

Feathered and Unfeathered Paddles

and

Preventing Wrist Problems

by Harv Mastalir

All a novice kayaker has to do to get a lively discussion going with more experienced kayakers is to ask, "Which is better, a feathered or unfeathered paddle?" While the conversation may heat up a bit, the truth is that neither is better...they are just different and most paddlers will prefer one rather than the other. What is this thing called feathered, and why would it stir us up so?

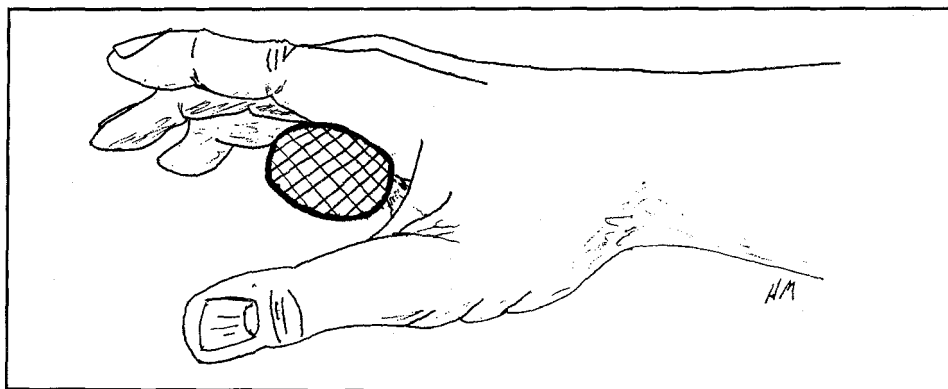
A feathered paddle is one which has the faces of the blades at different angles to each other. Lay your paddle on the ground. If both of your blades rest flat on the ground you have an unfeathered paddle. If one blade rests flat and the other sits at an angle to the ground then it is feathered. To confuse the issue a little there is also a right handed feather and a left handed feather. Place your paddle vertically in front of you with the power face of the bottom blade facing you. If the power face of the upper blade faces your right side, it is a right handed feather. If it faces left you have a left handed feather. Most two piece paddles have three holes so you can try any of these configurations.

Why would this matter? The paddling motions between feathered and unfeathered are different and they also respond differently in the wind. The best way to explore the different paddling motions is to try them out.

Some people argue that paddling feathered increases your risk of developing wrist problems. Wrist problems have more to do with poor paddling technique than feathering. I have known paddlers who paddled unfeathered that had wrist problems, so I don't think either method is intrinsically better in this regard.

The key to preventing wrist problems is to:

1. maintain a loose grip on the paddle
2. keep your wrists in a neutral position during all phases of the stroke where force is being applied (both push and pull)
3. open your fingers on the "push" stroke hand.



Note the hand pushing against the paddle shaft with the ball of the hand. Also note the neutral wrist position and the open fingers.

Let's look at these further.

I only grip the paddle tight enough to maintain control of the paddle. Gripping the paddle tightly bends my wrist at odd angles. Try this exercise. Let your hand hang down at your side so that your arm and hand are relaxed. Your wrist is now in a neutral position. Now make a tight fist. Notice that your wrist bends and is no

longer in that neutral position. This is exactly what happens when you grab the paddle too tightly. At the beginning of the stroke when you are reaching forward, it also causes your wrist to bend severely sideways. When paddling, concentrate on keeping a loose grip on the paddle. This is especially difficult when paddling in a strong wind, when your natural tendency will be to grip the paddle more tightly. Concentrating on this will help you relax and take your mind off those waves that are trying to swallow you. It will also keep your fingers warmer and your forearms relaxed, in fact it will help your whole body to relax. If you don't believe this, try relaxing with clinched fists. I also open my hand on the push stroke. This increases the blood circulation in my hands and also reminds me on each stroke to maintain a loose grip.

The wind will affect a feathered paddle differently than an unfeathered paddle. In a side wind an unfeathered paddle will behave better than a feathered paddle because it presents less surface to the wind. Paddling into a headwind will be much easier with a feathered paddle for the same reason. Beware of paddles with 45

To Prevent Wrist Problems

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or 60 degree feathers. On calm water they can be seductive to paddle with, but paddling into a wind they become entirely unmanageable. One blade will catch the wind and lift while the other blade dives. This tends to disappear with feathers somewhere between 70 and 75 degrees. My personal paddles are feathered at 75 degrees.

Now that we know more about feathered and unfeathered paddles, how do we decide which to use? First of all, try paddling both feathered and unfeathered. It took me about one and a half minutes with

each to understand that, for me, a feathered paddle felt much more natural. It might take you longer, but many people show a preference, just by feel, pretty fast. If one way doesn't seem to feel more natural than the other, I would recommend that you paddle feathered. There is a mechanical advantage gained when paddling feathered, and it is also slightly more efficient. Having said that, I will remind you that the Eskimos paddled for thousands of years entirely unfeathered and did quite well, thank you. Decide which way you want to paddle and stick with it. You will want a solid reflexive brace, and you will never

develop that if you keep switching back and forth.

It is not so important to decide which is better or faster or whatever, but rather which works best for you. All the heated discussions are just so much noise.

Grab a paddle and get out on the water! That's what really matters.