extra steps or have gear flying around (whether you are the swimmer or the rescuer).

Things like pumps and paddle floats also are the first to go when waves start breaking over the bow or when someone capsizes.

When things get dicey, that's when you need to focus more attention on the water, bracing, your paddling buddies, and effectively maneuvering the boat. The last thing you want distracting you is having to chase down gear that has washed off the deck.



Paddle float stored securely behind seat

With a little planning, you can keep your deck very clear. On an open water crossing, I may have a chart (in a chart case clipped to the deck line and under the bungee), a contact tow securely fastened to the deck line, and a spare paddle under the bungees in the stern. That's it. Everything else can be strategically placed, so it's there when you need it, and out of the way when you don't.

Pumps, sponges and paddle floats can be stored securely along side or behind the seat (see photo), or under your deck. You may need to fashion a mini-cell "holder" and glue it to the underside of your deck (see photo), cut down the pump height, or rig some bungee in a zigzag under the deck, but you can get it all there. After all, the only time you'll need those items is likely when the spray skirt is already off the boat.

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Water bottles can be stored in the day hatch, or better yet, use a hydration bladder on your PFD or stored behind the seat with the tube running up through your skirt tunnel. Hydration bladders let you drink more often without stopping to fuss with a water bottle, and in the case of a PFD-mounted option, you have water even if you don't have your boat for some reason.

Snacks go in a PFD pocket, along with your radio and camera. If your pocket isn't big enough, consider clipping the radio to your PFD, similarly to how you might clip it to a belt (make sure the antenna won't put your eye out!). Having the radio on your person is much better than watching this critical rescue device sink if you go over or float away if you get separated from your kayak.

For me, extra paddles go on the stern, under the bungees, with the power face facing up. I know the arguments of keeping them on the front deck (e.g., easier to reach). I've had paddles come loose from there too many times in the surf, but it has happened rarely when I've stowed them on the stern deck. There are devices (leggings, extra bungee loops) that help keep them more secure on the front deck, but that's more complication in my mind. I've never had to recover a split paddle and roll up, and I'd argue that if I'm good enough to pull out half a paddle, get it oriented and roll up with it, I can probably practice enough to recover it just as well from the stern as from the bow.



Mini cell foam pump holder under deck

The exception to this rear deck preference is if I have a Greenland paddle—because of its length, I can put far more of it under the multiple bungees on the front deck and it is more secure there.

The next time you go paddling, give your boat a once-over before you launch and look for ways to de-clutter your deck, rather than adding to it. This can be a great conversation with your paddling partners, too – talk about how and where you store your gear. Instead of talking about the cool new piece of kit, brag about where you store it out of the way!

Paddle safe and paddle often.

Tom Noffsinger is an ACA L4 Open Water Instructor, a BCU 5 star aspirant and lives in Chesapeake, Virginia. He teaches at a variety of symposia and excels at helping paddlers take their skills to the next level. Tom's favorite areas to paddle include Anglesey, Wales, the Triangle off the coast of Tybee Island, Georgia, and Nova Scotia. Tom writes a blog, online at <http://kayaktom.com/>.

Reviewer Comments

Brian Blankinship: Tom is an experienced sea kayaker who plays in rough water a lot. When kayak surfing consider anything on the deck lost. I changed brands of pumps in order to get one that would fit behind the seat of my kayaks, where I have always stored my paddle float and stirrup. One additional suggestion: "Dummy cord" all your gear so you are not the "dummy" that loses your stuff. I tie a short line from my deck compass to my deck line (saved me from failing BCU 4 Star where equipment loss was an automatic failure). I use inexpensive plastic carabineers to clip my pump, paddle float, stirrup, and other gear to the seat strap inside my boat. That keeps the rescue "yard sale" to a minimum. I also dummy cord my hat and sunglasses to my PFD with the same type carabineer so I have them after I roll.

Paula Hubbard: I'm 100% in agreement with Tom's Clear the Deck approach. Having a lot of gear on the deck only gets in the way, especially when doing rescues or reentries. Gear on the back decks can interfere with the paddler climbing in, and gear on the front deck makes it harder to empty and stabilize the boat and may even interfere with your strokes. It's also important to have key safety items such as a VHF radio or signaling devices securely attached to you and not to your boat in the unfortunate event that you are separated from your kayak. One additional comment: When securing gear in the cockpit, it should be secured so that you can get to it when needed, but in such a way that it won't fall out during a T rescue. Loose gear is a hazard no matter where it comes from.

([Continued](#) from page 4) **CPA Paddler Profile ~ Mike Hamilton**

Scariest/most dangerous trip/experience and why? Paddling around Bahia-Honda in the Florida Keys. I'm in a sweet Betsie Bay Kayak and Cindy is paddling a rented sit-on-top. I thought that she was going to kill me for making her do that...I guess that we should have switched. Alligators, sharks and surf I can handle – angry wives are way too dangerous.

Bucket list trips: Baja Mexico; Anglesey, Wales; and Chesapeake Bay from Elk Neck to Kiptopeke

Any formal training or ACA/BCU certifications: ACA L3 Coastal Kayak Instructor, BCU 4 star skill award (old system), BCU Coach 2 (inactive). Teaching others helped me learn a ton about kayaking and people.

Three things you like most about paddling? Independence, exploration, exercise.

What do you like about CPA? I have met some outstanding people in the group. There's something special about the bond between kayakers, and CPA creates opportunities to form that bond with a lot of people. I also like the general attitude about safety held by the majority of club members.

One thing other people find interesting about you: One thing??? I also play (at) Mandolin (Bluegrass mostly), enjoy casual birding and bugging (is that a word?), read books aloud with Cindy-then see the movie, read the cliff notes and discuss (nerds!). I hold a Bachelor's degree in Entomology and a Master's degree in avian neurophysiology – but I think I forgot all of it! Now I focus more on finding balance and happiness in life rather than seeking its secrets. It's all good.