

Safety Issues and Discussions:

Overview

A great trip, with brilliant rivers and all people and equipment returned safely. However there were some issues that we can all learn from.

Incidents

1. Paddler caught behind curtain of Maruia Falls 10m high waterfall. Line and technique cannot be faulted, pure chance paddler only emerged 50m downstream after 20 seconds underwater.
 - a. DONE WELL: Safety boat in lower eddy to help swimmer, all equipment collected from eddy.
 - b. DONE POORLY: Risks and possible rescue options (or lack thereof) not discussed.
 - c. TO BE LEARNT: Waterfalls are risky with rescues near impossible - the risk and fun are yours to weigh up!
2. Paddler caught in stopper, sucked into hole and swam out of hole, first grade 4 rapid on the Lower Hokitika, West Coast NZ. First throw bag thrown directly to swimmer, but thrower was not in a secure position to hold rope and it was let go. Swimmer went through second hole and was kept there, just underwater, for a couple of seconds, before being released. Second throw rope pulled swimmer to safety
 - a. DONE WELL: Safety throw baggers were setup at correct multiple spots. Rapid was well scouted and hazards and lines discussed. Throw rope throws were accurate.
 - b. DONE POORLY: First thrower was videoing for too long before attempting to move to a secure position for pulling in swimmer.
 - c. TO BE LEARNT: Video vs safety – yes, safety is more important! Look at where you are standing when doing safety, it is a huge force to pull in a swimmer, make sure you are either tied in or in a very secure position.
3. Paddler caught in second stopper on same rapid as above, recirculated and swam. Paddle was captured quickly but boat travelled about 2km downstream to confluence of Whitcombe River before being caught in a large eddy and reunited with owner.
 - a. DONE WELL: Swimmer was pulled to safety quickly and accurately. Team was eventually regrouped and moved down river in safe manner.
 - b. DONE POORLY: Communication for chasing boat was not great and some team members left behind initially were unaware of the chase boater's plan.

- c. **TO BE LEARNT:** Maps were not taken on river; these would have been very valuable in the case of a 10km walk out! One person who knew river chased the boat through grade 3 rapids – this was deemed an “acceptable risk” and boat was found. Team plans for these scenarios should be discussed before so that everyone knows what to do and precious time is not wasted. Above all, people are much more important than gear – a 10km walkout and boat loss is a very small problem compared to personal injury or worse.

- 4. Paddler stuck in small hole on Toatara River, west Coast NZ. A small inconspicuous hole, on a grade 2 section of water trapped a paddler for over a minute while in his boat. Although funny at first the seriousness of the situation became apparent when another two paddlers tried to bump him out and this failed. A paddler got to the side and got ready to throw his bag. After over a minute of surfing the paddler pulled his deck, but remained in the hydraulic barely above the water. The throw rope was thrown, but the swimmer was too disoriented (or below water) to catch hold of it. Luckily the rope coiled around the swimmers foot and he was pulled out of the hole and swam to safety.
 - a. **DONE WELL:** Paddlers attempted to bump him out, and got to both sides of the river to help with safety.
 - b. **DONE POORLY:** Took a while for group to realise situation was potentially dangerous.
 - c. **TO BE LEARNT:** Even small holes can be sticky and potentially dangerous. Ropes in holes coil around objects very easily, although helpful in this situation. In other situations it could be very dangerous – have a knife handy!

- 5. Paddler swim out of hole on Shotover River, boat retrieved within 500m, but paddle was only retrieved 1.5km downstream. The hole needed a very specific hard left line. One paddler scouted the rapid and gave clear directions – however the difficulty of lead-in water with boils and cross currents was not apparent and this caused paddlers to be off ideal line.
 - a. **DONE WELL:** Gear was eventually retrieved, after a 1.5km chase down grade 2 water and then it was portaged back upriver - and the rest of the river paddled safely.
 - b. **DONE POORLY:** Breakdown paddle was accidently left behind (even though we had 3 in the car!), as paddler who normally had it wasn't paddling this river. Group was split up after incident, leaving two above rapid, two chasing gear and one walking along the bank, without everyone knowing the plan.
 - c. **TO BE LEARNT:** A group that paddles together often can become blaze about safety, and important issues can be overlooked. Gear checks should be redone daily and maps carried. Following directions through a rapid without scouting yourself can be difficult – if in doubt, get out and scout.