

The Chesapeake Paddler



Volume 30 Issue II

Publication of The Chesapeake Paddlers Association, Inc.

March 2020

Hands-on training at Cold Water Workshop

In the classroom and on the water, kayakers learn about cold water safety

If putting away a perfectly good sea kayak for three or four months each year is too much to bear, learning about cold water safety is the first step out of those winter blues. Kayaking in winter has many rewards; quiet waters, few boaters and winter wildlife. But it takes knowledge, preparation and the right gear to extend your paddling season. The CPA/National Center for Cold Water Safety Workshop is a good place to start.

More than 35 eager kayakers attended this year's workshop at the Cult Classic Brewery on Kent Island for a classroom session on cold water safety followed by a chance to test their cold water gear in the chilly waters of Kent Narrows.

"More than 90 percent of kayak fatalities are attributable to cold water," said event organizer Catriona Miller at the opening session. "Capsizing in cold water without protection is the greatest hazard in paddle sports."

Cold water doesn't look dangerous, and when the air temperature is warm it's tempting to get that kayak out. All seems well until a capsize occurs. If not properly dressed for



Catriona Miller opened the workshop with a comprehensive overview of topics related to cold water safety.



Participants at the Cold Water Workshop got the chance to test their cold water gear in 42-degree water at Kent Narrows.

cold water immersion, a capsize quickly turns into a desperate race against time and cold water's lethal power.

Understanding cold water's effects is a key first step to stay safe. Miller and other presenters provided a wealth of information to help kayakers understand how to prepare for paddling in cold water. Topics included: What is cold water and why is it so dangerous? The four stages of immersion; The Five Golden Rules of cold water safety; Myths and misconceptions; Principles of insulation; Proper testing and use of cold water gear; Protecting your head, neck, torso, arms, legs, hands and feet and how to maintain your gear.

Even with proper gear, every entry into cold water is a race against incapacitation, when the effects of cold water overpower the paddler. Without protection, incapacitation happens fast. But even with proper gear, the time to incapacitation is just delayed, not avoided.

After Miller gave an overview of cold water safety, CPA member and founder of the [National Center for Cold Water](#)

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National Center for Cold Water Safety founder Moulton Avery joined the question and answer session via video conference.

Safety Moulton Avery joined the conversation from his new home in the Pacific Northwest via video conference.

“Every person reacts differently to cold water because of body composition and what they are wearing,” said Avery. “That’s why we stress getting in the gear you plan to wear and swim testing it in a safe environment. Do it in the conditions you expect to paddle in and at different water temperatures to see how you react. You need to get an idea of how long it takes you to start feeling the effects of immersion.”

Avery also stressed practicing self rescues and other “worst case” tasks in cold water so you know what it’s like before a crisis occurs.

CPA member Paula Hubbard then gave an overview of the types of cold water gear paddlers use, from wetsuits for warmer conditions to dry suits for colder temps. “Dry suits by themselves provide very little thermal protection,” Hubbard noted. “You have to make sure you wear enough insulating layers, such as fleece, to keep you warm. And as others have said, only swim testing will let you know how many layers will be enough to keep you warm.” Hubbard also went over protecting the parts of your body not protected by a wet or dry suit, such as your hands, head and neck.

Just as important as having the right gear is maintaining it so it functions properly when you need it most. CPA member Jim Zawlocki discussed caring for a dry suit, including tips for washing it, maintaining neck and wrist gaskets and tips for replacing them.

After the classroom session, it was time to get wet. About a dozen class members donned their dry suits and plunged into 42-degree water at Kent Narrows under the supervision of Jim Zawlocki. After several minutes in the water and a few full

immersions, participants got a good idea of what being in cold water really feels like. Some were shocked at the cold’s intensity.

Others issues that came up such as water getting in suits, insulating layers not warm enough and the rapid loss of feeling in hands.

Afterwards, it was back to the brewery for some hot soup made by CPA Coordinator Bill Smith and goodbyes. Sea kayaking in winter or just adding an extra month in late fall or early spring has a lot of rewards, just make sure you have the gear and the knowledge to stay safe!

For more information, visit:

[The National Center for Cold Water Safety.](#)

(Workshop photos by Rich Stevens and Bill Upton)



Jim Zawlocki covered how to care for cold water gear.



Paula Hubbard discussed what to wear for cold water paddling and demonstrated a storm cag with CPA member Ed Johnson.

Workshop participant provides valuable insights



Mary White, above, a member of the Jersey Shore Sea Kayaking Association, attended the Cold Water Safety Workshop. She was kind enough to share her thoughts after swim testing her cold water gear:

"The big take away for me is that it is one thing to learn about cold water danger in a book or workshop or by

reading about it and quite another to field test your dry suit and put your face in 43-degree water. My dry suit had no leaks and I wore a base layer and fleece layer. My cold water clothing kept me dry and I had good core warmth for the 11 minutes I was in the water.

"My neoprene gloves failed after five minutes. I could not handle a cell phone after that. I would not have been able to make an emergency call and it would have been very difficult to hang onto my kayak and paddle if I was swimming. My hands simply would not work.

"After volunteering to dunk my head (I was wearing a thick neoprene hood) my face felt like it was stabbed by 100 knives and I instantly experienced intense brain freeze (ice cream headache) that was 10 times worse than anything I ever experienced before. ...

"As Moulton Avery says, cold water is a killer. Please study [The National Center for Cold Water Safety](#) website if you are kayaking in cold water. Take all precautions if you value your life. Thank you CPA!"

Photos from the Cold Water Workshop

