

Jan 1988

New Zealand The Sea Canoeist Newsletter

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WHERE WE ARE AT

Perhaps as a first newsletter it would be as well to stand back a bit and clear the air about what we are on about and where we have come from, then look at the state of the art of sea canoeing.

There are some readers who will say that the name of this newsletter is a bit of a misnomer, and I would have to agree, although possibly for different reasons. The term 'canoe' has been deliberately chosen in preference to 'kayak' for a very good reason. Most authorities will tell you that there are two basic types of 'canoe' - kayaks that are related to the eskimo craft, and canoes which are related to the North American birchbark canoe. In actual fact the modern european canoe dates from a boat designed by one John MacGregor. Since he popularised the sport all european craft have developed from his original. To a large extent MacGregor's boats were inspired by the kayak yet were far shorter, beamier and more boat-like than the eskimo craft. Over the years these craft have evolved back towards the original eskimo style and, in 1961 some sea canoeists began to build replica eskimo kayaks. Today only a handful of craft owe their design to the original kayak style of the eskimo, most are evolutions of the MacGregor canoe. The term 'canoe' is therefore used to cover the whole field of canoe and kayak like craft that are paddled. The other aspect of the name 'sea canoe' that might be argued about is the word 'sea'. By far the vast majority of so called 'sea canoeists' do not set off on long coastal expeditions - perhaps Paul Caffyn is the best known of these people, yet most prefer to potter about along the coast and within the many estuaries around the country. Undoubtedly the vast majority of canoeists in New Zealand are river canoeists; and with so many good whitewater rivers this is hardly surprising. There are also those who prefer to cruise on the less boisterous parts of rivers such as the Wanganui River. We tend to call these people Touring canoeists. Sea canoeists, by matter of elimination, are those who use craft fitted out and designed for essentially still-water rather than rivers, although the sea is anything but still. What you need for a trip that is not current assisted can be quite different from what you need on a coastal trip.

Unfortunately the term 'sea canoeist' causes many to think in terms of the epic expeditionaries and this has put many off. I am what American's would call a 'gunkholer' - a lover of poking about in creeks and estuaries in a kayak - not for me the anxiety of fighting a gale of wind a couple of miles offshore avoiding a 25 foot breaking surf. But our craft are really very similar.

There are those who love the challenge of achieving a set goal - a friend of mine is steadily 'knocking off' the entire coast of the South Island in one week chunks in his annual holidays - frankly I would find the coast off Ashburton little to attract me in my rather precious days free from work - but then I subscribe to the comment made by, I believe, Confucius, who said that the journey was more important than the destination, or put another way, the action was more important than the achievement. Whilst Confucius was no sea canoeist and probably never said such a thing, it pretty well sums up my point of view. Not for me the offshore drama - yes I prefer the comfort of a nearby shore and the anxiety of big surf is something I can do without. I prefer to slip along a scenic piece of coastline and into the estuaries, and I prefer to revisit my favourite spots again and again because that is what I like.

This perspective will affect not only my choice of canoe, but also my paddle, my clothing, and other equipment. More importantly, it will affect the way that I rig out my boat. I recently heard of a local manufacturer who was verbally attacked for the way he fitted out his sea kayak for supply to his customers. The manufacturer sold a standard rig that suited the majority of his customers who were a bit like me - wanted a boat for poking about on their local estuary. Because

the manufacturer called his boat a 'sea kayak' and advertised it as such, he was accused of misrepresentation because the boat was not fitted out as standard for a paddler who would want to set out in expeditionary style on a lengthy coastal cruise. Let's keep this in perspective.

In describing the current 'state-of-the-art' it is helpful to talk in terms of people.

Paul Caffyn: Paul has probably pushed the limits of sea canoeing further than any other person. His first big trip was around Fiordland which he went on to extend into a circumnavigation of the South Island, the North Island and Stewart Island. He has published three books covering these trips. He then went on to a trip around Great Britain, Japan, and Australia. Paul uses a Nordkapp Kayak - designed directly from the very narrow Greenland Eskimo kayak. His trips date from December 1977.

Frank Goodman: Designer of kayaks including the Nordkapp, and builder of small craft. Frank has paddled around Cape Horn and in the Arctic (Baffin Island area). His designs are well thoughtout and without traditional dogma. He has the ability to approach design in a practical yet scientific manner but as a former lecturer in Art, his boats are aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

John Dowd: Author of the book 'Sea kayaking' which is into its third printing and has sold over 30,000 copies. John is a former New Zealander now living in Vancouver. John also edits the 'Sea Kayaker' magazine. His paddling experience has been mainly in the beamier single and double kayaks on long journeys. He is thus at the other extreme to someone like Paul Caffyn in terms of his choice of craft and therefore his techniques. This style of paddling has largely been static since 1970.

Derek Hutchinson: Author of the book 'Sea Canoeing' which is also in its third edition and probably the most widely read book on the subject. Derek has had considerable experience on expeditions but his book is less expedition orientated than John Dowd's. Derek is a senior coach and instructor with the British Canoe Union and is often identified as an administrator and beurocrat with a liking for formalised structures, certificates and to some degree regulations. Derek has also designed kayaks which are midway between the Dowd style and the Goodman style.

George Dyson: Author and traditionalist who builds kayaks after the Baidarkas of the Aleut area of the Arctic, often with sailing rigs.

In New Zealand the 'state-of-the-art' is very much up with the play internationally. Grahame Sisson builds the Nordkapp kayak in a number of forms and options and represents the Goodman school of thought in terms of slender, sleek kayaks that can handle rough conditions with ease provided the paddler is up to the ability of the boat. Grahame also builds the 'Puysegur' to his own design as a beamier and shorter kayak of the Nordkapp style. Max Grant builds the 'Puffin' kayak - a boat shorter than the Nordkapp and of realitively ample beam - it is built in polyethylene plastic. The sea canoeing scene in New Zealand is also very much enriched by the fact that we have here not only one of the world's more noted expeditionary kayakers, Paul Caffyn, but also the fastest olympic racing paddlers in the world and the products that they have developed are of direct benefit to all paddlers - the winged paddle blade for example. The sport of triathalon racing involving canoes in place of swimming as led to the development of fast kayaks that can handle more difficult conditions than that for the racing olympic craft - these triathalete craft are of value to the sea canoeist. We have some of the best whitewater rivers in the country, and the skills that our river canoeists have developed can be learnt in most canoe and kayak clubs - these are vital skills for the sea and surf paddler.