

Coping With the Cold

By Shelly Saunders

Winter and the shoulder seasons offer some great paddling opportunities, especially on those glass-calm days when there are no other boats in sight. It does, however, carry additional risks, such as increased frontal activity on the coast and the possibility of cold water immersion.

REDUCING RISK

Dressing for possible immersion (in wet or dry suits) is similar, in principle, to wearing seat belts. The benefits of using these safety measures outweigh the associated discomfort and inconvenience. Just as we're not always in control of our destiny behind the wheel of a car, we are vulnerable to many factors on the water.

There are many external factors to consider before and during a trip: weather forecast, tides and currents, wind, terrain as it relates to emergency pullouts and landings, and how all of the above can conspire against us!

Hypothermia, which many winter paddlers prepare for by carrying extra clothes and warm drinks, is only one possible result of cold water immersion. Cold shock or involuntary gasp/hyperventilation responses can render the immersed paddler helpless, increasing the time spent in cold water and possibly leading to a life-threatening situation. Here are some important facts about hypothermia.

THE 50-50-50 RULE

- * An average adult person has a 50/50 chance of surviving a 50 yard swim in 50° F (9° C) water.
- * A 50 year old person in 50° F (9° C) water has a 50/50 chance of surviving for 50 minutes.
- * Cold water can kill in 3 ways: cold shock, death by drowning, hypothermia.
- * Cold shock accounts for 1/3 or more of cold water deaths. It can lead to near instant cardiac arrest for those with underlying heart disease or hypertension.
- * Death by drowning can occur when an involuntary gasp reflex is followed by involuntary hyperventilation. This can also lead to cardiac arrest.
- * Hypothermia occurs when the body's core temperature falls below normal levels.

While these factors are beyond our control, dressing for immersion is one of the most effective means of reducing risk. It increases our chances of survival in a worst case scenario. Additionally, cold water rescue practice, done with dry suits, can help prepare us for managing a helpless or unconscious person in the water. Hauling 'dead weight' out of the water onto rafted boats involves more technique than brute force.

COSTS

Neoprene wetsuits are relatively inexpensive; they can be purchased for less than \$150. Drysuits provide the best protection in winter conditions and cost around \$800. New technologies such as water-proof/ breathable drysuits and Polartec Aquashell (a neoprene alternative) provide big improvements in comfort at additional cost.

© Shelly Saunders is an experienced sea kayaker, especially fond of multi-day trips. She was born and raised in the Nanaimo area, is an assistant sea kayak guide and small business owner.

RESOURCES:

Shocking News About Cold Water Paddling: www.capital.net/com/nckayak/nck_safety_p4.htm

Sea Kayaker Deep Trouble, True Stories and Their Lessons, by Matt Broze and George Gronseth, International Marine/Ragged Mountain Press, 1977.