Coastbusters

The Cross Currents Newsletter for Mid-Atlantic Paddlers

November 2025

Greenland Immersion

Michael Gray

A flat-topped section of sea ice (single season frozen sea water), rather than a bottom-heavy berg which would be high risk to be this close to. Sometimes, you feel lucky. Photo:

As a lifelong kayak expedition guide, the most common question I am asked is "What is your favorite place to paddle?". While my instinct is to answer with "wherever I am", if pressured, I have to say Greenland. Greenland is a natural destination for a life-long sea kayaker since it is the birthplace of these hunting craft. Most animals are food in Greenland and kayaks were how people hunted seals, whales and sea birds for millennia.

Over the last 12 years, I have guided three kayak trips along the West Coast of Greenland. The first from Sisimiut with Maligiaq Padilla, the second trip from Ilulissat into Disko Bay with Jenna Padilla and this last trip in 2025 was with our friend, Piotr Damski who lives in Uummannaq.

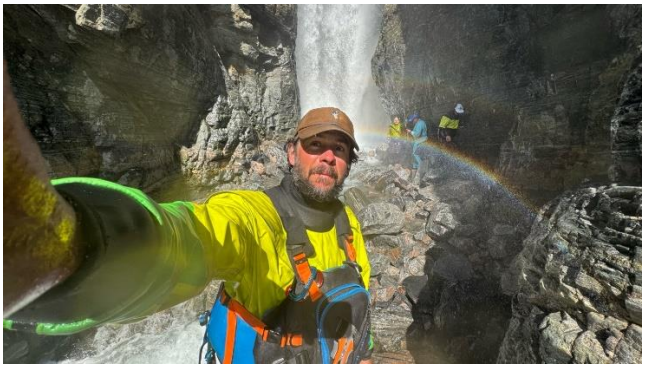
Background

Long ago, I was introduced to the idea of kayaking in Greenland by kayak scholar John Heath. At the time, he was traveling around the US with a 14-yr old kayak athlete by the name of Maligiaq. After polished off a half gallon of ice cream in Charleston, SC with the wiry teen, I was left with a lingering impression that I would reconnect with him over the years. Decades later, I have spent time with him in Michigan, Alaska and Greenland. Eventually this led to the two of us leading our first Greenland trip together from his hometown of Sisimiut along with his sister, Jenna.

As beautiful as the fjords and landscape were, our experience was deepened significantly by traveling with Greenlanders, particularly Greenlandic kayak royalty. Doors were opened, meals shared, and stories were built from a much deeper dive into Greenlandic culture. This deeper kayak travel experience left me with a commitment to try to cultivate local contacts for our more exotic explorations whenever possible. While the challenges of navigation, provisioning and gearing up for these trips were well within our capabilities, having the benefits of local knowledge from our cultural ambassadors deepened our experiences in ways that would be impossible on our own.

A Rocky, Watery Desert

Stepping out of a kayak on a remote beach here - the narrow margin between the icecap and the sea –



Our local guide Piotr Damski Photo: Piotr Damski

makes you feel like you are seeing the birth of the planet. Often you are looking at land that was previously covered in ice - in your lifetime. This rugged landscape of rocks that loom vertically from the sea has water running downhill nearly everywhere you look and most of it is drinkable. Despite being a desert, this abundant fresh water supports a variety of small plants and ground-hugging trees (less than a foot high) that add color and fantastic smells to the landscape.

The Paddling

This past season, we chose to go in mid-June to enjoy the 24-hour daylight and try to explore before the hordes of mosquitoes arrived. During our nearly 2 weeks, we enjoyed 40-degree days, some snowfall, and were "blessed" with the beginning of the season's bloodthirsty bugs at 70 degrees N., well above the arctic circle. One participant had a smart watch that told her times for sunrise and sunset. She thought her watch was confused when it said the next sunset was July 31. Even though this was mid-June, that ***was*** the next sunset. Headlamp? Nah.

Sunset a month away. Photo: Marcella Baum

Photo: Piotr Damski

Conditions on the water were variable during our 10-night trip. Long exposed fjords developed 10-20 knot winds during the day and subsequent wind waves, but generally conditions were very manageable. Only one day saw us turned back by headwinds that made the juice not worth the squeeze. Tidal currents were noticeable in places, but tides here only had a range of three to four feet.

Water temps were in the low 30's, so swimming wasn't an inviting option, but water clarity was amazing with visibility approaching 80 ft making it ***look*** like snorkeling could be fun. Air temps in the 40's and lots of sun made it comfortable to spend the day in a drysuit. Necessities included sunscreen, shades, fleece pants, puff and bug jackets.

One aspect of Arctic summer paddling is the lack of pressure for dawn patrol starts. We'd break camp after enjoying a hot breakfast for a midmorning departure, getting us to camp in late afternoon for a pretty relaxed pace. Partnering with Seakayakgreenland also meant some solid local knowledge about campsites that had room enough

Circle indicates paddling area near Uummannaq

Expedition route: the fjords to the east of Uummannaq

for our group (nine, including three guides) and had decent access to fresh water.

Generally our pacing looked like this: spend a couple of days traveling 25 to 30 miles back into an interesting area; spend two or three nights exploring in that area from a hub camp; then move another 15-20 miles to a new hub camp. We often find you get to paddle and explore more by moving camp less often. During our 11-day, 10-night trip, we paddled a bit over 100 miles with plenty of time to explore on land and give people time to immerse themselves in the experience of just being there.

The fjords to the east of Uummannaq were ideal for this kind of travel, had amazing campsite options and were full of one of the big reasons to paddle here - ICE.

Iceberg and glacier paddling is a unique part of getting closer to the earth's polar regions. In N. America that usually means enduring quite challenging weather in Alaska or traveling South to Antarctica to do short paddles off adventure ships which can be very expensive.

By contrast, ice paddling in Greenland often means bluebird skies, light winds and mild temperatures while choosing routes through bergy bits, growlers and some of the more massive bergs. Often the air around you cracks with glacial thunder of larger bergs rolling and splitting to give birth to litters of smaller house-sized chunks, reminding us to keep the large bergs at a safe distance. Larger icebergs often have their own ecosystem of waterfalls, sea birds and lounging seals atop them.

Food Adventures

A 11-day trip with a group of people of mixed diet preferences is always a challenge, especially in a place where the local supermarket items are all in Danish and the freezer case is stocked with Narwhal and seal meat. You may think you have pancake mix and end up with baking soda. Vegetarians have a tough go here - they are not really a thing in Greenland. As a matter of fact, the native language didn't have a word for "vegetarian" until they made one up recently.

People don't really come to me expecting to provide their own meals since I find it more efficient and bonding to do a group food plan revolving around one kitchen. Not being a prepared freeze-dried food kind of person, I spent a lot of time building meals that would work for our group at home and paid the extra baggage charges to bring it. Arriving a few days early to shop and pack out the remaining 30% of our food locally was an adventure by itself and

Strange food. Photo: Michael Gray

required a great deal of flexibility. Sometimes the market where you are just doesn't have much food. For example, you may be limited to whatever Danish cheese they may have, which likely will be from the Danbo dairy. When I lived in Denmark in the early 80's, they used to say, "eat your Danbo before it eats you". It does have a rather pungent odor - kind of like those wet booties at the end of the season that you forgot in the bottom of your gear bag.

Whoa!

During one moody foggy afternoon paddle over glassy calm seas amongst a hoard of icebergs we came upon a place that was calm, quiet and eerie. We could hear deep breathing and there was a low stench in the air; a funky odor of rot. No one said a word until Piotr said "Danbo?". Yep, that was exactly what it smelled like and the "it" turned out to be exhalations from a sleeping Humpback bobbing up and down amongst the sea ice a few dozen meters away in the fog. Spellbound doesn't come close to describing it.


Foggy Berg. Photo: Piotr Damkski

Cod – Lots of Cod

We were privileged to spend a couple of nights in one particularly beautiful camp at the head of a fjord that was decorated with ice formations bobbing everywhere in the water. The gin-clear water teemed with schools of cod that had several members of our hunter/gatherers out with handlines trying to choose a fish for dinner. We had to put a stop to all the fun after filleting 20 *pounds* of Cod.

Piotr swore that fried Cod livers "were just like bacon"; which seemed to be true in the sense that the longer you fried them, the larger the pool of oil that rendered out. Taste wise, not so much. We foraged for Cod and mussels along the way and kelp was abundant. Later in the season would come mushrooms and teas of fragrant flowers.


Cooking cod on a hot rock. Photo: Piotr Damski

Getting Grounded

The 24-hour daylight makes sleep challenging, but you have time for more coffee, a tent with a sea view and a walk to be in a waterfall. Pondering the shapes of passing icebergs, scanning for whale spouts and furtive seals and appreciating the efforts of your fellow paddlers are all fantastic ways to invest our shortening lifetimes. They are also a welcome and perhaps necessary break from the electronic bombardment we undergo in much of our daily lives. Greenland is the real world on its own schedule and will leave you grounded in ways you may have never experienced.

Culture

Greenland has been under Danish rule since 1721. While there are many Danish colonists, native Greenlanders speak Greenlandic, which is still a pure Inuit language, often understandable between native groups of the far North around the globe. They are taught both Danish and English in school, so communication is reasonably easy for travelers.

There is a current movement toward independence, but it is complicated by the fact that residents often must leave for higher education and Greenlanders are often dependent on Denmark for financial support.

Greenland has a wealth of rare earth minerals used in electronic devices like your phones. It also has an enormous amount of fresh water locked up in its icecap. If it were to melt, you may consider buying beachfront property in Tennessee.

Travel Logistics

Greenland is a big island. The 45,000 Greenlanders are all on ***Island Time***. Arrivals and departures are always approximate and often a maybe thing. Having time and flexibility are key to travel to Greenland.

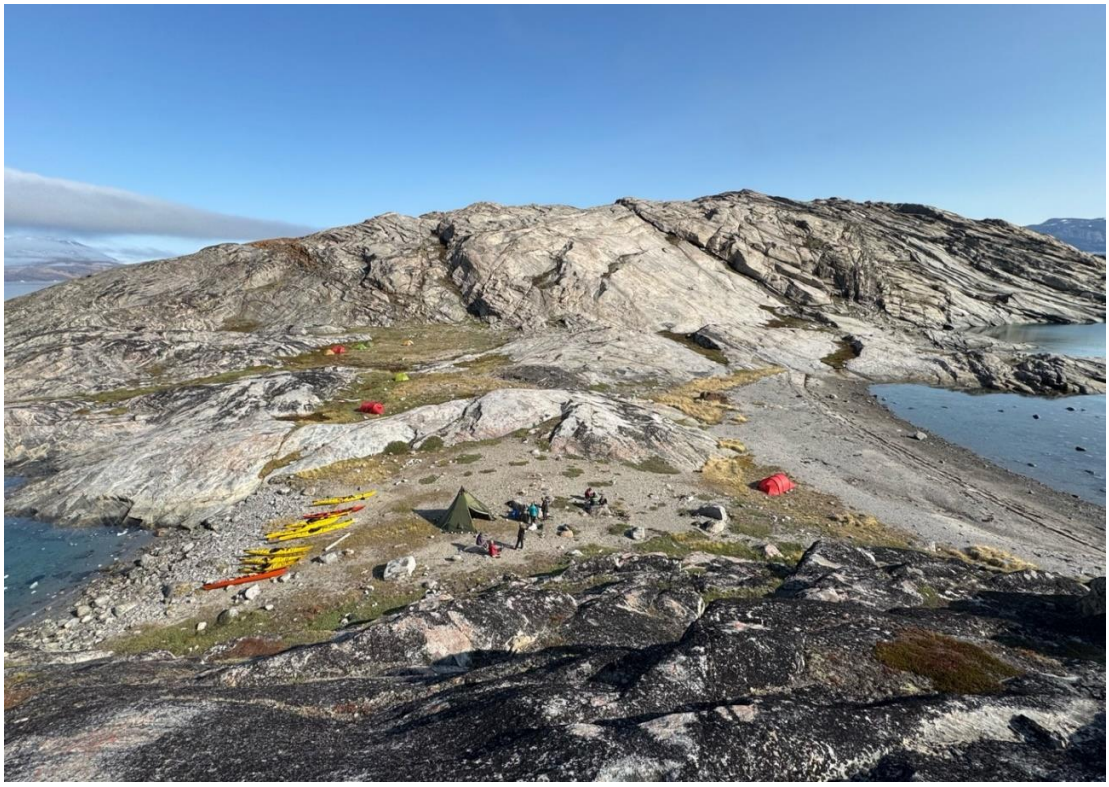
Until 2025, there were no direct flights to Greenland from the US. You either went to Denmark first or to Iceland. Once you arrive in Greenland, you need to transfer to a small plane for transport to one of the coastal communities that has an airport. Low clouds and fog (hello ice cap) often conflict with flight plans.

United Airlines began twice-weekly service recently (July 2025) to the new international airport in the largest city of Nuuk. These flights have been somewhat problematic due to weather. These jets often are redirected back to the former US airbase at Kangerlussuaq, which lies inland and has traditionally been used as the only airport that can support jets. Getting stuck here is common and planes often end up returning to their point of origin. So…budget plenty of time between international arrivals and your next leg, both coming and going.

Air Greenland is the national airline and is breathtakingly expensive for a reason: when you are delayed, they provide lodging and vouchers for meals. When our helicopter from Uummannaq was delayed five days due to weather, Air Greenland housed our group comfortably. Unfortunately, waiting the five days would have meant missing international flights. So we had to charter a boat – at great expense - for some of us to make the 200-mile midnight trip to an airstrip to meet our international flight. This is adventure travel. *Insurance is a must*.

Gearing up

Short of paying the extra fees to fly with folding boat that requires tender care around the rocky and icy shorelines, you will need to find kayaks in Greenland. Although kayaking is as much a part of Greenlandic culture as baseball is in the USA, it is hard to find serviceable rental boats available for anything but a day trip. Expedition gear, shuttles and food are all challenging to find at times.



Camped on the saddle of an island Photo: Piotr Damski

Your best bet is connecting with an outfitter that has a local fleet and solid local knowledge. Those that offer multi-day expeditions are few, so networking amongst previous Greenland paddlers for their impressions of the outfitters they used is key. We can vouch for Seakayakgreenland.com, owned by Piotr Damski. Piotr has a decent fleet of older N. American plastic kayaks, stoves, four season tents and outfitter gear and does small group trips. Maligiaq Padilla has been lending his talents to Black Feather Expeditions lately, if you enjoy larger groups. There are also a couple of European groups, but be sure to get references and be sure they operate in a language you are comfortable in.

Tourism

Greenland has recently chosen to leverage tourism as a major income stream, but the island's unpredictable weather has and will continue to make access a challenge.

In addition, very few communities have the infrastructure to support much tourism. Consequently, these smaller communities are often as curious about you as you are about them. You are not so much a tourist here as an explorer. Those days are numbered though. There has been a growing influx of small cruise vessels which bridge the issues of lodging and feeding travelers. In our experience of working around and sometimes ***for*** these companies, they often leave a heavy footprint without much economic benefit to local communities. It won't be long before these communities become numb to the people wandering around in matching parkas.

View from the tent at midnight. Photo: Michael Gray

Though not pets, Greenland Sled Dogs are their own breed and this Ummannaq girl wanted to share a new puppy. Photo: Michael Gray

In This Issue

Icy East Greenland

Rick Wiebush

Kulusuk. East Greenland Photo: Ville Miettinen

We got turned back after two hours of trying to make it through the ice. We had been following leads – narrow paths through the pack ice – only to repeatedly come to dead ends. Sometimes we couldn't see far enough ahead to determine whether the lead went through or not, while at other times what appeared to be a successful route got thwarted because the previously separated shelves had been pushed together by wind or tide and now blocked our way. It was the very first day of our 10-day expedition to East Greenland and we had to turn around and go back to where we started, camp there, and hope for better luck tomorrow.

Remote

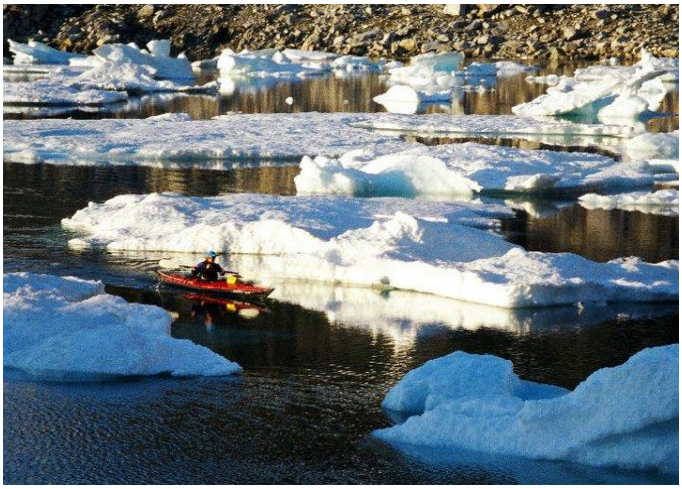
People in the U.S. think of Greenland as remote. But people in Greenland think of East Greenland as remote. We paddled in the roadless Ammassalik region of SE Greenland. The main regional town is Tasiilaq, population 1,750. It's the seventh largest city in Greenland! All the other hunting and fishing communities (about six) in the region have about 200 residents. That includes Kulusuk, home to about 25 houses, a small motel and an "international airport". Kulusuk was our base for the expedition. It is *very* remote.

The fjords of Ammassalik. Kusuluk's location circled. The whitish area on the left is the ice cap.

Paddling Through Ice

The real paddling story in East Greenland – even in July – is finding routes through the ice, and/or staying away from bergs that could roll at any time, and/or staying away – waaaaaay away – from glaciers that could and did calve off chunks of ice that were twice the size of 10-story apartment buildings. Which would send a series of five-foot waves surging across the fjord.

This happened one day: facing the glacier from the prescribed 300 yards away, it calved big time and sent those waves toward us. We were in a double. Not nimble. It took us a few minutes to realize that the waves were coming. It took what felt like 25 minutes to turn that double around. A lot of thrashing and splashing. Trying to outrun the waves. It didn't work. But luckily, the waves were just walls of water that didn't break until they reached the opposite shore. We only got gentle five-foot vertical rolling rides. Anxiety alleviated.



Negotiating the ice. Photo: Rick Wiebush

This happened another day: after dinner, I took the group leader's single kayak out, mostly just to be able to paddle a single after being confined to a double all week. To feel some responsiveness, some gracefulness.

I headed away from camp, slaloming my way through the ice for about a mile, with a smile on my face. I saw a little sandy spit jutting out from land and beached. After 20 minutes of enjoying the solitude, I started back and learned something. Actually two things: 1) the tides change pretty quickly and 2) when the tide goes out, there is less water and when there is less water, previously separated sheets of ice slide back together, thereby closing what - 30 minutes ago - had been navigable pathways.

Oops. I got maybe a quarter mile through narrow leads before I ran out of water. The ice just ahead looked thin, mushy and I thought I could break through it fairly easily. It wasn't and I couldn't.

A double moving through the ice. Photo: Rick Wiebush

Crossing an ice bridge from one lead to another. Photo: Rick Wiebush

I was sitting on top of ice, paddles clacking frantically, with the next available open water twenty feet in front of me. What happened next is kind of a blur, but it involved some combination of chopping ice with my paddle and gently gorilla-walking my canvas-hulled Feathercraft boat across that mini floe.

These OMG stories didn't happen every day. There also was a lot of easy paddling through more open water. But the difficult times – the frustrations and fears - made an impression.

Weather

Ice, ice, ice. Even in July in East Greenland there is lots of ice and lots of different types of ice: brash ice, shelf ice, bergy bits, icebergs, glaciers; found in a bewildering array of sizes and shapes that also come in different colors: green, bright white, dirty white, turquoise, aquamarine, deep blue.

10 days. About 120 miles. Mostly sunny skies, except for the overcast gloominess day near the Knud Rasmussen glacier and the bone-chilling, pouring rain, windy last day riding in the cramped hold of our shuttle boat with gear bags piled on top of us trying to stay warm on our way back to Kulusuk. But most of the days weren't like that. More like 60-65 degrees during the day (and 80 one day!), then into the high 40's at "night". Speaking of which, there really wasn't any, except for a couple hours of duskiness around two or three AM.

In Camp

Camping was on rocky hillsides and plateaus, with a lot of moss and four-inch high bushes and "trees" scattered around. A highlight: we had a giant tepee-type canvas tent that was about 12 feet tall with an opening in the top. We cooked and ate dinners in there. It was roomy enough to comfortably accommodate everyone in the group. It was also roomy and comfortable enough that I slept in there every night instead of one of the two-person tents.

The food – dinners especially – was fucking terrible. A lot of potatoes, big-ass, cut in half and half-cooked carrots and – get this – herring! All the meals weren't like that, but enough were that the difficult times – the tastelessness, lack of visual appeal and indigestion – made an impression.

Blue ice. Scale: the tall bit on the left was about 40 feet high. Width of the whole thing about 100 feet. Photo: Rick Wiebush

Camp. Photo: Rick Wiebush

The scenery is hard to describe, hence several photos included here. Basically, rugged mountains, partially covered in snow, dropping down to crystal clear water and spectacular ice formations.

Animal life was minimal. The only thing other than occasional birds was one arctic fox who was bold enough one lunchtime to walk up to our unattended kayaks and start rooting around in the cockpits, presumably looking for food rather than checking on what kind of gear we had.

The Group

The group was an interesting lot: one Canadian, a married couple from the Netherlands, a woman from Sweden, two Americans, and the guide from Ultima Thule Expeditions in Reykjavik, Iceland. Of course, the Europeans spoke perfect English (along with a couple other languages each). The guy from the Netherlands had such command of English that he could tell stories and crack jokes in English that were very funny; which, if you've ever tried to learn another language, is quite remarkable.

Arctic fox. Photo: Rick Wiebush

The only sandy beach we found in 10 days. Photo: Rick Wiebush

Also impressive was the habit of the Swedish woman to jump out of her boat at the end of each day and right there on the beach take off *all* her clothes and change into something dry and warm right in front of everyone. No inhibition about it.

Meanwhile, everyone else would be focusing on taking their stuff to the campsite, setting up their tent, maybe grabbing a snack and only then changing. Of course by that time, a chill had set in that we couldn't get rid of for the rest of the night. We all finally learned from the Swede and started changing clothes first, albeit without stripping right there on the beach.

Culture Bits

Hunters and fishermen in the communities use power boats (not kayaks) in the summer and dogsleds in winter. It's common to see 10 – 12 sled dogs tied up at houses in places like Kulusuk.

There is an interesting distribution of prized hunting spoils like polar bears. The person who *spotted* the bear gets the hide and half the meat. The person who *shot* the bear gets one-fourth of the meat and the rest is distributed among other community members.

Photo Contest: Cross Currents 2026 Calendar

Call for Photos!

It's that time again! Every year we ask people to submit photos for consideration for inclusion in the Cross Currents calendar. **We are now looking for photos for the 2026 calendar**.

All photos are rated by a panel of eight kayakers. The 13 best photos make it into the calendar. There are some rules:

- the photo should include a kayak(s) OR
- a great scene taken from a kayak
- the photo cannot include the bow of the person taking the photo
- the pic can be from anywhere in the world
- maximum submission of five photos

Photos should be submitted in .jpeg format to Rick at ***crosscurrentsseakayaking@gmail.com***

You can start sending photos now. The **deadline for submissions is Sunday, 23 Nov. 2025**

The submission should state:

- what the photo is of (e.g. "kayakers playing in the tide race at Sullivan's Falls")
- When and where the photo was taken
- The name of the person who took the photo

Kayaking with the Watkins Boys

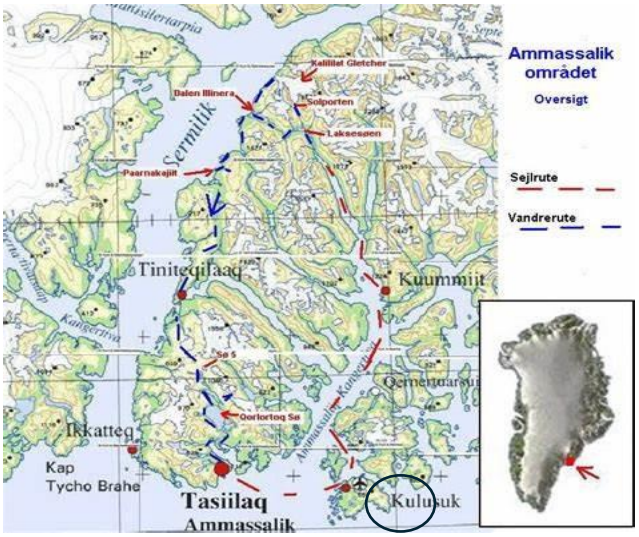
F. Spencer Chapman

Ed. Note: In keeping with the Greenland theme of this issue, this article is based on the explorations of Gino Watkins, the young British explorer who in 1932 died at age 23 while sea kayaking during an expedition to Greenland. F. Spencer Chapman, who was part of Watkins' crew, subsequently wrote a book about their expedition, titled "Northern Lights". One chapter in the book is devoted to how and why the Brits learned to paddle while in Greenland. The following are excerpts from that chapter. This article originally appeared in the March 2022 edition of Coastbusters.

The Art of Kayaking

In the winter, there are many ways of hunting seals. You can shoot them in the open water or in leads among the ice, or you can set nets for them, or harpoon them at their breathing holes… But in the summer, when seals are more plentiful, there is only one way of hunting them, and that is from a kayak. And as the seal is more essential to the Eskimos than manna was to the Israelites in the wilderness, they have reached a high level of efficiency not only in the handling of the kayak but in the design of the craft itself and all its equipment.

The kayak of the Angmagssalik Eskimo is not only a wonder of efficiency, but a veritable artistic triumph. It is the perfect canoe. Each detail has evolved until it has reached perfection. The kayak, like a racehorse, is a thing of infinite beauty. When the *Quest* first reached Greenland, we saw the natives in their kayaks throwing their harpoons with consummate grace; and later we saw them, dressed in waterproof coats, rolling the kayak right over in the water. They fell over on one side, and with a dexterous movement of the paddle appeared again on the other. We appreciated then the skills of this, as a trick, but it was not till we had personal



Area of Southeast Greenland referenced in the article. It's the Kulusuk area.

experience that realized the importance, indeed the necessity, of being able to perform this strange evolution.

Watkins realized that it would be impossible for us to hunt seals in the summer unless we learnt to use a kayak. Furthermore, should we succeed in this, we would be able to support ourselves on journeys along the coast, instead of having to carry a vast amount of food and impedimenta. Europeans had learnt to go in a kayak before … But it was generally thought impossible that a European could learn to hunt seals from a kayak, or to roll it in the Eskimo fashion.

Kayak Construction

In some parts of the Arctic, whalebone is used for the framework of the kayak, but at Angmagssalik there is always plenty of driftwood. Pine trees get swept down the great rivers of Siberia, and

following the arctic drift, possibly within a few miles of the North pole itself, are eventually seen by the watchful Eskimo floating about among the pack, great white tree trunks 10 or 15 yards long.

The natives, working outside their tents in the sunshine, did not take long to build them once they had got the necessary wood and skins. The framework is about 18 feet long and consists of five laths of wood longitudinally, and fifteen or sixteen transverse ribs, making the kayak less than 2 feet wide in the middle. These are most carefully cut out (with a pocket-knife, of course) and are steamed over the cooking-pots and then bent to the required shape. The various parts are cunningly spliced together, and held in place by wooden pegs. The extremities, where the keel and two side pieces meet, are a work of art. Skins of the large bearded seal are preferred, but only one or two of the most skillful hunters had their kayaks covered with these. Most of them had to use skins of bladder-nose seals or even of the Greenland seal. Kayaks covered with these have to be re-skinned each year, but the bearded seal-skin will last two or three.

The skins are allowed to putrefy till the hair and grain of skin can be easily scraped off. The smell of the skin is then most nauseating, yet the natives eagerly gobble up any of the trimmings. Two skins are usually enough, and they are put on wet and pulled as tight as possible before sewing, so that when dry the skins are as tight as a drum.

Sinew is used for the stitching, which is done in two rows about half an inch apart, so that the finished kayak is completely waterproof after it has been treated with boiled seal-oil. Coat after coat of this is rubbed in till the skin will absorb no more, and the last layer forms a coat of shiny, sticky varnish. A wooden ring, which will just fit over the hips, is fixed to the frame and supports the seal-skin on a row of small bone pegs on its inner side. …

At first, most of us found it quite impossible to get into the kayaks: we would get our feet in and then heave as hard as we could on the seal-skin thongs; but our kneecaps always seemed too large.

Wobbly Beginnings

To begin with we got in on land, which was hard enough, and were then lifted into the water while our instructors still held on to the stern. At first it felt most unsafe, very like trying to ride a bicycle for the first time. You wobbled one way, and then went too far over the other way trying to correct your balance, and finally lost it completely. The paddle laid flat on the water steadied you a little, but it was all most precarious, and purely a matter of balance.

After a bit, we could gingerly paddle along, being very careful round corners, and staring fixedly straight in front, for the least turn of the head started a wobble. ….. When you are in a kayak you have to perpetually balance it. If you relax, you capsize at once. With experience, of course, you learn to balance it unconsciously.

Rolling Lessons

We had seen the Eskimos “rolling” of course, and like most skillfully performed acrobatic feats it looked easy, though we knew it would take some time to learn… Watkins actually learnt to do it several weeks before the rest of us, but though he could usually perform it, he was not exactly certain what the movement was.

I remember very well when I started my first lessons. Three days after I first got into a kayak I went in a single day about 10 miles down Sermilik Fjord on the way to Angmagssalik, and being rather pleased with myself, thought I was ready to learn to roll. When we got to Angmagssalik, the local schoolmaster and the wireless operator’s assistant, who were about the best kayakers, came out to “pick up”, while all the inhabitants lined the shore to watch the fun.

I had rehearsed the movement carefully on land. If I rolled by falling over towards the left, I must keep my left hand (holding the extreme end of the paddle) right down, almost touching the kayak deck. With my right arm held well down the paddle,

I was to make a big sweep over my left shoulder and above my head. If I cut the stroke, or if I raised my left hand, I would fail to come up.

I got into the right position for starting, and feeling quite petrified let myself slip over into the icy water. Once underneath, it all seemed so odd that I made a dash at the stroke, cut my swing, lifted my left hand and was quite surprised when nothing happened. I dropped the paddle, put a frantic hand up on each side of my kayak, and watched the slim bows of the other kayaks coming slowly alongside. I grasped them and soon breathed the air again. I tried this several times, but though I once got my head above water I slipped back again. Then, as we were all rather cold, the session was closed. (*Seven of the crew, including Chapman, eventually learned how to roll – ed.)*

Learning to roll. Photo: Jakub Bartek

Hunting

One day I went out hunting with four of the natives and instead of taking my harpoon and line, I took with me a 16-mm, cinematograph camera…. We went about six miles from the land, chasing several seals along the way, but each time they reappeared out of range and eluded us… Suddenly there was a large disturbance in the water, and a large, grey-brown body broke the still surface or the sea, arched over in the water and disappeared. I could see as the Eskimos swung their kayaks round that it was something unusual, and when they excitedly whispered "kreaydewar" (Narwhal) I was so thrilled I nearly capsized. We went all out towards land, straining every sinew. Soon the Narwhal appeared to one side, came up three times and disappeared again. We changed our course, and paddled as if possessed, taking great long strokes that hurled the light kayaks through the water… This went on for more than an hour.

At last the leading hunter was just behind the Narwhal when he came up. … Next time it appeared the hunter hurled his harpoon and hastily threw the float overboard. The beast disappeared, dragging the float down after him. Both were below for several minutes. At last the float bobbed up, and the hunters, who had spread out waiting for it, rushed to the place. Soon the Narwhal appeared beside the float. Another harpoon was hurled and this time two floats were dragged down, but not for long. After a few seconds the great animal appeared and thrashed crimson on the surface. The harpoon point had found its mark.

Now Get It Back Home

Normally the Narwhal would start to sink soon after death, and it would be almost impossible for a kayak to tow it home. Two kayaks were therefore brought alongside with the dead narwhal between. A paddle was put across the kayaks, making them both stable. Then one man took out a knife and cut a small hole in the Narwhal's back. Next, working with a wooden peg, he made a space between the blubber and flesh of the Narwhal. With his hand on the paddle he then leant down and put his lips to the hole which he had cut, blew the Narwhal up as one does a balloon, and hastily inserted a wooden peg before the air could escape. After that, the four hunters harnessed themselves to the dead narwhal and started to paddle homewards.

I have never seen men so genuinely happy: all the way home they sang old songs and waved their harpoons in sheer joy. It was not a very large Narwhal, and when we got near a small island they decided to land and cut it up. A small piece on the back of each kayak, it would be easier to carry homewards. but the swell was so great that we were

Narwhal. Photo courtesy of obri oceanu.com

quite unable to land. Out at sea it had not troubled us, but here the breakers were rolling up the rocks with showers of spray and foam.

The ice-floes, on the other hand, rise and fall with the swell, and on them at any rate one could land. We did this, and hauled the Narwhal up on to the ice. Then it appeared, rather to my disappointment, that it was really quite a small one, being only about 8 feet long. Had it been much larger the natives said we would never have been able to catch it; as it was, we had had to give chase for more than an hour before a harpoon could be thrown. The big Narwhals are only killed when they are caught sleeping near the surface, and even after the first harpoon has been thrown they may still drag the float for several miles. After blowing up the Narwhal once more, the Eskimos got into their kayaks on the floe and dived in them back into the water.

As we approached the settlement they all shouted out at the top of their voices that one Cardi had killed a “kreaydewar”. All the natives swarmed out of their tents and soon the animal was divvied up. Every hunter who is present at a kill is entitled to his share of the spoil. The skin and blubber of the Narwhal have a sweet nutty flavor which is most delicious, and the meat is much like venison. Like seal-meat, it has no flavor of fish whatsoever.

Narwahls

Called the unicorn of the sea, Narwahls are in the whale family and are related to Beluga whales. They live near the Arctic circle, traveling under the ice and coming up for air through holes in the ice. They can stay submerged for 25 - 30 minutes. The males can grow to 12 – 15 feet and weigh up to 3,500 pounds. They can live up to 50.

It is the males who have the distinctive tusk, which is actually an incisor tooth. That tusk can grow to 7 – 10 feet. Scientists are unclear about the functions of the tusk, but it is related to social dominance.

Cod and halibut make up most of their diet, but they will also eat shrimp and squid. Their predators are polar bears, sharks and orcas.

Sources: Wikipedia, NOAA, Whale Scientists

Photos of the Month

Grounded

Photo: Ted Gormley

Photos of the Month

Submerged

Photo: Bill Vonnegut

Photos of the Month

Transported

Photo: Sherry Roy

Kiptopeke Symposium: Photo Essay

Rick Wiebush

The 12th annual Kiptopeke Sea Kayaking Symposium was held at Cape Charles on the eastern shore of Virginia, Sept 17 – 21, 2025. Sixty-five participants and 12 coaches stayed in the five Kiptopeke State Park Lodges and were involved in 10 full- or half-day courses each day.

Courses were held on the calmer waters of the Chesapeake Bay or on the bouncier (especially on Sunday with 20+ kt. winds) Atlantic Ocean. This photo essay is designed to provide some flavor for the symposium for those that weren't (and were!) there.

Intermediate Surf class. Photo: Ricardo Stewart.

Expedition Skills with Jeff Atkins. Photo: Ricardo Stewart.

Dale Williams leads Friday night discussion of lessons learned from expeditions. Photo: Ricardo Stewart.

Tide race off Smith Island. Photo: Ricardo Stewart

Navigating the breakwater of concrete ships during Teach and Trek. Photo: Linda Horton

Breaking through in the intermediate surf class. Photo: Ricardo Stewart

Ashley Brown. Photo: Linda Horton

Contributors

F. Spencer Chapman **- went to Greenland with Watkins when he was just 23. He subsequently wrote "Northern Lights" from which this article is excerpted. He then went on to teach and become a headmaster. He continued exploration, including a first ascent of a 24,000 foot peak in Tibet. He wrote two books about his Tibetan adventures. During WW II, he commanded a guerilla warfare school in Singapore and then spent three years behind Japanese lines in Malaya. He was considered a hero and awarded the British Distinguished Service Order. He wrote a book about his war experiences. He spent the rest of his life serving as a headmaster at various schools in Germany, South Africa, and England. He also served as the Director of the Outward Bound Trust. As he aged, he became depressed at not being physically able to face challenges and danger, and ended up committing suicide in 1971.**

Michael Gray **– is an ACA Coastal Kayak Instructor Trainer, Leader Trainer and Canoe Instructor and is the owner of Uncommon Adventures which he operates with his partner, Lisa Deziel. This most recent Greenland trip was part of a series of Pinnacle Expeditions they are offering to those in search of multi-day expeditions requiring a higher skill set. Next up is an 11-day SE Alaska trip. Look for Tasmania and Shetland to be in coming line-ups.**

Rick Wiebush **- runs *Cross Currents Sea Kayaking* and is the editor of *Coastbusters*. He is an ACA L2 IT and British Canoeing 4* Sea Leader. Rick lives in Baltimore. He went to Greenland when he was just 57.**

Coastbusters **welcomes submissions of trip reports, incident descriptions and analyses, skills and "how-to" articles, boat and gear reviews, book and video reviews, and photographs. We are interested in receiving submissions from all paddlers.**

Articles should be limited to about 1,500 – 2,000 words and submitted in Word. Photos should be submitted in .jpg format. Please send your submissions to Rick Wiebush at rwiebush@gmail.com.