



Title: Paddling – kayak, canoe, paddleboard

Overview

Kayaking, canoeing, and stand-up paddleboarding (SUP) are important activities at the University of Vermont, for both recreation and field studies. These activities can introduce students to a variety of physical, social and natural experiences that result in community building, skill development, health and wellness, and leadership skills. Paddling can also be an essential mode of transportation for data collection and field study in UVM academic departments.

General Risk Statement: All paddling programs inherently carry a risk of physical injury, fatigue, exposure to elements, becoming lost, drowning, damaged equipment and other hazards that must be communicated to the participant before the activity. UVM seeks to manage these risks in a way that avoids severe and lasting injury while minimizing additional harm. The operating procedures described below intend to do so.

Applicability of the Procedure

This applies to all members of the University community, including individuals who are faculty, staff, students, contractors, consultants, temporary employees, and affiliates of the University who plan or participate in paddling programs that are supported by the University of Vermont.

Definitions

Flatwater paddling – Level 1: Protected lakes and streams with no current (0 knots), and minimal waves (<0.75), light winds (0 – 8 knots), with constant access to safe landing, staying within .5nm from shore.

Openwater paddling – Level 2 : Large lakes or coastal waters with potential areas of exposure to minimal current (0 – 1 knots), mild waves (0 – 1 foot) and mild wind (0 – 10 knots), with constant access to safe landing, staying within 1.5 nm from shore.

Openwater paddling – Level 3 : Large lakes or coastal waters with potential areas of exposure to moderate current (1 - 2 knots), waves and/or surf (1 - 2 foot) and wind (10 - 15 knots), with constant access to safe landing, staying within 1.5 nm from shore.

Openwater paddling – Level 4 : Large lakes or coastal waters with potential areas of exposure to substantial current (2 - 4 knots), moderate waves and surf (2 – 4 foot) and moderate wind (15 - 20 knots), with constant access to safe landing, staying within 2 nm from shore. This represents the limit of wind, water, and current conditions that UVM programs will seek.

Whitewater paddling – Level 2: Paddling in rivers where mild current and waves occur (class I) and disturbed water flows over obstacles. Technical maneuvering may be required to avoid obstacles.

Whitewater paddling – Level 3: Paddling in rivers where moderate dynamic current and waves (Class II rapids) occur where technical maneuvering may be required to avoid obstacles.

Whitewater paddling – Level 4: Paddling in rivers where substantial dynamic current and waves (Class III rapids) occur where technical maneuvering may be required to avoid obstacles. The paddler encounters irregular waves (~3-4 feet) with obstructions like small falls or drops, counter currents and eddies. This represents the limit of wind, water, and current conditions that UVM programs will seek.

Procedures

Trip Leader Qualifications - Paddling qualifies as an elevated risk activity at UVM, and will often be a remote wilderness trip – beyond one hour from emergency medical facilities - and therefore requires a designated Trip Leader (Policy: Domestic Travel Involving Students) who has been trained in technical skills, group management and emergency response. This Trip Leader can be student, staff, faculty, or outside vendor

The Trip Leader qualifications are skills developed and practiced in conditions that match or exceed the conditions in which they plan to lead. In addition, all Trip Leaders must be prepared for emergency response and carry essential equipment to manage unexpected circumstances. If conditions are encountered that exceed their training, Trip Leaders must alter plans. Participants must be assessed for essential skills (appendix A) while paddling in three of the four conditions matching the environment in which they will be allowed to lead – Wind, Wave, Surf, Current - but all three conditions do not need to be experienced simultaneously.

Chart 1: Trip Leader Qualifications and Conditions Summary

Paddling Conditions / Level	Paddling Proficiency / Skills	Conditions	Additional Requirements
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Flatwater Paddling (L 1) (all boat types)	Self Assessed (Appendix 1) Kayak , Canoe , Paddleboard	Wind: 0 – 8 knots Waves: 0 - 0.75 feet Current: negligible	Safety Equip
Openwater or Whitewater (L 2)	ACA L2 , ACA L3WW , BCU 2, UVM L2 Training, or, equivalent demonstration of skills (app 1) in L2 conditions and, River Rescue (whitewater)	Wind: 0 – 10 knots Waves: 0 – 1 feet Current: 0 – 1 knots WW rapids: Class 1	Safety Equip First Aid/CPR
Openwater or Whitewater (L 3)	ACA L3 , ACA L3WW , BCU 3, UVM L3 Training, or, equivalent demonstration of skills in Level 3 conditions and, River Rescue (whitewater)	Wind: 10 - 15 knots Waves: 1 – 2 feet Current: 1 – 2 knots WW rapids: Class II	Safety Equip First Aid/CPR
Openwater or Whitewater (L 4)	ACA L4 , ACA L4WW , BCU 4, UVM L4 Training or, equivalent demonstration of skills (app 1) in L4 conditions and, Swiftwater Rescue (whitewater)	Wind: 15 - 20 knots Waves: 2 – 4 knots Current: 2 – 4 knots WW rapids: Class III	Safety Equip First Aid/CPR

Safety Equipment

Life Jackets Required for all programs: Life Jackets, type III USCG approved, properly fitted and secured, must be worn by all leaders and participants on water in any UVM paddling program. For whitewater programs, instructors will wear a type V rescue life jacket.

- If entering the water from a watercraft (swimming), Life Jackets may not be removed.
- Exception: when training in pools with water no deeper than the participants shoulders (the shallow end of the pool) with lifeguard present, life jackets are not required.

Additional safety equipment

On any paddling excursion, leaders will carry appropriate safety gear to support their group when conditions change or unexpected incidents occur. These may include:

- medical kit (*required)
- communication device (*required)
- spare paddle
- Navigation aid (chart, compass, gps)
- cold exposure kit
- towline or throw bag

- In any moving water, the tow line or throw bag must be immediately accessible.

- All equipment will be visually inspected before use.

Spray skirt use: The use of kayak spray skirts is not recommended for Level 1 courses, due to lack of familiarity with wet exits. Programs where spray skirts are used must include a wet exit demonstration. On-water demonstration is preferred, on-land demonstration is acceptable

- spray skirts are recommended for Level 2 courses, with wet exit demonstration.
- spray skirts are required for Level 3 and whitewater courses, with wet exit demo.

Thermal Protection: Appropriate thermal protection is required for all cold water paddling (<55 degrees F). Cold water protection includes wetsuits or drysuits. Generally, we dress first for the water temperature; do not dress for air temperature alone.

Helmets: Instructors and participants must wear sport-specific paddling helmets during all whitewater programs, surf sessions, or sea kayaking in rock gardens, regardless of boat type.

Personally Owned Equipment: personally owned equipment is allowed with instructor discretion. Instructors will inspect the personal equipment to ensure it meets safety standards.

Lifting and Moving: Trip Leaders demonstrate proper lifting and moving techniques and coach others to avoid injury. Two people should work together when moving canoes and sea kayaks.

Maintenance Procedure: Boats, paddles, and accessory equipment should be inspected before and after each use. Equipment, especially when used in salt water, must be rinsed and drained prior to storage.

Whitewater kayaking: Acceptable conditions for whitewater programs will be Class I, II, or III rapids where maneuvering in current may be required to avoid obstacles. Our programs remain at or below Class III, where the paddler encounters medium (~3-4 ft) but irregular waves with obstructions like small falls or drops, counter currents and eddies

Terrain Limitations:

- Swiftwater Rescue and ACA Level 2, or equivalent training >> to lead in Class I rapids
- Swiftwater Rescue and ACA Level 3, or equivalent training >> to lead in Class II rapids
- Swiftwater Rescue and ACA Level 4, or equivalent training >> to lead in Class III rapids
- Current Wilderness First Responder with CPR

Participant Safety and Management

- **Acknowledgement of Risk / Release of Liability**

For voluntary programs - participants must sign a release of liability (appendix B) prior to participation. Failure to do so will result in their ineligibility. Instructors must discuss trip-specific risks before departure.

Lightning

At first sign of an approaching thunder and lightning, get off the water at the nearest appropriate landing. Once on land, follow our standard lightning procedures.

Do not return to the water until 30 minutes has passed without thunder or lightning.

For detailed lightning guidance, refer to Backcountry Lightning Avoidance. ([link](#))

Contacts

Questions concerning the daily operational interpretation of this UOP should be directed to the following:	
Title(s)/Department(s):	Contact Information:
Risk Management	Risk.management@uvm.edu

Forms/Flowcharts/Diagrams

Related Documents/Policies

- Domestic Travel Involving Students

Training/Education