

Sea Kayak Towing

This is a new Technique series exclusive to Ceufad featuring articles from Wales' leading paddlesport coaches. Covering a different discipline each issue the series continues with an article by Nige Robinson, one of the UK's leading sea kayak coaches.

Initially I was going to write an article about what sea kayak coaches coach but during a recent spell of work running leader training courses I realised how a very simple but very important subject such as towing has seemed to have become more and more complex.



Nige Robinson is a Level 5 coach in sea and in surf, a gold medallist at the World Sea Kayak Championships and a co-author of 'Sea Kayaking'. He co-runs 'Sea Kayak Guides', a coaching and guiding co-operative based on the Pembrokeshire coast and is currently working on an expedition DVD with Olly Sanders which is due out in November. For more details visit: www.seakayakguides.co.uk

Towing

Towing is a means by which a paddler can assist an incapacitated paddler and kayak to a safe location. This may be a short distance or on the open sea maybe a couple of kilometres.

In all cases the rescuer should give clear instructions as to what they want the towed kayaker to do e.g. paddle or steer to keep pointing towards the back of the rescuer's kayak, drop the skeg.

Contact Tow

This is possibly the simplest method. The paddler requiring a tow holds on to the rescuer's kayak either at the bow or stern, forming a raft. The rescuer simply pushes or pulls them to safety. When rescuing a swimmer and kayak this means can be used to pull the swimmer out of danger before commencing a rescue. For a quick release the rescuer can simply shout "let go".

Towlines

Over a longer distance a towline is more effective and efficient. The towline can be one of the paddler's most useful and versatile pieces of equipment. Before purchasing a readymade tow system consider making or the very least adapting a towline in order to design a system that is efficient and adaptable in all situations, as follows:

- Set up should allow for fast deployment, essential in situations where the victim is close to rocks or drifting rapidly.
- Is it long enough? Rope has less drag than tape, it should be long enough to prevent the towed kayak bumping into the rescuer's kayak. At the same time short enough to take immediate effect when towing a rescuer away from danger. Initially a towline of a minimum 1.5 kayak lengths is recommended.
- Is the gate on the clip, without a notch, large enough to clip onto a kayak's fittings, easy to use especially in rough seas and with cold hands, and strong enough to cope with the stresses involved with towing? Use a half fisherman's knot to attach the karabiner to ensure it is well fixed
- Does it have an integral shock absorber and a quick release mechanism?
- How easy/quick is it to use and repack, especially with cold fingers?
- Does it float?
- The length of line should be adjustable and it should be possible to extend the line either with another line or, where the system allows e.g. daisy chaining, releasing more line. In a following sea the towline must be long enough to prevent the towed kayakers surfing into the back of the towing kayak. Approximately 1.5 boat lengths up to 3 boat lengths.



A short line can also be used to prevent the kayakers pulling apart, note the quick release knot.



Before using the towline the user should practise and, preferably receive training in, its use and be totally familiar with the quick release system.



A clear rear deck avoids entanglement.



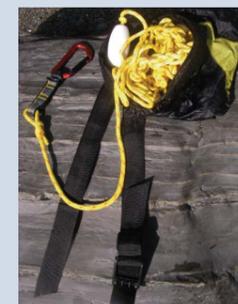
Clip from underneath and use deck lines and not toggles which are usually chafed and might break.



Towline attachments



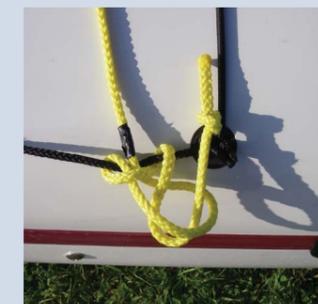
A kayak mounted towline reduces the strain on the paddler, it is usually fitted by means of a fairlead (eye) and a jamming cleat fixed on the deck behind the cockpit. When fixing the eye and cleat make sure a strong backing plate and large washers are used to spread the load. Positioning the tow in the middle of the kayak allows for greater manoeuvrability (a harbour tug has the anchor dead centre).



The second, more common, option is towing via a releasable waist belt. This has the advantage that it travels with the paddler if they change boats and if necessary can be transferred to another paddler to use. However it can have more strain on the paddler.



Some buoyancy aids are fitted with a releasable chest belt used in white water rescues as this is fitted high on the body it is not recommended for towing as it causes strain on the back.



An alternative quick release can be made by tying the towline to declines in front of the cockpit using a highwayman's hitch.

Towing options

Rafted tow

In some instances the paddler being towed may be incapacitated, e.g. suffering from sea sickness or injury, which is likely to make them unstable or in need of reassurance. Support can be provided by rafting them up with another paddler to create a stable platform. When towing two kayakers always pass the towline through both sets of deck lines.



If the distance to be towed is long, consider sharing the tow by either swapping over the towline to another competent paddler or by adding more tows in line with the original towing kayak.



A fan/husky tow where rescuers attach to the deck lines of the kayak, in front of the cockpit can be useful but requires good communication and equal length towlines.

Anchored rescue

The anchored rescue allows a T-rescue to be executed without fear of the rescuer being smashed onto the rocks, blown downwind, or disappearing down tide. It is also an excellent method for manoeuvring a raft to use as a platform for administering first aid, repairing equipment or pick up from a helicopter.

1. As one paddler begins to rescue the swimmer and kayak another attaches their towline to the end, closest to safety, of the rescuer's kayak
2. This paddler now tows steadily away from the danger, upwind, away from rocks, into the waves, up tide or towards the nearest eddy, thus anchoring the rescue

