

# *Coastbusters*

**The Cross Currents Newsletter for Mid-Atlantic Paddlers**

November 2021

**Raise Your Hand  
If You Know More Than Five Black Paddlers**

*Rick Wiebush*



*White faces in white spaces. Photo: Rick Wiebush*

*Note: This is the first of a two-part series on African-American involvement (or lack thereof) in adventure sports generally and sea kayaking specifically. This article provides background data and discusses potential barriers. The January issue will highlight some programs that are doing something about it.*

Sea kayaking is a relentlessly white recreational activity. Other than the few folks I routinely paddle with, whenever I see a Black person in a sea kayak, I am always a little surprised. A couple months ago, I got interested in finding out more about the apparently small number of Black paddlers and decided to do an informal survey of sea kayaking organizations (e.g., paddling clubs, Meet-Up groups) in the mid-Atlantic region. Those clubs collectively had membership upwards of 3,500 people. Of those, about 50 people (1.4%) were African-American. Yet in states like Maryland, almost one-third (31%) of the people are Black, while more than one in five people in Delaware (23%) and Virginia (21%) are Black. What's up with this stunning degree of underrepresentation in our sport?

### Participation Rates

It turns out that this situation isn't restricted to sea kayaking. Studies consistently show low participation rates in nature-based recreation among African-Americans. For example, the Outdoor Foundation does an annual report on the extent to which Americans participate in one or more of about 50 different outdoor activities, including fishing, hiking, camping, road biking, etc. Their report for 2020 showed that whites – who now comprise 58% of the U.S. population - accounted for 73% of the participants. Similarly, visitors to national parks, national forests and wildlife refuges are overwhelmingly white (e.g., 94-95%) and Blacks typically represent 1% - 2% of all visitors.

The same pattern of racial disparities holds for specific outdoor adventure pursuits. For example, although Blacks make up 12% of the U.S. population, just 4% of people who go camping are Black and only 1% of the members of national climbing organizations identify as African



*White faces in white spaces. Photo: Victor Leon*

American. The data are really striking for paddlesports:

- among nine million canoeing participants, 80% are white;
- of 11 million recreational kayakers, 83% are white;
- 71% of 2.8 million sea kayakers are white; and
- 74% of 3.5 million stand-up paddleboarders are white.

### So What?

There are important reasons to care about these disparities. First, the U.S population will become increasingly diverse by 2040. Consequently, the political will to financially support state and federal lands (e.g., state and national parks, wildlife refuges, conservation areas, public forests) and facilities (e.g., ramps and put-ins) for recreational purposes will become increasingly dependent on “minority” populations. The same is true for conservation, environmental, and climate change concerns, as well as the \$460 billion outdoor industry. Since research has shown that involvement in outdoor activities increases both the sense of a connection with nature and personal commitment to protecting the environment, expanding the racial mix of outdoor participants is critical for ensuring on-going political and economic support for outdoor activities.

Secondly, involvement in physical activities in general, and outdoor activities in particular, has been repeatedly demonstrated to have significant positive impacts on people's physical health (e.g., reductions in obesity and associated health risks; cardiovascular disease; risk of Type II diabetes), and mental health (e.g., reductions in anxiety, depression, and stress; improved self-esteem).

These multiple benefits are particularly important for African Americans since the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has found that they are much more likely than white people to be physically inactive and obese, to suffer from high blood pressure, and are disproportionately affected by cardiovascular disease and diabetes. That these issues – and associated health costs - can be mitigated by outdoor physical activity heightens the importance of increased participation by African Americans.

### Barriers and Constraints

#### The Outdoors as White Spaces

There is a range of factors that help account for the underrepresentation of African Americans in outdoor adventure activities. However, there is an overarching context that frames and is intertwined with the several individual factors that have been identified. That context is a fundamental conception of outdoor activities - both historically and currently – as “belonging to” white people. This is what Carolyn Finney refers to in her book when she talks about the outdoors as “white spaces”.

To illustrate this concept, close your eyes and picture downhill skiers, a rock climbing class, a group of backpackers on the trail, and/or a group of sea kayakers. What color are the faces of the people in your mental images?

#### Economic Issues

Economic and class issues provide one set of explanations. Researchers have found that the costs of travel and lack of transportation are cited as major reasons for non-participation by African

Americans in outdoor activities and their lack of visitation to national parks. In fact, low income is the best predictor of non-visitation to national parks. Other authors have noted that Black and poor people's lack of involvement in outdoor challenge programs (like NOLS and Outward Bound) might be accounted for by their more immediate and pressing concerns of getting by on a day-to-day basis. It's like:

*“we have to deal with difficult challenges every day at home (including staying alive), so why would we want to go out into the wilderness to face invented challenges?”*

An additional economic aspect is related to the high costs of participating in most outdoor adventure activities, even for those who express interest in getting involved. The cost of clothing and equipment is likely prohibitive for sports such as rock climbing (e.g. \$500 for shoes and equipment), skiing (\$150 – \$200 to rent equipment), or sea kayaking (e.g., \$70/day to rent a boat; \$1,500 to buy a decent boat), not to mention costs associated with training and travel to participate in these and other outdoor sports.

#### Collective Historical Memory

White people have romanticized nature and wilderness experiences and have viewed the outdoors as an escape from the stresses of daily life. But the historical experience of the Black community has led to an opposite view of the



All white. Photo: Rick Wiebush

outdoors; a view that serves to suppress participation. That experience includes slavery, the theft of land originally granted under the Homestead Act, beatings and lynchings in remote areas, and Jim Crow laws that excluded or restricted people from state and national parks.

Finney argues that these experiences have become ingrained as a collective historical memory in Black culture. They are part of a cultural narrative that associates participation in outdoor activities with personal danger.

This argument receives support from interviews with young Black people, surveys of Black people who did *not* visit national parks, and surveys of Black community members. One person who responded to a question about fears of the outdoors succinctly summarized this cultural factor - she stated that she was afraid of two things in the outdoors: 1) the unknown (primarily wildlife) and 2) white people.

### Sub-Cultural Identity

There is a strong sentiment in African American culture that outdoor adventure is something that white people do and Black people don't do. Things like rock climbing, backpacking, and paddling are seen as lying too far outside of group norms. In interviews with 12 Black millennials, Matthew Goodrid found that every one of them said that activities like hiking and camping were considered to be exclusively white activities in African American communities. As one interviewee stated:

*“So look, inside the Black community, I’ll speak about the Black community, things like hiking, things like kayaking... things like canoeing, things like skydiving, paragliding, um surfing, boogie boarding are all seen as White activities”.*

This cultural identity is strong enough that not only does it serve as a barrier to participation, but it also can create pressure from within the Black community for others to *not* participate, even if they are interested. Some of the people that Goodrid interviewed said they do enjoy activities like hiking



*White faces in white spaces. Photo: Rick Wiebush*

but felt that they had to figure out ways to deal with negative peer pressure. One author has referred to this as a “self-imposed cultural barrier” to participation in outdoor activities.

### Cultural Preferences

But it's not just *barriers*. There is evidence that many Black people enjoy doing things outdoors, but not necessarily the same things as white people i.e., they may have different *preferences* when it comes to the environment and outdoor recreation. For example, Janae Davis argues that Blacks do have a strong relationship with the outdoors, but it is manifested in Black spaces, not white spaces. In other words, those trying to account for why more Black people aren't involved are looking in the wrong places. She cites multiple surveys that indicate that Blacks and whites have different preferences for outdoor activities (e.g., Black preferences for organized sports, social gatherings, or hunting and fishing vs. white preferences for getting away from it all, sightseeing, and adventure).

This “cultural preferences” argument gets support from a study of national parks that found Black people are more likely to visit the newer, smaller, park sites that have Black cultural and historical themes (like the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad site in Maryland) than they are the wilderness- and nature-oriented parks.

## Media Representations

There is a dearth of African American images involved in outdoor pursuits in the media and in advertising, which helps reinforce the idea that outdoor adventure is for white people. Researchers have examined thousands of photos and advertisements in U.S. outdoor magazines and found that 97% of the people portrayed were white.

Interviews with African Americans indicate that they believe the idea that “black people don’t do that” is in large part due to media representations. One of Goodrid’s interviewees said: “[the media] make us think a certain way about ourselves, before we even experience it, so we automatically shut the door like, I don’t want to try that. I don’t want to do that”.

The low frequency with which various media portray Blacks as participants in outdoor adventure also serves to create a similar mindset for white people, i.e. that Blacks don’t participate in outdoor adventures and/or don’t belong in the outdoors. This can help provide the basis for another barrier, i.e. institutional and personal discriminatory attitudes and behaviors.

## Discrimination

While extreme forms of discrimination such as segregated facilities may no longer apply, Black people are still subject to overt and/or subtle forms of discrimination and microaggressions in the outdoors. This has been documented most frequently in relation to national parks, where people have reported hostile attitudes and actions displayed by other visitors and discriminatory acts by park staff. Surveys reveal that significant constraints to outdoor activities generally, and national parks specifically, are 1) fears for personal safety; 2) feeling unwelcome, uncomfortable and/or excluded; and 3) being subject to implicit racial bias by rangers and other park staff.

Here is an example of differential treatment by park staff. About five years ago, a group of university professors, four Black and four white, were attending a conference at a national park. On the

first day of the conference, the white professors went through the entrance gates unchallenged. In contrast, the African-American professors were extensively questioned about why they were going to the park. One of them was grilled about her degrees, her thesis, her research projects, and was asked to show her faculty ID before she was reluctantly allowed to enter.

## **Summary**

African Americans are significantly under-represented in adventure recreation. Factors influencing the low participation rates are multiple and often intertwined. These include the historic and institutional casting of the outdoors as the bailiwick of white people, economic factors such as the costs of specialized equipment, some self-imposed constraints in the black community in the form of beliefs that “Black people don’t do those things”, cultural preferences for different types of outdoor recreation, media representations, and on-going discrimination and bias. The search for ways to increase participation has some fairly high stakes in that: 1) many of the health issues faced by African Americans can be addressed and alleviated by nature-based recreation; and 2) continued political and economic support for national recreation areas, as well as the continued vitality of adventure-related activities will become increasingly reliant on the involvement of minority groups as the U.S. population becomes increasingly diverse.



Yes! Photo: Rick Wiebush

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*Pacific Baja. Photo: Bill Vonnegut*

## Fragile Ancient Mariners

*Ginni Callahan*



*Isla Coronados. Photo: Ginni Callahan*

We need creatures that challenge our imagination. Sea horses and dragons and blue-footed boobies; unicorns and Yeti and the Loch Ness Monster; giant squid and puffer fish and paper nautiluses.

When science and whimsy meet, some sacred harmony is struck, just haunting enough to plant a doubt about what's real, or pique a curiosity about what's possible. Notes of humility and excitement

find voice between the solid brass of biology and the flighty strings of cryptozoology (the study of creatures that may or may not exist).

One May, celebrating the end of the Baja tour season, the whole company had a picnic with our families on a crescent white sand beach on Coronados Island outside Loreto, Mexico. It was the kids of course, who found the unicorn of sea creatures in a shallow depression in the sand, still alive in its shell, but losing water to the falling tide.



As whimsical as a paper nautilus may sound, *Argonauta cornuta* definitely exists. They brought it to me in a bowl of water, and it suctioned itself to my finger. This was the first live paper nautilus that most of the other guides had ever seen in our combined 85 years of combing these beaches and snorkeling these waters. In my 20 years here, I've seen a few dozen empty shells, but only 2 live specimens.



*Live paper nautilus Photo: Ginni Callahan*

Such a close encounter of the wild kind as we had at the company picnic on Coronados Island leaves me feeling a little special and deeply grateful to have had that experience. Learning more about the

argonaut / paper nautilus has impressed me all over again just how ancient are some life forms (I really can't wrap my head around 500 million years!), how recently we've come to the party, and how varied are the experiences of life.

A live paper nautilus, or argonaut, is so rare to see that the field guidebook we used for years in Baja only had a picture of the empty shell. It's a single-chambered white to opaque crescent with black markings. Because it does seem fantastic that a kind of octopus swims around wearing a fragile curved hat, I've had clients insist I was completely making them up.



*Paper nautilus shell. Photo: Ginni Callahan*

I wasn't making this up. A few mass extinctions ago, the earth belonged to the ancestors of the paper nautilus—cephalopods, a group of agile, adaptable, expressive mollusks. It was a time before mammals, before dinosaurs, and even before land plants. Five hundred million years later, and much reduced in species variety, the cephalopod clan is still represented by octopi, squid, cuttlefish, chambered nautiluses, and paper nautiluses. They all have suctioned appendages and remarkable adaptations for predation, locomotion, disguise, and communication. These intelligent invertebrates also exhibit complex learning behavior. After all these years, there is still much to learn about them.



*Coronados*

## Point No Point

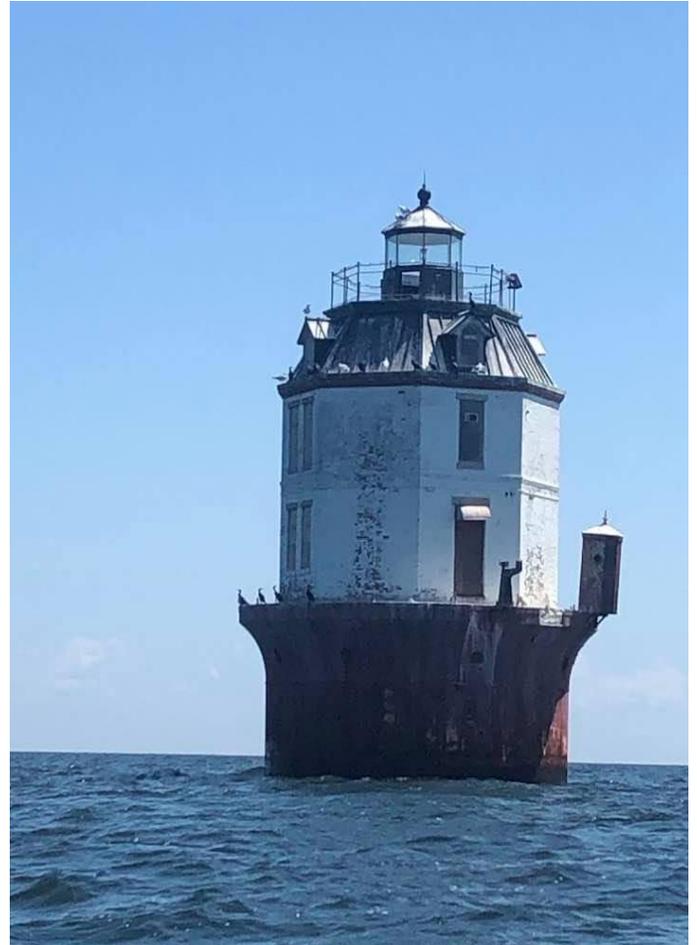
*Alex Dean*

I have been paddling around in a sea kayak for almost 10 years now and what a journey it has been! I have been on some wonderful adventures, meeting interesting people and most importantly, have seen some amazing things that you just are not going to see in a lifetime of experiences from the shoreline or even from the confines of a larger, powered boat. One trip stands out: a pair of dolphins accompanied my kayak on the way out of Metompkin Inlet on Virginia's Eastern Shore. The sea kayak is quiet, graceful and blends into the waters surrounding it, and most sea life seems unperturbed by its presence.

Over the years, I have had several great mentors that have made me a much better paddler - not just for the physical skills of strokes and rescues, but also for developing better insight and judgement. This leads me to an experience I had on the last day of August, 2019 that resulted in learning some important lessons. I had been following a Facebook page of novice paddlers in southern Maryland who would get together on the weekends in Saint Jerome's Creek, which is part of a protected, tidal basin that empties into the Chesapeake Bay. There was a gentleman that was taking a leadership role with this group leading paddles. He projected an image of someone who was experienced, competent and able to ensure at least a basic level of safety on the water. Let's just call him Jake. I kept an eye on the Facebook page because some of the comments Jake made there seemed odd for someone of his supposed skill level. I thought I should go on a paddle with these folks at least once so that I could quietly assess what was going on and possibly meet some new friends.

### A Dickey Proposal

An alarm bell and an opportunity projected themselves at the same time when I noticed Jake posted a paddle heading out of the creek and into



*Point No Point Lighthouse. Photo: Alex Dean*

The open water of the Chesapeake to Point No Point Lighthouse, nearly three miles into the Bay. With the exception of this self-appointed leader, none of these paddlers had actual sea kayaks with the exception of one with a 14' recreation boat with bulkheads. I also knew that the current could get difficult to manage at that southernmost tip of St. Mary's County. I contacted Jake and discussed my trepidation about offering to lead folks so far into the bay with rec boats and minimal or no experience in conditions. We had already exchanged messages, so Jake had some idea of who I was and

seemed appreciative of my concern. He said that only the best of this group would consider joining the paddle. What about restricting the paddle to sea kayaks with proper bulkheads and 15-foot minimum length? That fortunately became a non-issue when nobody signed up. So it was going to be just the two of us. I would get to know Jake a little better. I breathed a sigh of relief!

### Initial Assessment

Jake and I met at Buzz's Marina and the sun was already blazing hot. He seemed like a very nice guy and projected an image of someone with confidence and experience. His ride was a carbon-kevlar Greenlander Pro with the upward-angled stern. It was unpainted giving it a rather menacing appearance. He had a radio, full kit and a Greenland paddle which he claimed to have made himself, so no worries, this guy obviously knew what he was doing... However, two odd comments clearly stood out to me:

- There was a large carabiner attached to his spray skirt, like the kind you would use to go mountain climbing. I asked him why and he stated: "This makes it much easier to get leverage to pull off your spray skirt."
- He said he had only used this particular boat once, and that was last year. (I assumed from that statement that perhaps he was a gearhead and owned any number of boats.)

I asked him before we left what rescues he felt comfortable with and if he could do a self-rescue. He stated, "All of the usual ones. I was a member of CPA and did a lot of rescue classes." So I said, "If I need to rescue you, what reentry are you comfortable with, heel-hook, back deck or others?" He replied, "Any of those, and I also have a strap that I teach some of the folks how to use back in the protected tidal basin." Okay, I now felt somewhat confident that he knew what he was doing, so we set out.

### The Lighthouse

Point No Point Lighthouse was built between 1902 and 1905 to serve as a navigational aide in the main shipping channel of the Chesapeake Bay between Smith Point and Cove Point, off the shore of St. Mary's County, MD. It took three years to build because the Bay was subject to storms and ice that repeatedly destroyed wooden construction structures. It is 52 ft. high, with a range of 9 miles. The first floor of the lighthouse contained the kitchen and living space, while the upper level housed bedrooms for the head keeper and his assistant. The lighthouse was automated in 1938, but remained manned until the 1960s.

Here is part of the original description of the light: *Surmounting the foundation cylinder is an octagonal brick dwelling, 2 stories high, with a mansard roof, supporting a lantern deck with railing and an 8-sided lantern. A gallery surrounds the house, accessible from the water by means of two sets of ladders, and on it are placed steel davits, boat-hoisting apparatus, and the like. The new light was shown for the first time on April 24, 1905. It is of the fourth order, illuminating the entire horizon, and flashing white and red, alternately, at intervals of 20 seconds. A bell is struck by machinery a double blow every 15 seconds during thick or foggy weather.*

Source: [Lighthousefriends.com](http://Lighthousefriends.com)

### Trouble at the Lighthouse

Jake seemed to paddle just fine in the protected waters and we made good time getting out into the Chesapeake Bay. Luckily, it seemed like a pretty calm day. The tide had just started ebbing as we left, so that was a little push that could bolster confidence. The further out we went, however, the chopper the water got, which felt fine to me, and the one-foot chop with occasional white caps was pretty typical conditions in these waters. The wind was picking up as well, reaching around 4-5 knots.

The lighthouse, the target for this paddle, came into view and I was starting to get excited about seeing this old structure up close. As we got within a hundred yards, I got my camera out of my PFD pocket and took several pictures.

I thought it would be great to get Jake in the shot, so I called over my shoulder for him to paddle up past me on the side of the structure so that I could capture this memory. No answer, so I again called out, "Hey, just paddle up past me and I will get a shot of you." No reply, nothing... I turned my boat and craned my neck around behind me and saw his boat upside down. I could not see him. I was about 15 or 20 feet away, so I knew he had not been there long, so I started shouting out to him and paddling back as fast as I could. No reply. I feared the worst.

I turned around as quickly as possible, continuously shouting his name, "Jake, Jake, are you okay???" I am sure it only took less than a minute but it seemed like forever making it back to his kayak. When I looked over to the other side, there he was with his poorly-fitted PFD up around his ears and his head only halfway out of the water. I asked him again, "Are you okay" in a more than slightly irritated tone of voice, to which he stated calmly, "Yes, my paddle just got wedged under my boat by a wave." I asked him why he did not answer me in the first place as I was worried for his safety. He simply stated, "I did not think it was a big deal." Wow, I thought, not cool! "Okay, so let's get you back into your boat and start heading back."

### Huh?

I started to execute a standard T-rescue, but it was clear that he had no clue how this was supposed to happen. I ended up telling him what to do several times before he would finally follow through with my orders. Once I had dumped out his cockpit and got us parallel I asked him how he was going to get onto his boat deck. He pulls out a strap! "I said, I thought you could do a heel hook or get on the deck for a re-entry?" "Well, uh", Jake said, "I haven't done that in a while and I think this will be better." I scarcely believed what I was hearing.

Okay, he is a big guy, well over 200 pounds and not that tall, but he started to wrap his strap around his own boat's combing. At this point, I took over and looped the strap around his paddle, passed back under his boat and back to him and instructed him to loop over the other end of his paddle until it was at comfortable length. This way, his weight wouldn't pull us both in as he tried to get up onto his deck. It was an awkward assist and the heavy carabiner attached to his spray skirt got hung up on part of his seat as he tried to roll into the cockpit of his boat. Eventually, he got back and got the skirt back on.

### Multiple Capsizes: Now What?

"Okay", I said, "How do you feel?" "Are you okay to paddle back?" "Oh, sure," he said confidently. I released his boat and within a few seconds, he was back over again.

At this point, I made my biggest mistake of the day. I rescued him again, this time insisting that he give me his carabiner to make this a bit easier. Once back in the boat with spray skirt on, I told him, "I am not convinced you have the skill set to deal with the conditions out here. Let me contact tow you back to calmer water to be safe." He immediately said, "Oh no, I do not know why that happened a second time, but it was a fluke, I am absolutely fine to paddle back." At this point, I said, "Okay, but if you capsize again, I am towing you back, period!" I think the reader knows what happened next...

Back in the water again, and somewhat demoralized, Jake was looking pretty tired, so I told him, “No worries, let’s get you back into the boat and then you can lay across my deck as I tow you back out of here.” He looked thoroughly embarrassed but did not try to resist my latest statement. “Okay”, he said, finally agreeing with me, so I started the rescue process over once more. Once we situated the strap, however, we discovered that he had no energy left and couldn’t get back onto his deck. I was at a loss as to what to do next. I pleaded with him to try to find the energy but he still was unable to get up. At this point, I thought, well, I will set up a tow line and just have the guy hold onto his deck line at the rear of his boat and kick his legs and otherwise keep his body streamlined with our direction of travel. Some may ask why I did not do a bow carry, but Jake did not have the strength necessary to wrap his legs around the bow of my boat, plus, we were nearly 3 miles out and bow carries are for short distances.

### Making the Call

At this point we had both wind and current. The wind speed had picked up to around 8-10 knots, which would thankfully be the peak for the day. The white caps were more pronounced and the current was pulling stronger to the south. Although I am quite a strong paddler, towing Jake’s boat with him hanging on to the stern was like trying to paddle with an anchor hanging off the end of the line. I tried to convince myself that we were making progress, but after almost two hours trying to get back to shore, I was starting to get pretty tired. I looked to the north and was shocked to see that we were still parallel to the lighthouse but had also drifted several miles south of the inlet to the protected basin. I realized my limitations and concluded it was time to call the Coast Guard.

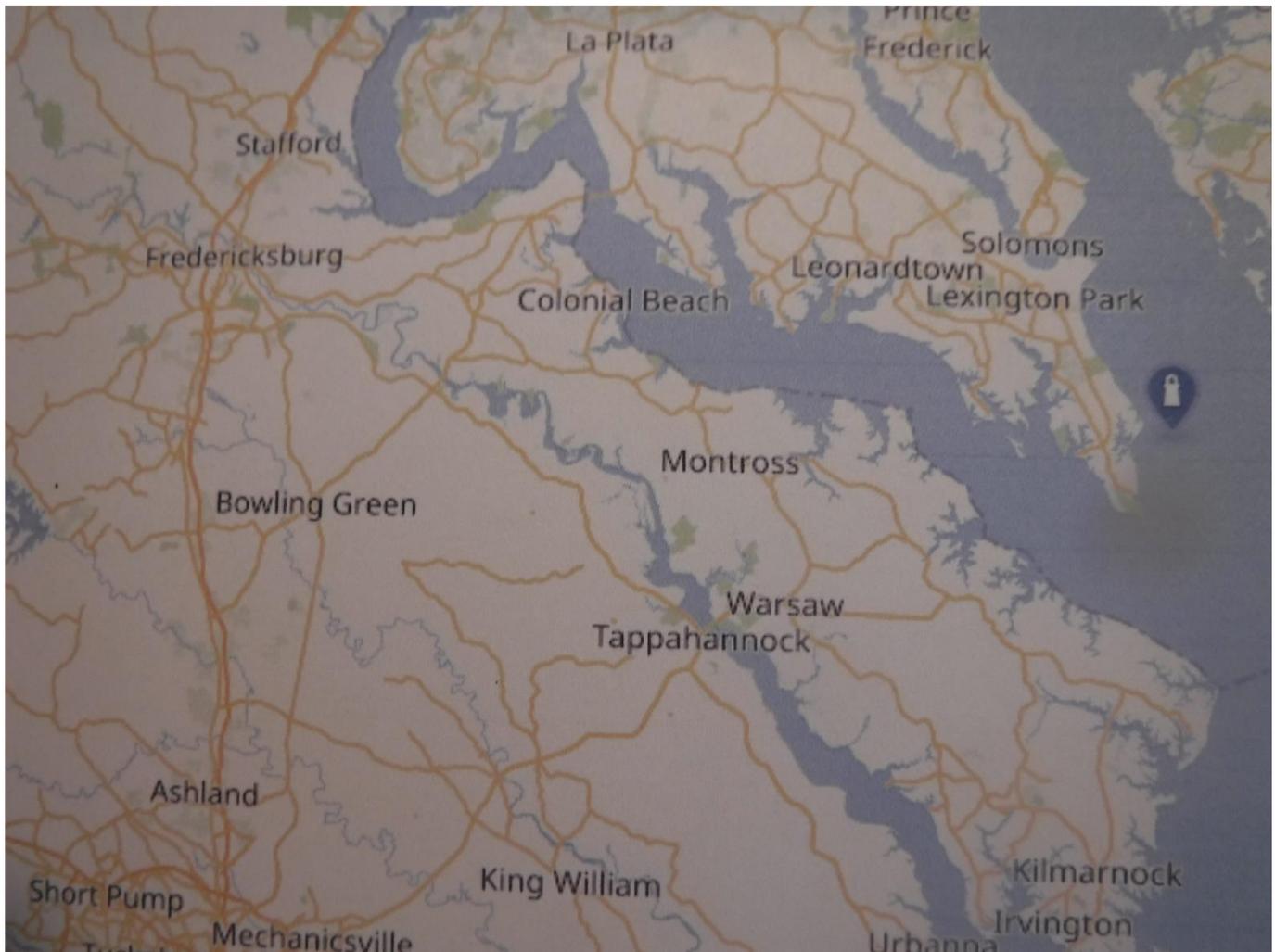
I pulled Jake’s boat up next to mine, explained the situation and asked for his radio. He handed it to me, but when I turned it on, the battery was dead. Apparently, he claimed, he must have forgotten to charge it before the paddle. I thought to myself, why didn’t he check it before leaving the house? I thought about the fact that I left my radio, fully charged, back in my truck since I figured, “There

are only two of us, so why get overburdened with more equipment than we need? After all, there are just two of us, why would we need to talk to each other through a radio?” This was just another one of several bad choices made that day. I remembered the words of Rick Wiebush echoing in my head when I once asked him, “Hey, we got several folks on this paddle with radios, do I really need mine?” He said, “Always take your safety gear if you have it.” Luckily I had my iPhone which was relatively waterproof, so I proceeded to call 911 and told them the situation.

While the operator contacted the Coast Guard I noticed a fishing boat coming directly toward us. At first I thought they did not see us and sensing a possible collision, raised my paddle to alert the captain. They waved back and slowed down. It was clear at this point they were coming over to assist, so I cancelled the 911 call. The two young anglers had a center console 26’ Carolina skiff and



Photo: Skip Willis



clearly had plenty of room for Jake and his boat, so I asked them to take him back to the closest shore point where I would meet and accompany him back to the marina. At first they tried to adhere to the mariner's rule to not leave others behind, but I politely insisted that I would be fine paddling my own boat back.

#### Lesson Learned

After two hours of trying to tow Jake and his boat back and making zero progress, I was able to now complete the distance in about twenty minutes. There he was waiting on the sand at Scotland Yards beach. People were out enjoying the sun and Jake looked relaxed and happy to see me. I was not so happy. I told him to never, ever, misrepresent himself like that again. Although he profusely apologized all the way back to the launch point I silently vowed to never again paddle into open

water with anyone without first verifying their skill level.

I am not sure what ever happened to this guy, but I never saw him organize any more group paddles and have not seen him on the water since that day. I wanted to share this experience with other paddlers because it was one of those situations where both Jake and I learned many lessons. I hope that the take-aways from this story might help others avoid a potentially disastrous situation before it takes place. In my case, I considered this the point in my sea kayaking life when I decided that regular training was crucial if I was going to continue in the sport. For instance, if I had only known at the time how to do a scoop rescue, things could have gone smoother that day. Since then, I vowed to always work toward updating and improving my rescue and paddle skills, never letting ego get in the way of education and always continuing to strive to find better and safer ways to enjoy the waterways.

**Photos of the Month**



**Maine Surf**

*Photo: Jimmy McArdle*

**Photos of the Month**



**The Tetons**

*Photo: Jeanette Holdbrook*

**Photos of the Month**



**Northern Ireland**

*Photo: Jeff Allen*

## Whither The Popularity of Sea Kayaking?

*Rick Wiebush*



*On the rocks. Photo: Rick Wiebush*

You have probably heard the stories about sea kayaking as a sport possibly in decline. Many of these stories are based on reports from kayak shops and dealers who note that sales of sea kayaks have been weak over the past few years and that inventory is backing up. They also report that most of their sales are from stand up paddleboards (SUP) and fishing kayaks, both of which appear to be the “in thing” in terms of paddling-related recreation.

There are now data available that support these anecdotal reports. Based on a national survey, it appears that sea kayaking is in fact in a stagnant - if not declining - mode in terms of its popularity as a sport. To illustrate this point, this article presents multi-year trend data on the number of people involved in sea kayaking in the United States. It also: 1) examines the extent to which younger people are involved in sea kayaking; 2) compares the number of participants in sea kayaking with the number involved in other paddlesports; and 3) gives

some perspective on the popularity of sea kayaking by comparing participation rates with other popular outdoor activities.

### The Outdoor Foundation Study

Each year the Outdoor Foundation produces a report that focuses on the extent to which people are involved in outdoor activities. The report includes in its definition of “outdoor activities” over 50 different activities including everything from archery and back yard camping to day hikes, hunting and fishing, bike riding, rock climbing, and wildlife viewing. It is a big umbrella.

This year’s report, entitled “2021 Outdoor Participation Trends Report”, examines participation during calendar year 2020. It is based on over 18,000 on-line interviews, the results of which are projected to the entire U.S. population. They report on the number of participants in various activity categories, the frequency of participation, and the characteristics of the participants. The report also examines diversity issues and, of central concern to this article, changes over time in participation rates. The full report can be found here:

<https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2021-outdoor-participation-trends-report/>



Stock photo

### Trends in Paddlesport Participation

Table 1 below compares the number of people involved in four different paddlesports (sea kayaking, recreational kayaking, white water kayaking, and kayak fishing) for four different years (2009, 2013, 2017 and 2020). The data reflect the number of people *in millions* who participated one or more times in the sport during each of those years.

The data show that the number of sea kayakers increased steadily during the period of 2009 (1.8 million participants) to 2017 (3 million people), but then declined to 2.5 million people by 2020.

**Table 1: Participation Trends (in millions) in Selected Paddlesports**

Type of Paddlesport	Year			
	2009	2013	2017	2020
Sea Kayaking	1.8	2.7	3.0	2.5
Rec. Kayaking	6.2	8.7	10.5	13.0
WW Kayaking	1.3	2.1	2.5	2.6
Kayak Fishing	n/a	1.8	2.3	3.0

In other words, there were 500,000 fewer people who sea kayaked last year than in 2017.

Nor is 2020 an outlier: participation in sea kayaking dropped steadily from 3 million people in 2017 to 2.8 million in 2018, then again to 2.6 million in 2019 (data not shown in tabular form) and to 2.5 million in 2020. These data clearly support the notion that sea kayaking is not as popular as it was a few years ago.

Conversely, levels of participation in the other categories of paddlesport showed a continuous *increase* from 2009 to 2020. Especially striking is the strong growth in kayak fishing, and the fact that the number of people involved in recreational kayaking ballooned, more than doubling during the period (from 6.2 to 13 million participants). The same data are shown graphically in Figure 1 below.

Youth Involvement in Paddlesports

Discussions in the sea kayaking world sometimes involve questions about the extent to which younger

people are – or are not - involved in our sport. I often assume that younger people want the thrills and spills associated with white water paddling and are not interested in hanging out with old people, doing boring flat water paddling. The data on youth participation in the Outdoor Foundation report partially address this question by examining 2020 participation rates for the four types of paddling. The data are only partially relevant because they are restricted to youth aged 6 – 17 and do not include young adults aged 18 – 25. The data, shown in Table 2, are nonetheless pretty interesting.

**Table 2. Paddlesport Participation by Young People**  
(in thousands)

Type of Paddlesport	Number of 6 – 17 Year Olds Involved in 2020
Sea Kayaking	400,000
Recreational Kayaking	2.3 million
White Water Kayaking	800,000
Kayak Fishing	800,000

**Figure 1. Participation Trends by Sport, 2011 - 2020**

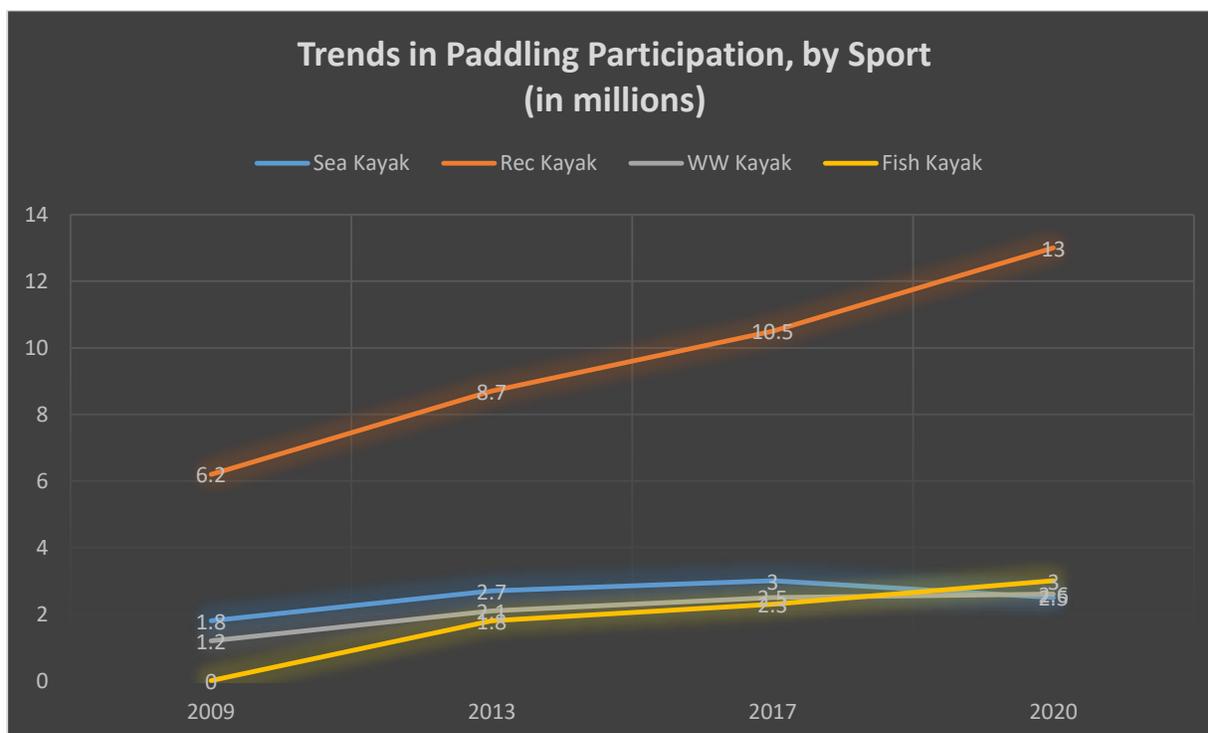




Photo courtesy of Owsten.co.uk

The data in Table 2 show that among the four types of paddlesports, sea kayaking is the least popular - with approximately 400,000 young participants in 2020. Perhaps not surprisingly, white water attracted twice as many young people (800,000 vs. 400,000). This supports the theory that younger people want more “action”. However, that theory is seriously called into question by the number of young people involved in kayak fishing (also double the number of young sea kayakers), and by the fact that young people were almost *six times* (!) more likely to be involved in recreational kayaking than in sea kayaking (2.3 million vs. 400,000).

### Keeping Things in Perspective

As paddlers, many of us think of sea kayaking as a fabulous sport, and it is one that many of us engage in almost exclusively. However, there are a lot of people who have different ideas about what constitutes great recreation. Without wanting to diminish the value of sea kayaking, the data in Table 3 below show that the number of us involved in sea kayaking is dwarfed by the number of people involved in other outdoor activities, whether those activities are somewhat tame (e.g., fishing, archery) or more adventurous (e.g. overnight backpacking,

indoor climbing). These data are shown to provide perspective on our relative position in the world of outdoor activities.

**Table 3. Comparison of Participation in Sea Kayaking and Other Outdoor Activities, 2020**

Type of Outdoor Activity	Number of Participants in 2020 (in millions)
Sea Kayaking	2.5
Overnight Backpacking	10.7
Archery	7.2
Mountain Biking	9.0
Fresh Water Fishing	42.5
Indoor Climbing	5.5
Downhill Skiing	14.3
Surfing	3.3
SUP	3.6

### What’s Up?

Trying to explain the drop in sea kayaking participation is problematic at best. It’s important to emphasize that a decline in participation is real, not just perception. The 2020 data are not an anomaly. We saw previously that there has been year over year declines since 2017, so it appears to be a trend. And the 2020 figures aren’t due to Covid, because other paddlesport numbers *increased* in 2020. The question is: why might that be happening?

One potential explanation is that a deterrent is the high initial cost of involvement in sea kayaking (e.g. \$3,000 – \$4,000 boats, \$350 paddles, etc.). But that doesn’t seem to hold water (cue groaning) in light of the strong growth of the sport in the period prior to 2017. Costs were high then too.



Photo courtesy of LL Bean

Another possibility is the emergence of cheaper, safer alternatives for being on the water. Between 2013 and 2020, the number of people involved in standup paddle boarding almost doubled, from 2 million to 3.7 million people. Part of the draw may be that generally, SUP boards and paddles are less expensive than sea kayaks, they are easier to carry, inflatable boards are much easier to transport, and most SUPpers choose the relative safety of flat water rivers and lakes. It may be the case that people who otherwise would have taken up sea kayaking opted instead for SUP recreation for some of these reasons.

The growth - from 6 million to 13 million participants - in recreational kayaking between 2013 and 2020 is stunning. It may be the case that some people have been turning to recreational kayaking in large numbers as an alternative to sea kayaking. Lower cost and greater safety may also be factors for recreational kayakers. Moreover, the strong emergence of recreation-boat-friendly and social-

paddling-oriented Meet Up groups over the past several years may have both reflected and *accelerated* the growth in recreational paddling.

A third potential explanation for the decrease in sea kayaking numbers is ageing. A significant (if unknown, but look around you) portion of the sea kayaking community consists of baby boomers i.e. that cohort of people born between 1946 and 1964. According to the Census Bureau, there are an estimated 73 million people in that age group and 59 million of them are age 65 and older. In 2017, when participation in sea kayaking was at its height, the oldest members of this group had just turned 70 years old; they are now 74 years old. It may be that baby boomer sea kayakers are starting to back off of their involvement in the sport.

#### What Do You Think?

Ultimately, this is all conjecture on my part. What do you think may account for the decline in the number of sea kayakers in the U. S.? Please write to the Coastbusters editor and share your thoughts.



*Stock photo.*

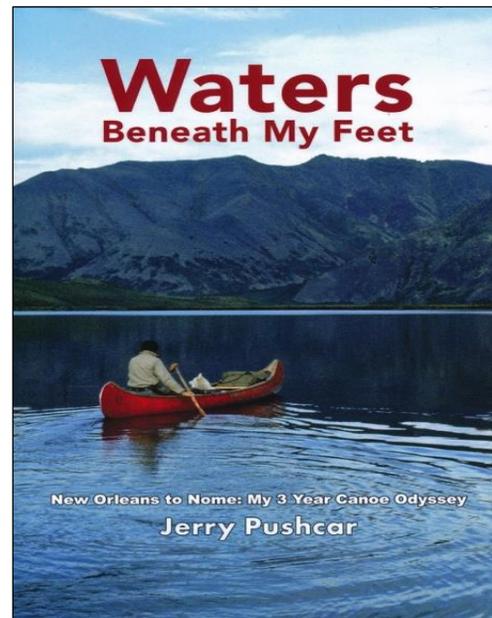
**Book Review****Waters Beneath My Feet, by Jerry Pushcar****Paul Caffyn**

This book's subtitle - *New Orleans to Nome: My 3 Year Canoe Odyssey* - caught my eye as the author had finished his trip at Nome in Alaska where I had been during my round Alaska paddle.

With not much of a preamble, other than a note on the rear cover that states, "after a 1,200-mile solo canoe trip from Grand Portage, Minnesota to Hudson Bay, Jerry Pushcar wanted to see more of North America's untamed wilderness", the author launched his 17-foot canoe into the Mississippi River at New Orleans. He aimed to paddle up the river, cross central Canada by portaging and paddling, down the Mackenzie River, up the Rat River, then portage across into the Yukon River and from its mouth, paddle north along the Alaskan coast to Nome.

Jerry was 25 years old, when he launched into the Mississippi near New Orleans on 10 January 1975, his sole companion a six-week-old Samoyed pup. There are 10+ books of kayak or canoe trips *down* the Mississippi - one of the best being the 1960 paddle by two women and a kitten from source to sea. All these books describe difficult times with floods, finding campsites, portaging around dams or passing through locks and dealing with a high density of shipping traffic, particularly long strings of barges in the lower reaches.

Jerry has to deal with all those challenges, but in reverse, bucking the current, fighting his way upstream around moored barges, dealing with sudden thunderstorms, and trying to find dryish campsites for an evening. All this on an absolute



shoestring budget. His dogged determination to push up the Mississippi River is staggering. He slept with a Smith and Weston under his pillow, using it once to deter a pack of five dogs savaging a deer. Once through the first of the many massive locks, the issues of floods and muddy river banks were left behind and he was able to enjoy the scenery and interaction with locals he met.

By the onset of northern winter, Jerry had left the Mississippi River and begun the paddle/portage routes to the Canadian border where he rented an abandoned farmhouse for the winter doldrums. After ice breakup on the lakes and rivers in the summer of 1976, Jerry followed those routes that the French-Canadian voyageurs used in the really old days with big freight canoes. Not far north of



Photo: Jerry Pushcar, courtesy of Minneapolis Star Tribune.

Lake Athabasca he had to spend a second winter and remarkably, from scratch with the aid of an axe and a two-foot folding saw, he builds his own log cabin, plastic sheet for a window and boot leather hinges for a door. How this young fella survived on his own for a second winter with just himself, a second dog and his guitar is mind boggling.

During the third summer, Jerry reached the Mackenzie River, then had a battle with bugs, running short on food and having to drag his canoe up the freezing waters of the Rat River to Summit Lake. Locals out hunting and archaeological teams helped with his meager diet, as Jerry paddled down the Bell River, into the Porcupine, and then it was all downhill on the Yukon River to the sea.

At Russian Mission, a small native village, not only does he lose his second dog in an overnight scrap but it was mid-September and winter was on its way. Held up by headwinds, he finally exits the north mouth of the Yukon River, but then almost loses his canoe when it drifts offshore. Following a swim to retrieve the canoe, his survival depended on his ability to light a fire. His 'Tin Man' description of trying to free his frozen joints and underwear is so apt.

At Unalakleet, a coastal Inupiaq village, winter conditions were well advanced. Then at Cape Denbigh, only 132 miles by sea from Nome, there was no more open water - the sea had iced over. He could have waited out another winter, but Jerry's dogged determination led him on a long, freezing

detour on land, through terrible blizzard conditions until he staggered into Nome on 12 November 1977.

In the acknowledgements, Jerry Pushcar notes the book was 40 years in the making. Obviously, he had a few rejections early on. The text is very readable - it never gets bogged down in a straight regurgitation of diaries. Mind you, he had plenty of time for re-writing during those two long winters. Description of his time interacting with the locals, especially during the two long winters, are nicely done, with insights into the hardships suffered and friendships made in those really remote villages or winter camps.

Photo coverage is on the lean side; some chapters with none and some with two or three in the text. The single half-page map shows North America with a black line marking his route and not a single place name. Which makes following Jerry's route rather difficult. A map per chapter would have helped.

The last paragraph notes that "Jerry was born and raised in the northern Minnesota" and he "has lived in Nome since completing his record-breaking solo canoe voyage. He has now retired and spends his summers mining for gold in the mountains surrounding Nome."

Perhaps best described as a down to earth narrative of a really big paddling trip by such a young bloke. No deep philosophizing about the meaning of life, but how he set his sights on reaching Nome and how his dogged determination got him there in the end.

Title: *Waters Beneath My Feet*

Subtitle: *New Orleans to Nome: My 3 Year Canoe Odyssey*

Author: Jerry Pushcar

Published: 2019

Publisher: Last Cache Publishing, Alaska

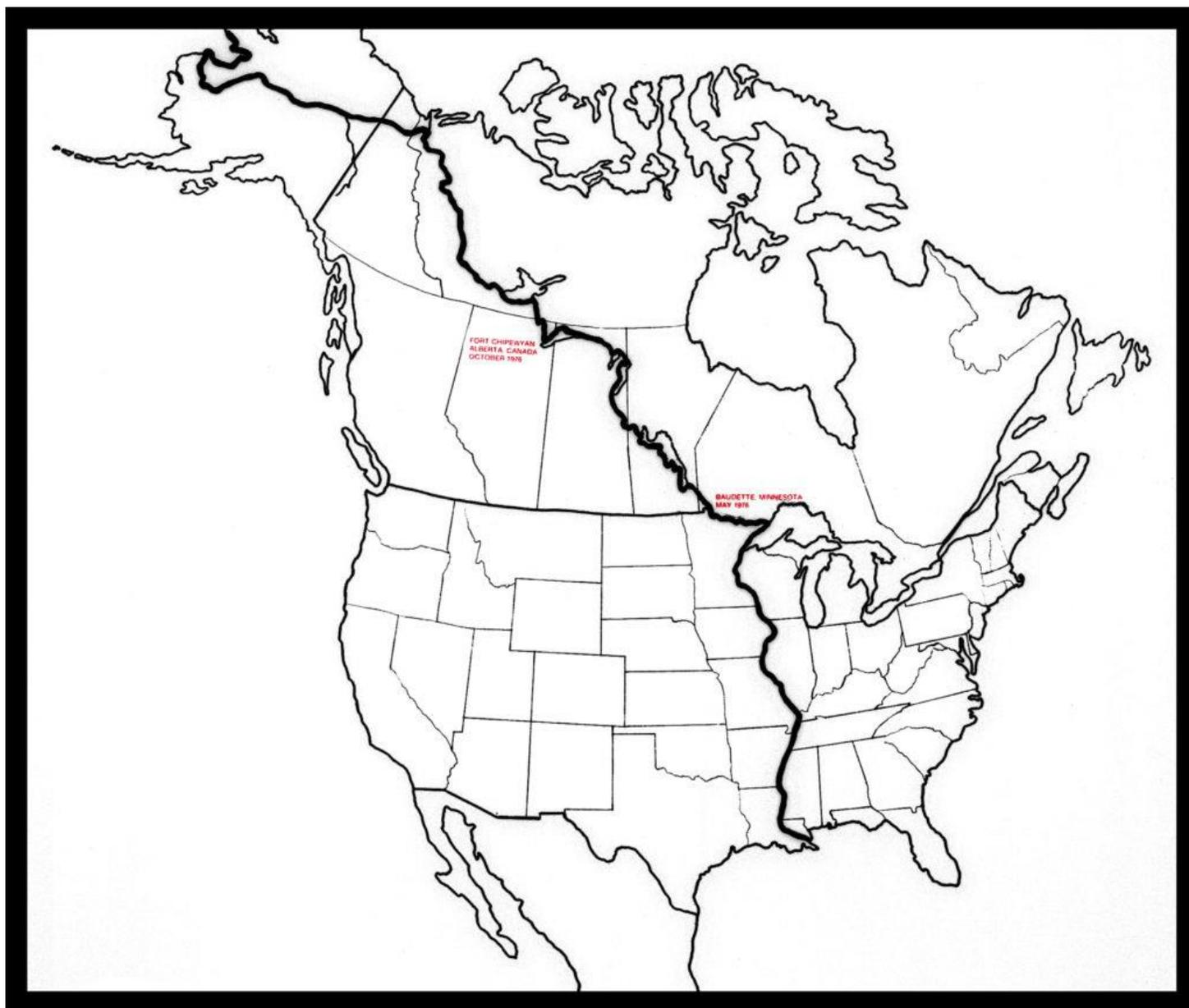
Contents: 373 pp, black and white photos, one map

Cover: softcover

ISBN: 978-0-578-41848-3

Availability: Amazon, \$19.29

## Pushcar's Route: 9,000 Miles Across North America



*Source: Waters Beneath My Feet*

## Jerry Pushcar's Final Push Into Nome

*Jim Klobuchar*



*Photo: Jerry Pushcar, courtesy of Star Tribune*

*Ed Note: The Minneapolis Star Tribune's reporter Jim Klobuchar (Amy's father) wrote several articles about Pushcar's journey. What follows are excerpts from his Nov. 16, 1977 column about the end of the trip, after he had been stranded on a remote cape for several days.*

"He trudged the gravel road into Nome, Alaska, like some northwoods Johnny Appleseed, bearing the scents and burrs of thousands of solitary miles.

Residents gaped, an attitude afforded few visitors to Nome. It is a place scoured by arctic wind, a rude little enclave of humanity between the tundra and the polar sea. Not many visitors impress Nome.

People come to Nome — some of them reluctantly — by plane or by a boat. They don't normally canoe 9,000 miles from New Orleans to get there, or walk the last 250 miles over cliffs, ocean-bay ice, tundra, and three feet of snow.

'We thought you were dead,' a bearded house painter told Jerry Pushcar at the bar of a town saloon where the 27-year-old wanderer from Biwabik, Minn. was

toasted with the Nome version of the champagne special: A double boilemaker — two shots of brandy and a beer.

A month ago, an Alaska newspaper published a report that Pushcar was feared lost at sea in the hours before the winter freeze locked the waters of Norton Sound. The report, Pushcar acknowledged, was not far from the truth.

On the last full day of his three-year transcontinental canoe journey from the Gulf coast to the Bering Sea, he went for an enforced swim among the ice floes, wearing only his wool underwear. ...

... With the sea frozen and his canoe immobilized, there were still 250 miles of swamp, tundra and 3,000-foot hills between the inquisitive man and his destination.

'I don't know what choice I had, why you come to think of it. That uninhabited cape on the frozen ocean was a helluva place to spend the winter unless you happen to be a walrus.' ...

... After three weeks on the tundra, Pushcar walked into Nome, a prepackaged celebrity.



*The end of the road. Photo: AP file photo*

## Upcoming Events

### Cross Currents Winter 2022

# Navigation for Paddlers

**Webinar Series: Seven Wednesdays 7 – 8:30 PM**

**On-Water: Saturday Apr. 30, 10 - 5**

This on-line series is the same as the one we did last winter. That one involved 25 people in two separate groups and everyone loved it. This year, we will cover the same general topics but with new examples and new exercises.

*This course is rigorous and demanding. Some of the sessions end up running for two hours. There is homework for each session and you will spend at least an hour or two on homework each week. There is a final trip planning exercise that will likely take you several hours to complete. Just sayin'.*

**Feb. 23:** understanding charts: symbols, latitude and longitude, measuring distance, understanding scale

**March 2:** using chart and compass together to plot courses, and to figure out where you are (i.e. triangulation)

**March 9:** understanding tides; accessing and reading tide tables; tidal causes and variations; rule of 12ths

**March 16:** understanding current; interpreting current tables; accounting for current in crossings; 50/90 rule.

**March 23:** dealing with wind: Beaufort scale, effects of wind on paddlers; strategies for dealing with wind

**March 30:** trip planning – bringing it all together: factors to take into account; details of the trip planning exercise

**April 6:** trip planning presentations: participants present their trip plan, including rationales for the decisions

**April 30 (Saturday):** on water – identifying aids to navigation; determining location; using ranges; dealing with current; comparing the chart and land features; dead reckoning, inter alia.

**Cost:** \$295 (\$200 if unable to do on-water portion)

**To register:** email Rick at [crosscurrentsseakayaking@gmail.com](mailto:crosscurrentsseakayaking@gmail.com)

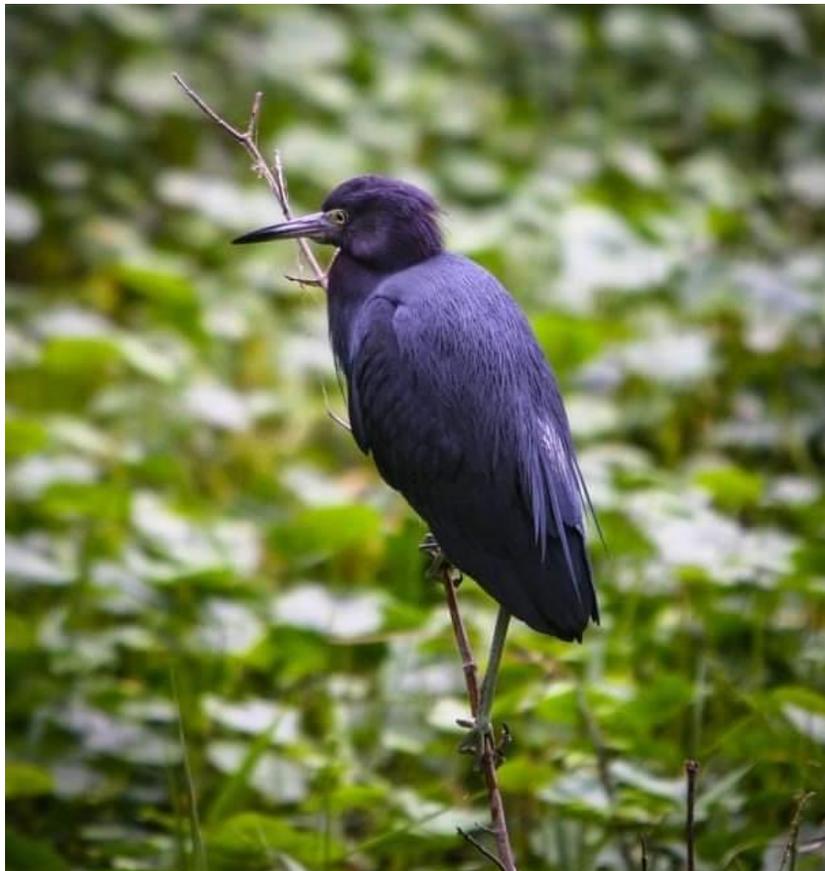
## *Upcoming Events*

### **Paddler Survey Coming Soon**

I am going to be doing a large, multi-state survey on the reasons older (55+) sea kayakers love to paddle. I will be contacting many of you soon to ask you to participate. It will be a chance to have your views heard and counted, while contributing to what we know about the paddling community. People who participate will be entered into a drawing and have a chance to win some great prizes, like a VHF radio!

People paddle for a lot of different reasons: some do it for challenges and thrills, others do it to connect with nature, others do it for the social aspect, and others do it for all those reasons. But, very little is known in a formal way about why “baby boomers” paddle. I want to use this survey to help fill that gap.

The survey is automated (Survey Monkey) and your responses are anonymous. It takes only about 10 minutes to complete. I did it, and actually enjoyed it because it made me think about exactly what my motivations are for paddling. Keep an eye out for an email invitation that I’ll be sending out in the next few weeks.



*Raven. Photo: Howard Mindek*

## Contributors

*Paul Caffyn* - lives on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island. In addition to being the first person to circumnavigate Australia in a sea kayak, he has circumnavigated the British Isles, New Zealand, New Caledonia and Japan and has done major expeditions in Alaska (the whole coast) and Greenland. Paul also has an extraordinary collection of sea kayaking-related books from around the world. Check out his website at <http://paulcaffyn.co.nz/>

*Ginni Callahan* – lives in Loreto, Baja for most of the year, operating Sea Kayak Baja Mexico. She is a BC 5\* paddler, an ACA L5 instructor and a fabulous writer. Her article in this issue originally appeared in her blog.

*Alex Dean* – is an ACA L3 Instructor who lives in southern Maryland.

*Jim Klobuchar* – was a well-known sports and general interest reporter for the Minneapolis Star-Tribune for three decades. He summited Kilimanjaro five times and the Matterhorn eight times. He is the father of Senator Amy Klobuchar.

*Rick Wiebush* - runs *Cross Currents Sea Kayaking* and is the editor of *Coastbusters*. He is an ACA L3 IT who lives in Baltimore.

*Coastbusters* welcomes submissions of trip reports, incident descriptions and analyses, skills and “how-to” articles, boat and gear reviews, book and video reviews, and sea kayaking-related photographs. We are interested in receiving submissions from all paddlers. Articles should be limited to about 2,000 words and submitted in Word. Photos should be submitted in .jpg format. Please send your submissions to Rick Wiebush at: [crosscurrentsseakayaking@gmail.com](mailto:crosscurrentsseakayaking@gmail.com)

*Coastbusters* is a publication of *Cross Currents Sea Kayaking*