

Paddle Leashes

If you're in a kayak away from assistance and lose your paddle, you are up poo creek. Not a good place to be.

There are a few things that can be done about this. As ever, the best solution is prevention, but we will set this aside for now and look first at what can be done after the event.

Loss of a paddle will probably occur because of wind or a capsizing due to waves, rapids, or contact with another object. Losing a paddle is unlikely to happen when paddling on flat water. Having said that, when stopping to do something that requires both hands such as taking a photo, paddles have been known to swim off and appear quite a way from the boat. In flat water you can hand paddle (best done with both hands dipping simultaneously) to regain it. In waves though, it's no easy matter to stay upright.

Alternatively you can use the spare split paddle you have stowed on board. Can you get at it, assemble and use it? I wonder how many people try this, especially with equipment strapped on deck that could get in the way. In any significant waves, even this is going to be a difficult task. Those far-sighted souls who keep their split paddle easily accessible on the foredeck may one day reap their reward.

Failure to regain your paddle or deploy your spare in rough conditions, puts you at serious risk. In John Kirk-Anderson's mnemonic for kayak safety, the first letter is A for Avoid. Avoid getting into the situation to start with i.e. don't lose your paddle in the first place. To prevent a loss happening, you can use a paddle leash to keep the paddle secured so it can't float off or get blown away.

You *could* attach the paddle to yourself e.g. to your PFD, but this is not recommended for normal sea kayaks. In any breeze your boat can be blown away if you lose contact with it for even a moment. A paddle attached to you will hamper your swimming after it enormously and there's a real risk you will not regain your kayak at all.

You should attach the paddle leash to the boat so the two will not become separated. If you come out of your boat, you should always hang on to your paddle and will therefore retain contact with the kayak.

Potential paddle
leash



The simplest paddle leash is a piece of string. Tie one end of the string around the centre of the paddle shaft and the other to something on the foredeck of the kayak. There are three problems with this.

- the string has to be quite long to allow for all normal paddle manoeuvres, and can catch on things
- it could be difficult to untie a knot in a hurry if you had to release the paddle
- if you had to do a paddle float rescue, the line could restrict paddle position or get in the way.



A slightly more advanced leash can be made with some suitable cord and a Velcro cable tie. These have holes to tie the line to and have Velcro hooks one side and fluff on the other. The largest size is long enough to wrap twice round the paddle shaft. To attach to the boat a knot is OK, but a good quality fishing swivel with a clip holds well and discourages twists in the line.

Simple leash for fishing kayak paddle

A common type of purchased leash has a coiled plastic section. The coiling means that the leash may be as short as 0.5m long but can be stretched to about 1.7m or more to allow movement of the paddle. The end to attach to the boat generally has a loop and the paddle end commonly has a Velcro arrangement that is firm but which could be released in an emergency. Some people find these leashes heavy and they tend to be quite noisy, clattering on the deck of the boat, and again they can catch on things.



Common type of purchased paddle leash

An alternative mentioned in a KASK article by Dave Winkworth (issue 151, Feb-Mar 2011) is a simple length of shock cord with a jamming device to attach the paddle. These little gizmos go by various names (Dave calls them olives) and are available in marine suppliers and sometimes in cycling shops where they are used to tension bungees. Knots either side of the olive keep it from sliding off. Because the shock cord is stretchy, it can be kept quite short, and if a similar cleat is used at the boat end as an





attachment, the length can be varied. Olives can be quickly released if a paddle float rescue is required.

The shock cord is not as noisy on the boat as the coiled plastic leash and is less apt to snag on things. On reading Dave's article I made one with a loop and single olive. While I do not normally use a leash unless it is seriously windy, I do keep it secured in the boat behind the seat so if wind gets up on a trip I can easily put it on while at sea.

A related matter relevant to sit on top kayaks is that you can also attach the paddler to the boat. This is recommended for surf skis, sit on tops and stand up paddle boards.



If you fall off, you are attached to your craft, usually by way of a leg leash attached below the knee which links to a convenient point on the boat. Typically there is a firm fastening to the boat and a quick release at the leg attachment, just in case you need to get free e.g. if the boat might be tumbled in big surf. Bought ones usually have the coiled plastic used on paddle leashes. The example shown is home brewed. The leg strap is wide webbing with a Velcro fastening. It has about 1m of shock cord and has a dyneema line for strength about 1.7m long, folded and cable tied in such a way that will allow it to deploy if the shock cord is stretched. A leg leash needs to be long enough to allow a capsized paddler to float in a standing position next to the kayak, ready to remount.

Leg leash for use with sit-on-top

The problem with this system is that you can still be separated from your paddle, and if you're tied to your boat, the chances of swimming after it are slim. Most schools of thought agree that if you're going to be in the water awaiting rescue, it's better to be without a paddle than without the boat. For sit on top craft, a leg leash is a good solution. However, for sit-ins, it is not recommended that you attach person to boat while paddling. Line of any sort inside the boat could tangle legs while trying to exit. If you're in the water and need to stay with your boat for a long period, you can attach at that stage.

Many sit on top paddlers, in particular kayak anglers, should use a paddle leash as well as a leg leash. While fishing, the paddle is left unattended for long periods and really needs to be secured. It's rare to see a spare paddle carried on a sit on top which makes keeping paddle #1 even more important.

Didier Plouhinec is a very inventive surf ski and kayak paddler from France who has modified, adapted and invented dozens of things to improve his paddling safety, comfort and convenience. He uses a lightweight retainer of 4mm shock cord that does not fasten to the boat but to the paddler. One end has a fixed loop that slips snugly over the shaft of his split paddle, the other end passes through a tight loop in its own end. This end fits over the left wrist, the loop is drawn up and two sleeves of plastic tubing are slid up as keepers to maintain the wrist loop at the right tension to stay put. Since he also wears a leg leash, Didier can never become separated from his boat or his paddle.



Plouhinec leash

I'm not convinced this wrist paddle leash is a great solution for most sea kayakers, but it is an interesting idea, and fuel for letters to the editor.

Didier's blog (mainly in French) is one of the most comprehensive paddling blogs you'll find with over 400 entries including lots of trip reports, equipment trials, photos and fixes. Web address on photo credit below.

Sandy Winterton
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Plouhinec leash Photo by Didier Plouhinec from his blog site

<http://dplouepic.skyrock.com/3147444144-Dragonne-ultra-legere-de-pagaie.html>