

OA Paddling Decision Tree

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Whenever paddling in whitewater (or sea kayaking) you need to be able to gauge how your skills, experience, and abilities match the difficulty of the water. Either as an individual or as a member of a group here are some of the questions we need to ask ourselves and be able to answer. Most of us run through a short list of these before a trip, but sometimes enthusiasm may cloud our judgment and we just dive in. So run through the list and add your own questions. If you find that many of the answers are not on the positive side of the questions or you're not sure, then you need to really consider not doing the river or the particular drop. Sea kayakers can adapt this list for their decision process such as, "have I done a crossing this long before," "have I done a crossing in these weather conditions", etc.).

One way to use these questions as a decision tool is to evaluate each question as either positive (something that adds to your ability to successfully run the river) or negative (something that limits or reduces your ability to successfully run this river). Obviously many of these questions are far more complicated than that, but forcing you into a + or - assessment will give you some visual idea of where you stand.

Remember, no one can make the decision for you. This checklist is designed only as a tool to help you objectively consider the factors, but it cannot evaluate your skill, physical, condition, mental preparedness, etc. It is not a replacement for good judgment. And remember, the river is a dynamic and unpredictable environment. Even the most skilled experts, after making careful and thoughtful decisions get into trouble and even die because something unpredicted happened--they missed their line, flipped unexpectedly, pitoned on an unseen rock, etc. The author and Princeton University assume no liability for you using this checklist to make any decision on the river.

The River

- _____ Have I paddled this river before?
- _____ Have I paddled this river before at this water level?
- _____ How did I do paddling it at that level?
- _____ Is this water level apt to make the river harder or easier than my previous experiences?
- _____ How long has it been since I paddled this river?
- _____ Is it possible or likely that the river has changed since then?
- _____ When was the last time I paddled something of similar difficulty?
- _____ How did I do with that other river?
- _____ How cold is the water?
- _____ How remote is this run? Is it along a busy road, a short walk out, a long walk out, isolated canyon, remote wilderness site, etc.?

(+)River Total	(-)River Total

The Paddler

- _____ What is my current level of physical fitness?
- _____ How does that level compare to my fitness level for previous rivers of this difficulty?
- _____ How much paddling have I been doing lately?
- _____ How comfortable do I feel about being in the river and my skills?
- _____ Do I have a roll?
- _____ How reliable is it?

_____ How essential is a roll for this river?

(+)Paddler Total	(-)Paddler Total

The Group

_____ Who am I paddling with?

_____ How many people?

_____ How much experience do they have with this river or with rivers of similar difficulty?

_____ How much rescue experience is there in the group?

_____ How much first aid experience is there in the group?

_____ What are the implications for the other members in the group for my having difficulty?

_____ Will they be able to rescue or assist me?

_____ Will working to assist or rescue me place them at risk-minor, moderate, major, catastrophic?

(+)Group Total	(-)Group Total

The Equipment

_____ Do I have all the necessary paddling equipment-boat, float bags, skirt, helmet, PFD, rescue gear, first aid kit, food, water?

_____ How appropriate is my clothing for the water temperature and weather conditions?

(+)Equipment Total	(-)Equipment Total

The Actual Drop

_____ Have I run the drop before?

_____ Can I scout the drop from the boat or shore?

_____ Can I adequately see my line?

_____ Can I follow someone through?

_____ Can I paddle the line?

_____ Am I confident in my skills, equipment and fitness level that I can run the drop?

_____ Am I psychologically up for running the drop?

_____ How long is the drop?

_____ Are there any specific hazards in the drop that I must be able to avoid?

_____ Do I have the skills to avoid them?

_____ What are the consequences of not avoiding them-none, minor, moderate, major, catastrophic?

_____ What is the rescue potential the drop-can adequate rescues be set up from boats or from shore at sites that specifically need rescue backup?

_____ What are the rescue resources of the group? How many people have adequate knowledge/training in river rescue?

(+)Drop Total	(-)Drop Total

Final Totals

Now add up your totals for each sub-category. This should help you evaluate your ability to safely manage the drop.

(+)Final Total	(-)Final Total

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