

Coastbusters

The Cross Currents Newsletter for Mid-Atlantic Paddlers

July 2023

An Interview With:

**Ginni Callahan,
Sea Kayak Baja Mexico**

Rick Wiebush

Ginni Callahan is both a legend and an institution in the world of sea kayaking. She is also a spectacularly interesting and extremely nice person. Ginni runs Sea Kayak Baja Mexico, [Welcome - Sea Kayak Baja Mexico](#) based in Loreto, offering both tours and training. She uses only high-end NDK boats, Lendl paddles, and other top-tier equipment. She and her team of local guides know Baja inside and out and a lot of mid-Atlantic paddlers have done week-long trips in Baja with her. Ginni is an ACA L5 Instructor, a British Canoeing Advanced Sea Leader, a BC 4 Surf Instructor and a BC Assessor of Sea Leaders. In our hour-long Zoom session, we talked about how she got started in sea kayaking, her personal paddling motivations, some of her great adventures, and her plans to gradually transition ownership of the business to the local folks who work with her.*

Rick: When and how did you start with sea kayaking?

Ginni: Well, when I graduated from college, I put everything I owned in the back of a pickup truck and drove until I could drive no further, literally to the beach in Seaside Oregon, and decided that was going to be home. So, before I got a job, I got a canoe and put it in the Pacific Ocean one day and realized that was a bad combination as I swam back with it. Then I switched to a surfboard.

I met a kayak guide who was paddling in his little whitewater kayak in the surf. It was a kayak guide without a car and he said, "I'm a guide in Baja and I need a ride. So, if you would get a kayak, learn to paddle, and drive me to Baja, you can tag along on a few trips." So, I did. That was in the mid-90s, late 90s, last century. So, yeah, putting a sea kayak in the surf was just sort of a natural next step.



Ginni.



The Loreto area and the Parque Nacional Bahía de Loreto

Motivation for Paddling

Rick: So, the question is, why do you do that? What is it that you get personally of sea kayaking; that leads you to get out when you can?

Ginni: Oh my goodness, everything. Even when I was a kayak guide for another company, as soon as I would finish washing the gear, I would get in my kayak and take off. That was just my unwinding. I would be by myself, paddle out as far and hard as I could, and then just go to lie on the beach for a while and start looking in the tide pools, start looking at the birds, the snorkeling, start seeing really cool stuff out there and turn around to say, hey, look at that cool.... Then there's nobody to share it with. It's like, okay, now it's time to go back for another group of people. It's just kind of that balance being out in nature just absolutely fills me up. It's my battery recharge.

Rick: So decompressing, being in nature.

Ginni: Yeah, being in nature trying to stay fit and feel good about myself. That's my exercise of choice. It turns out this body is kind of an endurance machine, so to do that through paddling, I need lots of hours. Once I've trained up, I can just

keep going. So, to just go paddle for a couple hours, hey, I'm not quite warmed up yet. It's a bit of a struggle to find the time to do that to the level that I feel like I need it.

It's a whole combination of things, and the social part for me, less, so. Like, so much of what I do is people. Guiding, coaching, running the company, the administrative part, the conservation part, is all interacting with people, and I recharge solo. So, because I'm putting in so much energy with people, being out there solo is essential. It's also like my creative retreat. I have a light-colored kind of turquoise colored kayak, and I keep a pencil in my PFD pocket, and when I come back, my deck is usually just covered with notes. They may be things I need to do with the company. They may be a chapter in the guidebook I'm working on. They may be my next meeting with somebody. It may be like research. Yeah. It's my creative retreat. I go to think; I go to not think. I take pictures of animals and plants.

I mean, the social part is rewarding for sure, and sharing with people is one of the things that really drives me in what I do, but when I need to recharge my personal batteries, I just need to be with the stars and the fish and the rocks.

Big Adventures

Rick: So, can you talk a little bit about some of your adventures? Like, as you look back on things, what's been some of your great adventures?

A Month-Long Solo

Ginni: I did a month-long solo, like no resupply because it's always sort of been a dream of mine to just spend a month ... just paddle away and be gone for a month or so. It has always been a dream to explore a couple of the islands that are a little further off the coast that we just didn't go on trips. When COVID landed our business pretty much closed up within a space of a few weeks in

It's my creative retreat. I go to think; I go to not think.

the middle of our peak season. Oh, and I got the news that I was being divorced, for the second time, right around that same time. So, it was sort of a hard moment in my life where the two pillars of my identity and security just disappeared.

I had already had a desalinator modified to mount underneath the deck in the cockpit, and the lever arm was connected into the foot pedals. So, I had water. I could make the water. I loaded way too much food in the kayak. Could have been out there for two months because I was also fishing. Just headed off down the coast, and kind of reflected a bit on life and who I was, and why I was here. Struggled a bit with some of it, but came back. I actually came back not ready to come back yet, but just being out there, videoing creatures and looking around. I remember being on one little island, San Diego, and looking out at the world and thinking, I would really love to have some purpose out here.

And at that same island, there's this really interesting 20-foot high terrace of cobbly rocks, kind of surf-rounded with fossils, coral and shells embedded in between. So well, that's a really curious geological feature. So I took a bunch of pictures of it, and then later one of the local geologists... he does work in Baja,(and) is helping me write the geology part of the guidebook that I'm working on. Just in conversation, he said terraces of marine storm-tossed boulders is one of the larger projects he was working on around the world. So I sent him pictures of this island and he's like: go, go, measure, take pictures, research. I'm like, what? Go paddle 30 miles to an offshore island and take

pictures? All right!!! So, we published the first research article that I've been in, and now we've done more.

The ironic thing is, I was sitting on that very island looking at that very feature going, I wish I could have a purpose. Yeah. So, that was in the month-long solo.

The 18-hour Crossing of the Sea of Cortez

Rick: But that was different than the crossing, right? Didn't you do the crossing (of the Sea of Cortez) right around the same time?

Ginni: I did it after. So, the month-long solo was really just kind of get my bearings again. And when I ended that, I wasn't ready to end. I did not want to go back to civilization. I just wasn't ready. So, I knew I needed something else to keep pulling me forward because we were under COVID lock down, and there's no business, and what are we going to do? So, on the very last day of my solo, I met a sailor. I actually chased down his boat just to say, hi. (It turned out) he was going to have his boat on the other side of the gulf in October and would be coming back towards Loreto in October. So, that was my ride home.



Ginni's "Office"

So, I trained up. Each week, I would add 5 more miles to what I did the previous week without touching land. So, 15 miles one week, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40. The last long day before the crossing was from Loreto out around Carmen Island, and back to Loreto. I left at 4:00 a.m. in the morning and got in just after sunset, 50 nautical miles, 16 hours. It was August and in the middle of the day, was 114 degrees. It was brutal. I jumped in the water every hour or half-hour just to try to cool off.

We left for the crossing in October. Two of my guides (who were going part-way), Jorge and Ruben and I got a ride up to Santa Rosalia. We paddled out to San Marcos Island, and then we paddled up to Tortugas Island. It was a calm enough day that we managed to land. The grains of sand on this beach were this big (Bigger than basketballs). But we managed to, between us, get the kayaks up on that "beach".

(Try) to find a place to put a stove. There was like the lid of an abandoned freezer and that was our kitchen. That was Jorge's bed. Ruben curled up on top of a giant boulder that had a little divot in the top. I crawled into this cave where there was a shelf right up against the ceiling almost the size of a Therm-a-Rest, just kind of lay there sweating all night.



Basketball beach. Photo: Ginni Callahan



Sunrise and nothing in sight. Photo: Ginni Callahan

Then I launched at midnight. Jorge helped me get the kayak off the rocks and then he and Ruben paddled back the next day to the coast. So, I launched at midnight, and by sunrise I've been paddling for about six hours. And when the sun rose, there was no land in sight. It was sublime. I was so high on life endorphins, just the beauty of sunrise in the middle of a slightly choppy sea, and nothing on the horizon.....except color. Yeah. It was remarkable.

I developed the habit of carrying my mask, fins and snorkel and a tow belt on my back deck. The tow belt, I didn't like to wear it, but I kept it clipped on my back deck. So, I just put all that stuff on, clip onto my kayak, take off my PFD, slip into the water, and go hang out under water for a little while looking at fish. Then you can stretch and move around. It's not like you're stuck in the kayak the whole time. That's the beauty of Baja.

The crossing was 18 hours. It was one day, but you live an awful lot in that one day, and time at some point just gets so amorphous. Minutes take hours in some cases, and then hours pass in the blink in some cases.

The crossing itself was 18 hours, but the preparation for the crossing was really what got me through that summer. It was a motivation to prioritize taking care of myself... Just getting out there training, getting fit, and the things that you see out on the water when you're there. Dealing with the fear of paddling

The crossing was 18 hours. It was one day, but you live an awful lot in that one day and time at some point just gets so amorphous. Minutes take hours in some cases, and then hours pass in the blink in some cases.

at night with strange noises in the water, splashy things. Try to jump in the water for a pee break. There's sharks in there. Then dolphins show up at just the right time to make you smile, or a black-vented shearwater starts landing near your kayak to eat the krill that you disturb. You have to stop paddling to not hit the bird because it's developing this pattern of landing right in front of your boat to pick stuff out of the wake; to say "hi" again.

I stopped once to pick up a big plastic bag. Tried to scoop it with my paddle, and it turns out it wasn't a plastic bag. It was a pyrosome. It's like a sheet of jellyfish, but it was several feet long and square. I didn't know what it was. I took a bunch of pictures of it after molesting it with my paddle. Put it on Facebook and somebody told me what it was. In about July, as you're paddling, these little things stick in your fingers in the waters here. It looks like little glass beads, and if you take a picture of them with a macro, they're larval decapods, so shrimps, crabs, and they look like little shrimp, but they have this glass helmet on. It has a spear going that way, and these two spikes going that way and just get stuck in your fingers. And they're completely transparent. They're uncomfortable, but they're kind of cool.

Big Trouble: No Flotation and Tangled Tow Lines in the Surf

Rick: Have you had any times when you thought, or you actually were, in a lot of trouble on the water?

Ginni: This is a towing in the surf, don't-try-this-at-home story, right? Years ago, I was assisting another instructor on a course. And this part of the course was in the mouth of one of the entrances of Magdalena Bay, the Pacific side of Baja. Big estuary system, big water flow, and some weeks before the course, I'm like, hey, have you checked the tides on this course? He's like, "No. I used to fish out there. We'll just figure it out." It was a full moon, full ebb all day, and there was a storm offshore somewhere generating this huge swell meeting that outgoing current.

He said but there's this big sandy spit, so we can get shelter on the inside. But he hadn't been there in years. It had changed a lot and was sketchy for the broken mangrove skeletons in the area with smaller surf. The first time we went out, he takes people to where it's a little bit lumpy. We practiced T-rescues, and then he took the whole group altogether out into the surf. So, they all end up crash-landing on the beach. I don't want to step on his toes. He was the leader.

Rick: Everybody came out of their boat?

Ginni: Everybody. Well, he didn't, I didn't, but we got them on the beach, and then at lunch break people walked back to the camp to get lunch and we talked each other into just grabbing a couple of waves for fun before going in. So, go out, surf a little and it's a ripping ebb, but some pretty steep fun waves. He had inherited a little plastic surf boat that didn't have flotation in it, and he came out of his boat and he's like, oh rescue me. So, it's like, oh, do the T-rescue in crashing waves.



Not the actual event, but you get the idea.

I dumped the water out, put it back in the water and he's a little bit chunky. Every time he climbed in, it just swamped the boat and sank it. So, meanwhile, we're drifting out into bigger and bigger surf, just drifting away. He said, here, clip on my boat. It had this little canvas strap on the bow - clip on my boat and tow me and my swamped boat back to shore.

Right. Okay. So, you're the leader. I clipped on and just as I clipped on, a wave came and swung my bow over my tow line, so I am side surfing towards the beach with the line coming from my beachside going under my kayak anchored to him, going this isn't going to end well, and it's not going to last long. Bam, right over. So now I'm underwater, I can't roll up towards the shore because of the wave. I can't roll up towards the sea because of the line, and I don't want to come out of my boat because we're headed out to sea. So, I thought, okay, he's an anchor, the wave will pass, then I will roll up and then I will spin my boat around. So, that's what I did, and I started just heading towards shore and paddling with all I had, and looking at the distant ranges, and we were still going out to sea. We're still going backwards.

Rick: You still have him on tow?

Ginni: Mm-hmm. I could not make headway with a swamped boat and a person. Thank God, the handle

on his boat broke. So, I reeled in my line, I went back to him and it had another handle on the stern, but I said, no. I am going to shore. If you want a ride, get on my back deck. I'm not taking your boat. I hope it goes to China. I didn't say that. So, he got on the deck of my boat, and he was pretty big, so we did this wheely thing towards shore. It's not too bad having a back-deck passenger. Every time the wave hits, it kind of straightens you out and pushes you a little bit.

I used him as a rudder and just sort of put my weight on one hip, so his one foot would go deeper in the water. That was my rudder. Whenever a wave would hit, it would turn us again towards shore. We just kind of crabbed our way in. And my cockpit was absolutely swamped because it was under water with every wave and it just slowly filled up, but I got us to shore and the next day, I felt like I got hit by a truck.

It took 45 minutes from trying to put on the tow to get to shore. Unfortunately, the next day the fishermen came by our camp with his kayak in their panga. I was so disappointed. I've never been so disappointed to see a kayak in my life. But yeah, tow lines in the surf are a good thing to avoid when possible. (And) flotation is a good idea, and knowing your tide is also a good idea. We both agreed that we learned a few things. I learned that if something seems like a dumb idea, even if you're the assistant, just say, no.

Getting Started in Business in Baja

Rick: So, can we shift gears a little bit and talk about you and your business? How did you get started with the business? What made you say, I'm going to start a business down here?

Ginni: Pure foolishness. No. I was guiding for another company about... Well, at that point, I had been maybe 5 or 7 years in Baja, and then coaching in Washington and Oregon in the summer.

And it took 5 years to make that happen. At first, I thought I was going to do a kind of a sub-brand of the company I was working with. Got the kayaks all lined up; ready to import the boats. They're like, no, too small of a niche market. We're not going to make any money on you. On your way.

I interviewed all the companies in Loreto. None of them was a really good fit. So, it's kind of the last resort to start a company. I don't consider myself a business person. I'm a paddler. Yeah, there were definitely challenges. The scene was also changing. Before that was kind of a free-for-all. Boat permits were just starting to be required. So, you needed to import the boats to Mexico, register them in the country, and get a license plate like a car, called the Matricula, and register them in the state and then register them with the local port captain so that you can register them in the National Marine Park. And by then you've got almost \$1000 invested in each boat to be able to use it commercially. And then you

need to renew those every year, for a couple hundred dollars each. To camp, you need to have permits for each campsite, and then a bracelet for each person.

Just so many levels of crazy bureaucracy. If I had known all of it, I probably would have been scared away, and not done it. It was like the frog in the boiling water, but I think I can swim in boiling water now anyway.

Rick: So, how long ago was that? When did you...

Ginni: 2007 was when we formed the company. It was really the only way to lead the kinds of trips that my students were asking for and that I wanted to lead. Cooking's okay, but I'd rather paddle.

The ironic thing is that other company that said, no, too small of a niche market. They ended up selling out to another company, and we're now the biggest company in Loreto.



The Loreto Neighborhood

A Kick-Start From Nigel Dennis

It started with a loan of six kayaks from Nigel Dennis. I was over in the UK. I just got in my 5-star and he paddled up and says, hey, I'm considering starting this program of NDK Expedition Centers. So, those who have our boats different places in the world, I'll put you on our website, we'll market; send you people. Well, that sounds pretty good. Nigel, how much does one of your boats cost? So, he told me, and I'm like, what's the minimum order? He said, six. I said, okay, that's about double my annual income. I'm a kayak guide, remember? He's like, just tell me what six boats you want. I'll send them to you. Pay me when you can. So, thank you, Nigel. It took me two years to pay him off, and now we've got like 50 something boats.

My vision was to have maybe four or five trips a year, total. So, I started with two or three trips, and then slowly built. Sometimes three or four trips go out in the same week now. Pretty big staff, 20 plus. About half of them guides and I never intended to grow that big.

*I just kept reinvesting everything,
and people kept signing up.*

Rick: So how many people do you think you serve each year roughly?

Ginni: I looked up some numbers for 2022 and we had 1200-1400 user days. That's people per day on just multi-day camping trips. And then on courses, I came up with 86 (user days). You ask the difference between courses and trips. Our company ethos is that on trips, our guides are also coaches. If people want to learn and develop on trips, that's just part of what we do. Courses are even more focused on learning.

So personally, in 2022 I coached 51 days. I also guided - trips that didn't specifically have an educational purpose - 38 days. So that's coaching or guiding about half the time during our six-month winter season. In the summer I usually run courses helping to develop the staff as they work with our local paddlesports club. It's building the team for the future and for my eventual exit.

Transitioning to Local Control

Rick: Can you talk about this transition that you're doing? My understanding is that you're taking your business and basically wanting to turn it over to local folks somewhere down the line. Is that kind of the idea?

Ginni: That's the idea. I've always struggled a little bit with being the foreign owner and not wanting to be a miner, as in you come in, you extract the value, and you take it away. But to really set down roots here, be a benefit to the community in many ways, and to the people working with me. And I'd never planned to build a big company. I never planned to build up something big and then sell it at the end. My plan has always been to do what we love doing, and when I come to the end of my term with it, to turn it over to those people who have been working with me and who want to continue it.

I turned 55 last week. And honestly, the whole COVID thing, we survived it. We got through it. It took a lot out of me, and as far as running a big company, I'm tired of it. I'm tired. I don't have the time to take care of myself, to get out there like I feel like I need to. So, while I still have the energy to continue to train people and be very intentional about it, I want to start this transition. We're thinking five years. I've had these great ideas about how to do it, and if we were in the States, I would have more business structures available to me.

In Mexico, it's a very different scene, and just legally, really challenging, but the plan is to phase over the ownership and management over five

years. And if I'm still able to keep coaching and guiding at 60, then Let's see if the body keeps up, but yeah, I want to stay active in the field and relieve myself of the decision-making, management administrative pressure that just drains me.

Rick: Would it be a person or group of people, some kind of collective thing that would take over the business?

Ginni: That's what I'm working with the lawyer about how to do that. The idea of a co-op where kind of everybody's equal has its challenges. And especially, in Mexico, it often doesn't function really well. So, there needs to be a clear leadership structure, a clear decision-maker, who has the support of the team and the buy-in from the team. We've got somebody who's been training for that. And then this person needs to have a really solid team to support the effort. In the field we've always been super strong. We're a bunch of guides who either came together as experienced guides or trained up and mentored with us. We were a bunch of guides before we had an office person.

So, that's our strength, and we've not had much turnover at all in guides in 15 years, but the admin... It's really challenging to run business well in Mexico. So yeah, I'm not quite sure how the finances will work out. I've invested and reinvested,

everything these last 15 years into the company. So I feel a little bit of insecurity on how I'm going to live and keep living.

I'm still an asset to the company, you're right, and I do a little bit of promotion. Essentially, the company right now couldn't function without me, that's for sure. So, I make some money from that work, but I want to turn that over to the next generation. It's a bit of a puzzle.

These are details that everybody wrestles with, the security and that kind of stuff, but on the whole, I've been so blessed to be able to do this for a living. I do something that I love and I believe in, and I feel like it has purpose. I work with amazing people, and when I'm out on the water, I go play with amazing, enriching people. I can't believe it. What more can I ask for?

Rick: Some of my friends and I talked about what you're doing even though we don't understand it all, but people are really impressed with your decision to turn this business over to local people.

Ginni: Thanks. It seems fair because I didn't build it by myself. It's a team effort. That's a way in which a kayak company can do something good for the community, for the environment, that feels really good. That feels like it has a purpose.



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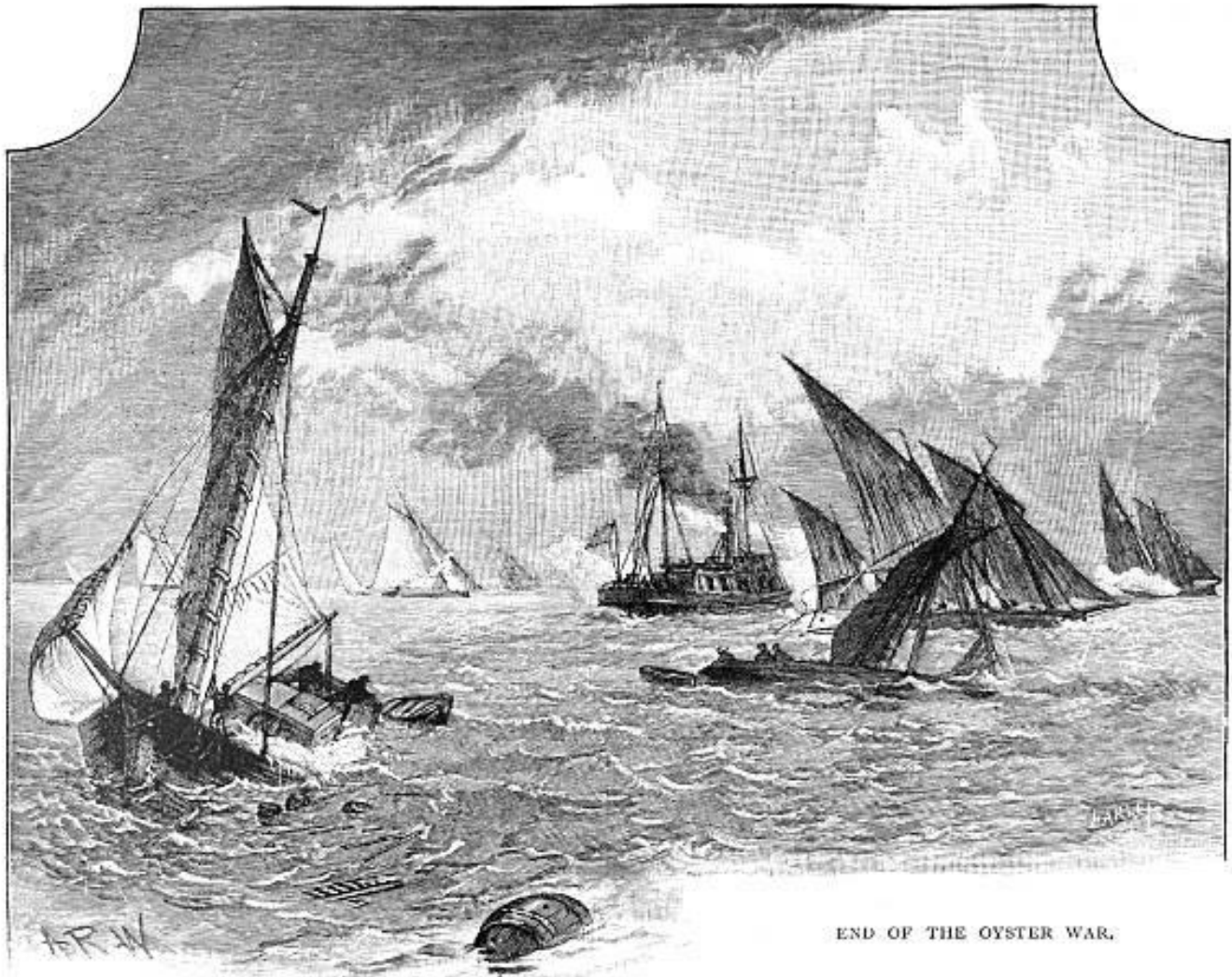
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Ready for Kayak Jousting with Outward Bound Staff. Photo: Rick Wiebush

Chesapeake Bay Oyster Wars

Rick Wiebush



END OF THE OYSTER WAR.

Print courtesy of Getty Images

The Scene

November 1859. Virginia portion of the Chesapeake Bay. An Onancock oyster dealer sent a steam-powered tugboat to protect his Chesapeake Bay oyster beds from being pirated by oystermen from Smith Island, Maryland. After heading across the bay, the tug's captain saw a crew from Smith working the Virginia beds. They were hauling in oysters by the dozens. Incensed, the Virginia captain rammed the fishing boat not once, but twice. On the second charge, the tug rammed a hole in the hull of the fishing boat and sank it. Otherwise a gentleman, the tug captain took the Smith Island crew on board the tug. But to ensure no attempt at retaliation, the tugboat crew welcomed the Smith Islanders aboard at gunpoint.

Retaliation came later. Upon being released, the Smith Islanders vowed that in the future they would be well-armed and would fire upon anyone trying to damage or take their boat. Sure enough, when the tug was patrolling the Virginia oyster beds later that month they intercepted and tried to board a Smith Island oyster boat. They were met with a hail of gunfire.

These were just two of dozens of incidents that occurred on the Chesapeake during the second half of the 19th century and into the 20th, some occurring as recently as the 1950's. They all were part of what came to be known as the Chesapeake Bay Oyster Wars.

Oysters Were a Really Big Deal

In the late 19th century, the Chesapeake Bay produced about half the world's oysters. The numbers are staggering. In the 1850's, about 1.5 million bushels of oysters were harvested each year in the Chesapeake. By the mid-1880's, that number reached 20 million bushels annually. (To provide some perspective, in 2022 the yield was about

800,000 bushels.) There are about 100 – 150 oysters per bushel. Do the math: 20 million bushels equals a minimum of two billion oysters! In today's dollars, Chesapeake Bay oystering in the 1880's was a 16.5-million-dollar industry.

The burgeoning industry was fueled by an increased demand for oysters. Two key developments helped meet – and further spur - that demand. First, the extension of rail lines from Philadelphia to the Maryland and Virginia eastern shore meant that oysters could be delivered further afield, more quickly and less expensively. Further, the mid-century expansion of the B&O railroad from Baltimore into western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and the mid-west opened those markets to mid-Atlantic goods, including oysters. Author John Wennerston notes that in the 1860's the B&O carried some three million pounds of oysters westward each year.

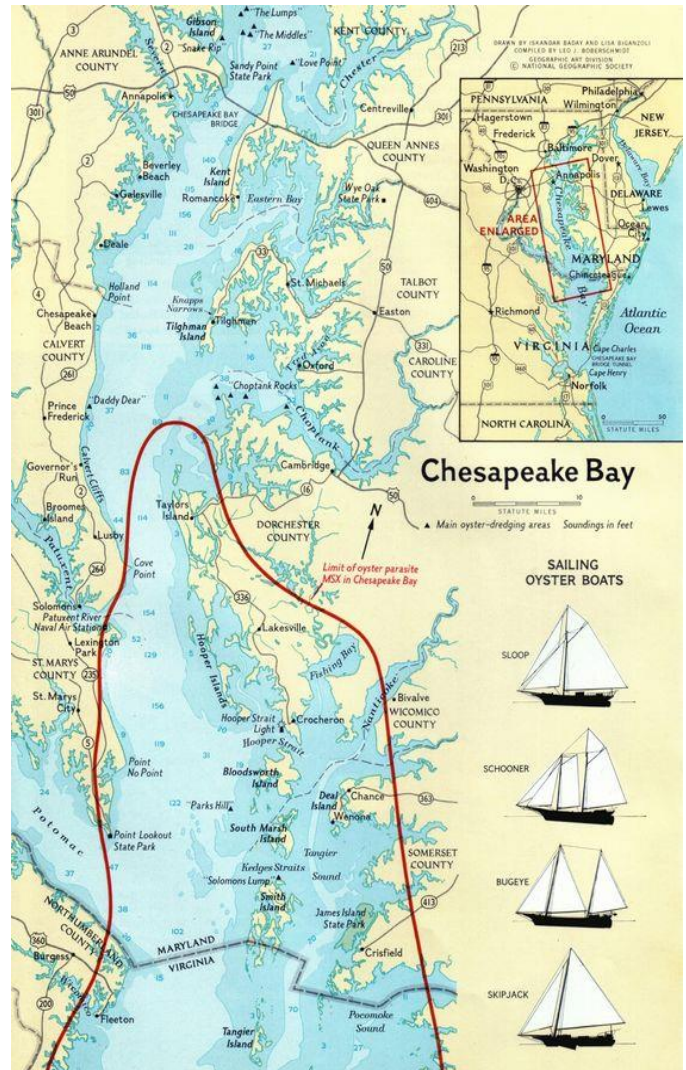
The second factor was the increasing use of canning to preserve food. Canned goods of all types had become increasingly popular – especially in urban areas – because they prevented spoilage, were easy to carry around, and meant that people didn't have to go to the store every day. The growing demand for canned (or jarred) oysters was further accelerated among the working classes because they were less expensive than meat or poultry.

In 1884, Maryland watermen harvested 20 million bushels of oysters from the Chesapeake Bay. In 2022, the oyster harvest was about 800,000.

For these reasons, oystering became big business. And everybody wanted in on it. In the 1890's, there were about 32,000 people directly involved in the industry, operating over 7,000 boats – and that was just in the Maryland portion of the bay. The bulk of the other people involved were packing house workers, especially those employed as shuckers.

Accounts from that period paint a picture reminiscent of the California gold rush. Regional centers sprung up such as the town of Crisfield, Maryland, which bristled with oyster boats and crews, packing houses, oyster traders and brokers, gigantic piles of oyster shells, saloons, hardware stores and blacksmith shops, railroad cars, teams of oxen, as well as gamblers, brawlers and prostitutes. There were all kinds of characters involved, scrambling for their piece of the action and doing whatever was needed to “get theirs”. Boat owners were described as “daring” and “unscrupulous”, while oystering crews were “motley in character, some of them colored, a few criminals, and many of them foreigners but recently arrived, scarcely able to speak the English language.”

By the 1870's Crisfield was the center of oystering operations in the Chesapeake and at one time was home to over 600 vessels engaged in the business. Fittingly, much of the town was built on a foundation of oyster shells.



Map of key oyster war areas in central Chesapeake Bay. Courtesy of Nat'l Geographic.



Crisfield docks in the late 1800's Photo courtesy of The Crisfield Heritage Foundation

Wars on Multiple Fronts

What's fascinating about the Oyster Wars is the number of warring factions involved. The rush for the “gold” of oysters: 1) pitted “outsiders” against the Chesapeake Bay oystermen; 2) saw oystermen using one method of gathering the mollusks (tonging) fighting against those using a different method (dredging); 3) created battles between law enforcement and the Oyster Navy on the one hand and all the watermen on the other; and 4) involved the watermen from Maryland warring with those from Virginia.

New Englanders vs. Marylanders

The first round of fighting started because New Englanders had overfished and totally depleted their waters of oysters. So they turned to the Chesapeake Bay as an alternate source of income. This didn't sit too well with the locals. Maryland passed a law barring out of staters from oystering in the Bay, but this had little effect. As a result, the Maryland watermen took things into their own hands. They routinely fired upon the New Englanders when they found them and killed several men. (Then the New Englanders got sneaky and started using fake bills of sale to register their boats as Maryland vessels.)

Tongers vs Dredgers

Larger-scale fighting took place between “tongers” and “dredgers” (or in the vernacular, “drudgers”). The tongers used two 16-foot-long wooden poles with claw-like steel attachments on the ends. Working in shallow water, the men would reach down with the poles, bring the claws together, and scoop up the oysters. This was usually a two-man operation using smaller boats. One would operate the tongs, while the other sorted the oysters that were brought up. In contrast, the dredging operation involved larger sail boats and used a huge metal rake that was dropped overboard and dragged across the oyster beds. It's iron teeth scraped up a huge amount of oysters with each pass and required the work of four men to operate the hand winches that were needed to pull the fully-loaded dredge to the surface.



Tonging. Courtesy somdoysterguide.com

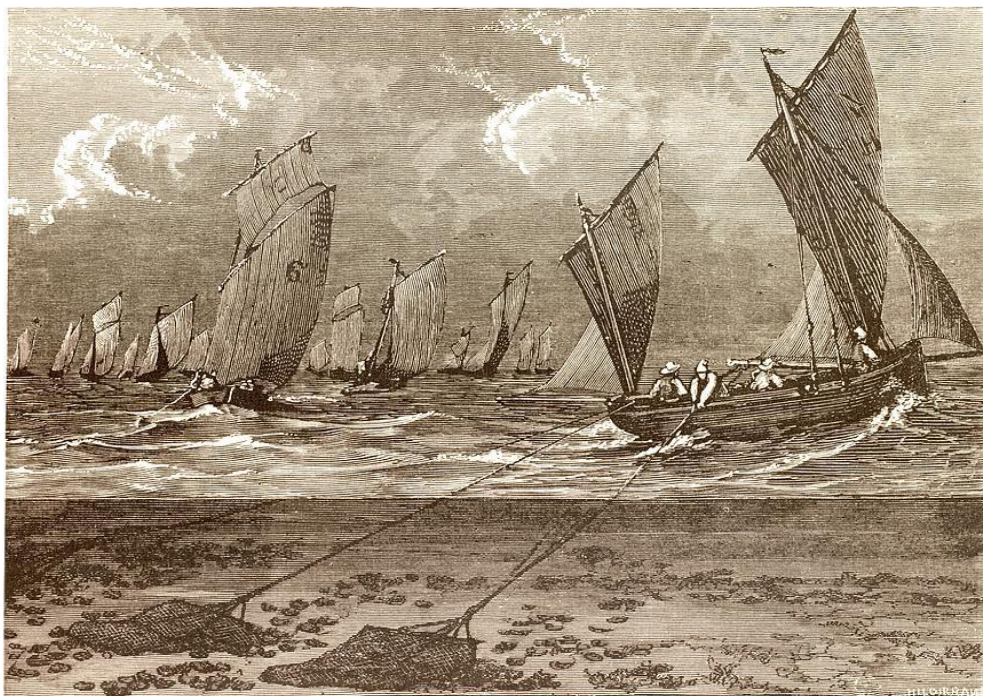


Modern tonger. Photo: Annapolis Capitol Gazette

By custom and law, the dredgers were supposed to work only the deeper parts of the bay, while the tongers worked the shallower parts of the bay and its' tributaries. But the dredgers saw the whole bay as their rightful territory and, by the 1870's, hundreds of dredging boats were working in the shallower areas reserved for the tongers. These “pirates” or poachers usually worked under the cover of darkness. In response to the poaching, the tongers armed themselves with rifles and fired upon any pirating dredgers. Warfare broke out and it soon became routine to see the bodies of dead oystermen floating in the bay.



Oyster dredge. Photo: Excursionistas2 blog



Oyster dredging. Print by David Parker

Virginia vs. Maryland

Yet another arena for warring oyster factions was the Pocomoke Sound and Tangier Sound sections of the bay. Somewhere in that area was the boundary between Maryland and Virginia. But no one could agree about exactly where the line was, or for that matter, what difference it made. So Virginia oystermen routinely went into Maryland waters and vice versa.

Exacerbating the situation was a precipitous decline in the oyster population in the late 1880's. That meant that the Maryland and Virginia watermen in the Pocomoke and Tangier sounds were more inclined to go wherever there were promising oyster beds, regardless of legal boundaries. As a result, there was constant outrage, conflict, and violence between the watermen of each state. Throughout the second half of the 19th century (and in fact continuing sporadically into the 1950's) the pirating was mutual and each incursion by one side led to retaliation by the other, resulting in spiraling conflict.

The pattern of violence and retaliation was exemplified by a series of incidents in December of 1884. Tongers in the Crisfield and Smith Island area had long been fighting Maryland dredgers and now had to deal with increasing incursions into their waters by Virginia dredgers. When no help from the state government was forthcoming, they decided to handle the situation themselves. Throughout the 1884-85 winter season, any Virginia oystermen encroaching on Maryland waters were met with a hail of bullets. In addition, Smith islanders retaliated by going into Virginia waters to pirate their oysters.

In one incident, a Virginia police boat caught the Smith Islanders poaching and pursued them back to Smith. But when the police boat arrived, it was fired on by 25 men from Smith Island who were using repeating rifles. The Virginia police boat responded by firing its cannon at the men who again responded with a fusillade of bullets. It was later determined that the Smith islanders had fired 500 rounds at the Virginia police boat. Badly outgunned, the Virginia boat retreated to its home waters.

The illegal dredgers first descended upon Deal's Island. I wanted them arrested and volunteered to assist Capt. Insley in a night attack. He consented, but when the dredgers began firing, he hove to and left me and my own to brave the brunt of the fight. The firing was so heavy our sails were riddled and my crew compelled to go down below to escape the bullets..

Oyster Navy vs. All the Watermen

In 1868, Maryland created a marine law enforcement agency – the Oyster Navy - to try to control the chaos and violence on the waters of the bay. At that time, there was a violent death each week resulting from clashes between various groups. After an ineffectual first two years, public pressure resulted in greater funding for the Navy. By the end of 1872, it consisted of 12 sailing vessels and one steamboat, all of which were fitted with Hotchkiss Rapid Firing guns and one of which had a howitzer.

With these new resources, the Navy permanently stationed boats at the mouths of some of the tributaries that were being raided most frequently and enjoyed some success: in one year, over 130 arrests were made and over \$7,000 in fines collected. Yet, with the bay being 200 miles long, with 11,000 miles of shoreline, it was an almost impossible task to police the thousands of oyster boats and stem the piracy or the violence associated with it.

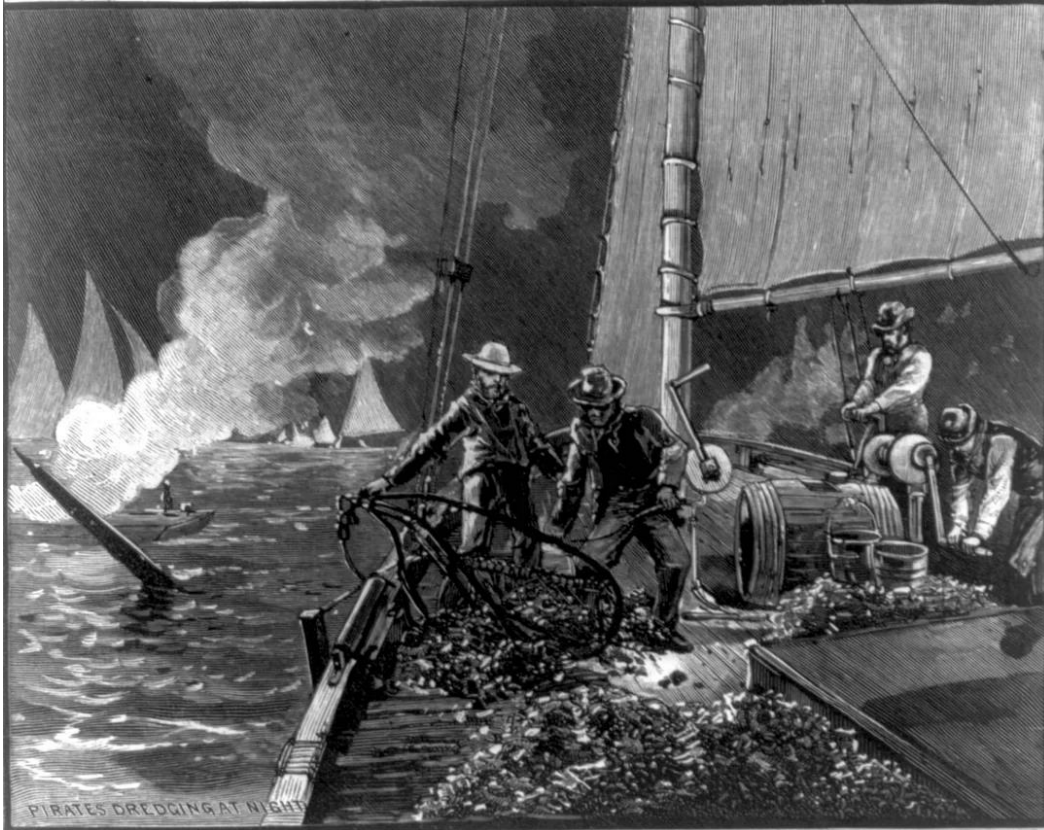
Apparently, everyone hated the Oyster navy. The pirating dredgers and Virginia poachers for obvious reasons, but even the legal oystermen disliked the navy, claiming that they treated everyone like criminals. So the law enforcement people didn't even get support from the people they were designed to help. Part of the reason was that the

navy was trigger-happy. Unable to keep up with some of the faster sailing vessels, navy captains and crewmen would resort to shooting at fleeing pirate crews, sometimes killing the watermen. In one bold retaliatory move, pirates plotted – and almost succeeded – in killing the head of the Oyster Navy by sneaking onto his boat at night, clubbing the watchman, and trying to break into his cabin. Hearing the ruckus, the commander came out firing his pistols and chased away the would-be assassins.

The pirate dredgers were absolutely fearless and contemptuous of the Oyster Navy. There were multiple incidents in which the dredgers banded together and fought off or attacked Navy boats. In one case, a navy boat accosted 14 dredgers in the Little Choptank River near Cambridge, MD. When the dredgers ignored commands, the navy fired several cannon rounds at them. But instead of giving up or fleeing, the dredgers surrounded the navy boat and two dozen watermen blasted away at it with their rifles. The navy boat escaped, but the next day the captain and crew refused to go out again.

From the New York Times, 1884

Baltimore, Feb. 14. – A dispatch received here this evening gives some new and interesting developments in connection with the oyster wars in the Chesapeake Bay. The correspondent telegraphs from on board the Maryland Oyster Police boat Leila, in Fishing Bay, and his account of the situation indicates that serious trouble and probable bloodshed will ensue before the existing difficulties are ended, if, indeed, the authorities will be able to cope with the pirates at all, the depredations of the latter having grown bolder and bolder as it became evident that the "oyster navy" revealed its utter ineffectiveness to suppress the lawless acts of the piratical crews.



Pirates dredging at night. Courtesy of r/USHistory

The End

After 1890, oyster harvest dropped dramatically. As had happened earlier in New England, the Chesapeake Bay oyster boom severely depleted the stock. This increased competition assured that the violence would continue. However, Maryland and Virginia both took steps to regulate the industry, and these enjoyed some success. After 1900 the violence diminished considerably although sporadic battles continued.

During the hard times of the Great Depression, some conflicts arose as oystermen – now reduced greatly in number – tried to eke out a living by poaching. (Other watermen made an alternative living during this period by becoming “rum runners” during prohibition.) During WWII, conflicts largely disappeared as watermen decided to quit that hard work and either join the armed

forces or work in the booming wartime factories in Baltimore.

There was one last incident. In April 1959, three friends from Colonial Beach, VA decided to do some midnight dredging on the Potomac. Unbeknownst to them, there was a Virginia marine police stakeout in the area. It’s not clear why the police opened fire, but they did, hitting one dredger in the leg and killing another. The death finally got the governments of Maryland and Virginia to work together to end the conflicts. They developed a full-fledged plan to conserve and manage their shared fishing resources and that plan was approved by Congress and signed into law by President Kennedy in 1962. That put an end to the 100 year-long oyster wars of the Chesapeake.

*Ed: this story is based primarily on the book **The Oyster Wars of the Chesapeake Bay** by John Wennersten. Tidewater Publishers, 142 pp. The book has way more details about the sociology and political issues of the times, and the violence. It’s excellent.*

Photos of the Month



Submarine Paddling

Photo: Bill Vonnegut

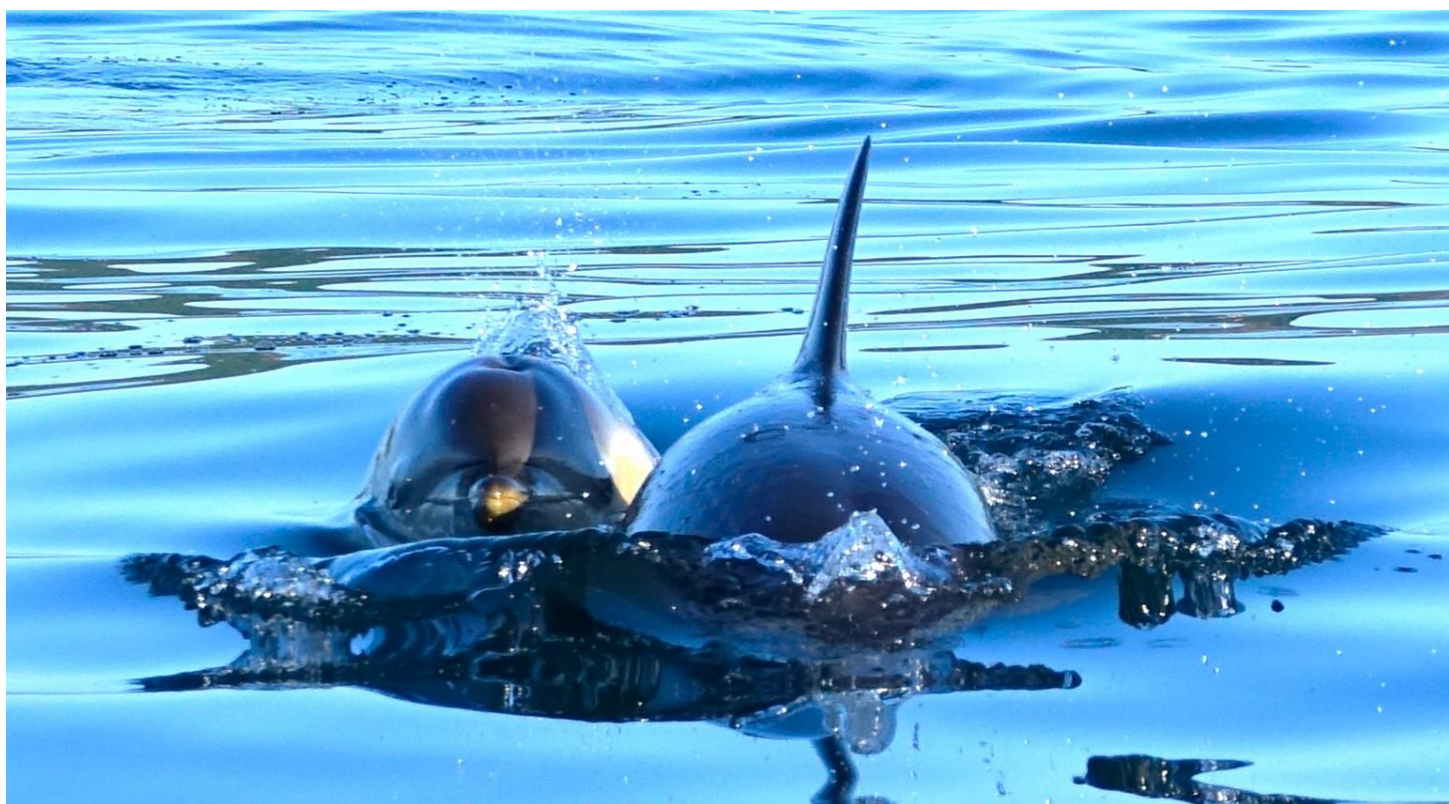
Photos of the Month



Osprey Catch

Photo: Kim Johnson

Photos of the Month



Dolphin Mother and Calf

Photo: Rupert Kirkwood

Looking Back, Paddling Forward: Outdoor Expedition Participation Over the Lifespan

TA Loeffler

Ed. Note. This article is reprinted from the January 2021 edition of Coastbusters. I decided to include it again because it seems like a relevant follow-up to the May 2023 edition's story on serious leisure, as well as to earlier reports in Coastbusters on the motivations of baby boomer sea kayakers. It's a summary of a study about people like us. I have paraphrased and liberally excerpted from it for Coastbusters. This is adapted from Loeffler, TA. (2016). Looking back, paddling forward: perspectives on outdoor expedition participation over the lifespan. Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning 19:2, pages 111-123.

How the Study Was Done

The study is based on the experiences of 13 people (five female, eight male) who had participated in multiple sea kayaking and/or canoeing expeditions. The average age of the people was 63, with a range from 50 – 71. The study looked at the life influences on older adults who continue to be heavily involved in paddling and other outdoor adventure activities. Loeffler used an interesting interview approach. People brought photos with them that they had taken on their adventures. The stories connected with the photos (along with interviews) became the raw data. The interviews lasted 60 - 90 minutes and were recorded. Loeffler then reviewed all the tapes to identify key themes. There were three major themes identified:

- People's interest in outdoor adventure activities started in childhood;
- The nature of involvement in outdoor adventure activities changed substantially during their lives;
- Several factors influenced their continued participation in paddling adventures.



Baby boomer expedition. Photo: Rick Wiebush

A Childhood Initiation

Almost all the participants said they had significant experiences as kids that pre-disposed them to continued involvement in outdoor adventure. Linda (66) recalled exploring a nearby swamp in childhood. Her description illustrated a deep sensory experience of being in the swamp:

“I felt I could almost hear the heat of the sun, which I guess was really the whirring of the insects and things like that. There would be little rustlings that you didn't know about...it was related to the all the sounds and the smells of heat and the colors of green and the fact that the ferns were so tall. I would just lie down so no one would see me. I mean it was kind of the excitement of isolation and just this little, and maybe this is part of what makes an expedition, it's this little tiny edge of fear.”

Peter (64) put it this way, ‘We spent all of our time out behind the house in what we called the woods ...we were outdoors. You were always out.’ Marty (53) commented that, ‘I think parents would be going to jail today, if they let their kids do that [now].’

Loeffler notes that: “These early outdoor experiences facilitated participants’ skill development, sense of competence, and participation in youth organizations such as Scouts and Guides. Further skill development occurred through reading outdoor and expeditionary literature and through family outdoor trips and mentors.

Things Change and Evolve Now We Have Kids

People reported that in young adulthood, they got involved in expeditioning and started doing longer, more frequent trips. But that changed with jobs, and especially when they had families. Many people modified their expectations and practices (e.g., shorter, closer-to-home trips) so that they could take their kids with them. “These participants described continuing family traditions by going out on trips with their own children, often very early in their children’s lives. Peter took his sons outdoors:

“...Almost as soon as they were born. I mean they were in diapers, well the younger one was in diapers when he was with his grandfather in the second and third picture. And they’ve been walking on their own and they climbed some of the highest tourist mountains in Austria while they were young. They were probably the youngest kids on the mountain...they were always tough and didn’t mind getting out, getting a bit damp...”

Many participants told stories of needing to learn new skills to take outdoor trips with their children such as managing portages and evaluating terrain



Starting young. Photo: Rick Wiebush

for hiking with children. Most described a repeat of the earlier pattern of starting shorter and closer to home and progressing from car camping in a developed site to longer and more remote expeditions with their children. This phase ended once the children reached adolescence or young adulthood and left home or moved onto other interests.

Empty Nest, More Money

Most participants reflected that their expeditionary lives became much freer in the phase following child rearing with greater time freedom and less economic constraints. Both factors combined to yield more frequent trips, longer trips, and/or more remote or exotic trips. Larry (71) described it this way:

“In the past, I didn’t have the money. Raising the family and starting off, having a house and so on, you just couldn’t take on something like, say the Nahanni [River] that we did. That was a very expensive trip. As you get older and you get more settled, you tend to have a little more money so for me anyway, that was a big factor.

Greg concurred:

“In our latter years, we tend to go further afield than we used to for longer trips. A couple of reasons, I suppose, financially is one of them. Your kids are raised, families are raised, you’re on your own, you can do a little more. There’s less guilt about walking away and leaving people home. I think that’s really what gets people out in the outdoors anyway, is the need to explore and see what’s out there that I haven’t seen before”

Linda also shared that the change in discretionary income allowed her and her husband to increase their tripping schedule once their children left home: “But also money. I mean no mortgage, kids are mostly settled, and I’ve settled into good gigs. So hey, we can afford to do this, which is for us, kind of a big part.”

But Getting Older Looms

The study also found that as people got older several things happened: 1) they all expressed feeling lucky that they were still able to participate in expeditions; and 2) some younger ones (50’s) started thinking about looming decline in physical ability and started prioritizing the trips they could/should do. In addition, older people noticed that peers they used to do things with were now reluctant to take on risk and/or were now less likely to want to put up with the discomfort of sleeping on the ground and/or had developed physical problems that limited what they could do.

Linda discussed the influence of changes in risk tolerance and level of adventure over her lifetime:

“I think when I was younger, I wanted more challenges, and now what’s really important to me are the people and the nature part of it, other than to kill myself. It’s really about seeing.”



Exhausted! Photo: Rick Wiebush

Harold (59) described an increasing sense of urgency related to his tripping pursuits: “And then, all of a sudden, your age creeps in, I’ll be 60 next year, and then you really, you’ve got that little push all the time. Do it now. Don’t put it off...there’s always other things you should be doing, but now ..., I don’t have to say that so often. So let’s do it.”

“Nancy (70) echoed a similar sentiment: ‘My most tough trips, in a way, have been recently... Time is not on my side. So while I’m physically able, I’m trying to do as much as I can now.’ Mary (50):

“The other thing is as I get older, maybe I have to shrink my dreams, you know. I used to do, one big mountain and bigger and bigger, and then at this point, should I try, am I at that stage where, because of my physical condition, to shrink my dreams? It’s very depressing to do that. It’s not fun. I have had a few injuries in the past two years. It slowed me down a lot. And so I don’t know. [Am] I’m really at that stage? I’m thinking, thinking hard.

What Keeps Us Going

Several factors were identified that facilitated continued participation in adventure pursuits as they got older. These included the physical challenges, which were valued because they were challenges, but also because they contributed to fitness and a

sense of well-being. Another is the social aspect, the connections with peers, the friendships developed with co-participants that provide a support network during the trips and in some cases afterwards. Finally, people experience a spiritual connection to nature through their travels.

The Physical Dimension

Larry (71) said:

... it's in the genes and it's not that you should do this, it's you want to do this. You want to do it because you're enjoying every moment, not only just the, you know, if I'm canoeing or cross-country skiing, not just the downhill part, but I do enjoy the portages. I mean to me, a canoe trip is not complete without a portage. And it's the same thing when it comes to skiing. I like to work my body. I really like to drive my body as far as I can go. When my heart rate is on bust, I'm at my happiest.

Nancy (50), like Larry, said,

“I still get huge pleasure out of trying to push myself physically... it's really important for me to be able to go places and scramble up rocks and go swimming to just able to be physically active. So I guess I'll keep trying as long as I can.”

The Social Dimension

Most of the participants credited the people they travel with as another factor that kept them participating in expeditions over their lifespans. Kristen remarked, “These trips are like my lifeblood. Some of my closest friends come from participating in these sort of trips.”

Harold said that the social kinship parts of the trips were ‘huge’, and that it's ‘been wonderful’ to have a



The social dimension is central. Photo: Rick Wiebush

group of ‘people that really like doing what I like doing’. He mentioned that when the group gets together in social situations, they often ‘refer back to the trips and what happened there’... Harry confessed: I am now known as ‘All Wobbly,’ partly because of my [camping] chair and partly because of my freakin’ hip [he had it replaced recently], and the last trip, my back went. I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t even pull my kayak up [out of the water] that night.

The Spiritual Dimension

Finally, along with connections to their peers, experiencing spiritual connections to nature and the landscapes they travelled through, was a very important factor in participation continuance.

Greg labelled being on expeditions as heaven-like, “My heaven would be outdoors, probably sitting on a rock, just looking out in a pond, nothing around me, only the birds chirping or whatever, or the wind blowing slow across that pond.” Linda described being out on expeditions as, “Being good for her soul”. And Kyle described being outdoors as, ‘Soul connecting activity’ that had been a part of him since he was a child.

Book Review**Alaska: Stroke by Stroke by Clint Waghorn****Paul Caffyn**

the winter. In 2000, Clint followed the Alaskan coast south across Bristol Bay, through False Pass to the Pacific Ocean and reached the summer fishing town of Chignik by August 24.

His 3rd year in 2001 took Clint along the exposed south coast of the Alaskan Peninsula, across Cook Inlet, through the quieter waters of Prince William Sound (PWS) to the coastal fishing town of Cordova.

Ahead for Clint lay the vast sprawling mudflats of the Copper River delta and 684 kms (428 miles) of very unforgiving surf coast to reach the shelter of the Inside Passage fiords near Juneau. Then just a last stage back to Prince Rupert. However, the rowdy noise of surf on that outer coast unsettled Clint so much, that he decided to leave that final open coast leg for another year, and worked his way back via PWS to Whittier; with road access to Anchorage and a flight home to NZ.

Back in November 1990, Waikato, New Zealand farmer Clint Waghorn got in touch re suggestions for an extended paddle in Alaska that would involve a circuit. He settled on an ever-so-cunning plan to launch from Prince Rupert in northern British Columbia and paddle the Inside Passage up to Skagway, in SE Alaska. From there he would get a lift to the headwaters of the mighty Yukon River. Thence seawards to the river mouth in the Bering Sea, where Clint would head south down the Alaskan coast, to complete a huge coastal circuit by kayaking back into Prince Rupert.

On 22 April 1999, Clint commenced his paddle as planned, and by August 5 he had reached the meandering delta country at the Yukon River mouth, where he stored his kayak at village of Chevak, for





Copper River delta

Clint returned in 2002, with a brand new girlfriend, keen to complete his solo circuit at Prince Rupert. But back inside the Copper River delta, with the unsettling ever-present surf noise, he decided the risk of paddling solo, on that wild Pacific Ocean coast, was not worth it. So with girlfriend Becky and their two kayaks, they caught the ferry from Valdez to Juneau. They then paddled south to Prince Rupert, and Clint proposed to Becky, bringing his four-year remarkable circuit to a close.

At 632 pages, it took me a whole week of bedtime reading, and although more in an expanded diary format, for me the book was engrossing reading. Especially as I had paddled all that coast Clint had described. He delights in describing his kayak cuisine, fishing for dinner at every opportunity. His close calls nearly capsizing in freezing water are vividly described, especially when caught in weather tide conditions while crossing Cook Inlet (south of Anchorage). There are nice touches of dry Kiwi humour, with both of us using the same Footrot Flats Fred Dagg call, 'Get out of it', when trying to scare off approaching big brown bears.

The colour plate segments are not sharp, the photos almost lost in a sea of white. Being bled out to the paper margins would have helped. The colour section maps nicely show Clint's paddling route but the one

really bad cock-up is the first route map - it shows the Alaskan's Inside Passage upside down.

Clint's trip planning was first rate. His book is an excellent guide for planning a wilderness kayak trip in Alaska. He went solo and unsupported, his food parcels mailed to remote river or coastal villages. He does allow a hint of emotion to sneak into the text at times, but it is the raw experience of dealing with all the challenges that paddling in Alaska can throw at a solo paddler, that resonated with me.

Unlike many of the pathetic self-indulged vanity paddling publications printed these days, Clint did the hard graft, he paddled the huge distances, he had so many wonderful and scary experiences, along with the big highs and lows, and he relates these honestly. So easy to picture myself in the same situations. Yes, he did miss out paddling a bit of the Gulf of Alaska, but his trip was without big sponsorship or nightly necessary updates on a website. It was 'his adventure' and boy oh boy, he did get adventured. A 'gear list' completes the book. In the list titled 'other', he suggests taking: 'Cement pills - to harden up when the going gets tough!'

Clint's book was self-published. Contact him at clintandbeck@farmside.co.nz

Upcoming Events

Dates	Event	Location	Website
July 12 - 16	Great Lakes Symposium	Grand Marais, MI	greatlakesseakayaksymposium.net
Sept. 20-21	Intermediate and Advanced Surf Camps	Cape Charles, VA	crosscurrentsseakayaking.com
Sept 22-24	Kiptopeke Symposium	Cape Charles, VA	crosscurrentsseakayaking.com
Sept 29 – Oct.1	Bay of Fundy Symposium	Lower Argyle, Nova Scotia	bofsks.com
Oct 5 - 8	Delmarva Paddlers Retreat	Lewes, DE	delmarvapaddlersretreat.org/
Oct. 19 - 21	Sea Kayak Georgia Symposium	Tybee Island, GA	seakayakgeorgia.com
Oct. 22 - 28	Explore The Georgia Barrier Islands	Savannah, GA	crosscurrentsseakayaking.com
Oct. 27 – 29	Autumn Gales Symposium	Stonington, CT	autumngales.com



Toucan. Photo: Rupert Kirkwood

Upcoming Cross Currents Courses

See [Cross Currents Sea Kayaking | Courses on the Chesapeake Bay](#) for course descriptions

Incident Management: Sun. July 23

With Paula Hubbard; at Chestertown, MD

\$125

Intro to Surf and Open Water: Sat – Sun, July 29 - 30

With Rick Wiebush; at Metompkin Inlet, VA Eastern Shore

\$225

Introduction to Sea Kayaking: Sat Aug 8

With Denise Parisi, Shelly Wiechelt; at Annapolis, MD

\$125

Introduction to Rocks and Ledges: Fri – Sun Aug 18 – 20

With Rick Wiebush; at Newport, RI

\$325

Intensive Intermediate Skills: Sat – Sun Aug 19 – 20

With Laurie Collins; at Rocky Gorge Reservoir, Laurel, MD

\$225

Kiptopeke Symposium Update

Link: [Cross Currents Sea Kayaking | Kiptopeke Symposium](#)



Coach Update

John Kirk-Anderson (JKA), one of New Zealand's leading coaches, will be joining us. He will be helping to lead rough water courses. JKA will also do a presentation (Friday night) on paddling in New Zealand.

Enrollment Status

The symposium is over 75% full. There are approximately 15 spots left. There are nine spots available in the lodges, but other housing options are available.



Status of the Classes

Intro to Surf and Intro to Rougher Water classes are almost full.

Red Point is Full

There is space in all advanced, rough water classes and most intermediate classes.

There is space in some rolling classes.



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/>

Dr. TA Loeffler is a celebrated educator, adventurer, nature advocate, and author from St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. TA is a professor of Outdoor Education and Recreation in the School of Human Kinetics and Recreation at Memorial University. In 2020, TA was selected to the Canadian Geographic "90 Greatest Canadian Explorers" List. Additionally, in 2015 and 2016 respectively, TA was named to the Canadian Geographic's Canada's Greatest Explorers 100 Modern-Day Trailblazers List and Greatest Canadian Modern Women Explorers List.

Rick Wiebush – runs *Cross Currents Sea Kayaking* and is the editor of *Coastbusters*. He is an ACA L3 IT and British Canoeing 4* Sea Leader. Rick 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. It just so happens that some of this month's contributors are instructors. That is not a requirement. Articles should be limited to about 1,000 – 1,500 words and submitted in Word. Photos should be submitted in .jpg format. Please send your submissions to Rick Wiebush at rwiebush@gmail.com.