

**As Record Numbers of Paddlers Take to The Water, Accidents Surge**

*More than one-third of victims had less than 10 hours experience in paddlesports;*

*experts cited lack of safety training as an important contributing factor*

**ORLANDO, Fla. – April 12, 2022** – A record 37.9 million participants engaged in paddlesports like kayaking, canoeing and stand-up paddleboarding during the pandemic according to the latest data (2020) from the Outdoor Foundation. This pandemic surge brought an estimated 2.5 million new paddlers to American waterways. However, it increased accidents to 331 and fatalities to a record high 202 – accounting for more than 26% of all boating fatalities that same year.

Water Sports Foundation (WSF) Executive Director Jim Emmons said boating in general is still one of the safest forms of recreation, but data from 2020, the most recent year for which complete data is available, indicates most paddlesports deaths occurred due to lack of safety training and experience.

“We know from analyzing U.S. Coast Guard data that in 2020, nearly three-quarters (74.6 percent) of people who died in paddling accidents had less than 100 hours experience in the activity,” Emmons said, “And over one-third (38.8 percent) had less than 10 hours experience.”

"People are drawn to paddlesports,” said Robin Pope, Ph.D., PA-C, Fellow, Academy of Wilderness Medicine and chairman of the board of directors of the American Canoe Association. “And why not? It’s fun, accessible and inexpensive. It’s easy to get your craft to the water, no license required, no marina fees, no fuel to buy and plenty of great exercise.”

While Pope supports greater participation, he’s also concerned that many newcomers to the sport simply don’t recognize the hazards.

“Data tells us most accidents happen in flatwater due to falling overboard or capsizing,” said Pope. “Untrained paddlers usually don’t know how to get back in once they’ve fallen out, aren’t wearing a life jacket and aren’t prepared for cold water exposure. It’s imperative that we help more paddlecraft purchasers take advantage of the many free and inexpensive safety education resources available to them.”

Emmons and Pope say sales associates rarely provide guidance or safety training, especially at stores selling entry-level paddle craft. And most states do not require the purchaser to take a boating safety course, as some states do for motorized vessels.

Walt Taylor, the Recreational Boating Specialist for the U.S. Coast Guard’s First District headquartered in Boston, believes a change in mindset would boost safety training while decreasing incidents and deaths.

“Many paddlers do not consider themselves ‘boaters’ and therefore don’t realize they are required by law to obey navigation rules and carry the required safety equipment for their size and type of vessel,” said Taylor. “By taking a recognized paddle safety course, paddlers will learn the basics about navigation rules, aids to navigation, risk management, and required and recommended safety gear.”

Taylor said that in 2016, paddle craft fatalities in the First Coast Guard District, which includes Northern New Jersey, Eastern New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine, jumped to 29, or 53% of the district’s recreational boating fatalities for the year. Drowning after falling overboard or capsizing accounted for 27 of the 29 deaths, and 24 drowning victims were recovered not wearing a life jacket.

In response, Taylor said the First Coast Guard District intensified its focus on paddle craft safety through public safety outreach, paddling education courses and vessel safety checks, along with greater enforcement of federal requirements on paddle craft. These efforts contributed to a 34% decrease in paddle craft fatalities from 2016 to 2017 (19 paddling fatalities, down from 29), demonstrating the life-saving importance of paddling instruction.

Emmons recommended the following safety tips to help paddlers reduce risks:

1. **Seek safety training** – see the following free or inexpensive safety resources:
* American Canoe Association's resource library -- <https://americancanoe.org/education/resource-library/>
* WSF’s Increasing Awareness of Paddle Sports Safety Program -- <https://www.watersportsfoundation.com/programs/increasing-awareness-of-paddle-sports-safety/>
* Paddling.com's paddling safety series -- <https://paddling.com/learn/paddle-safety>
1. **Wear a life jacket** – U.S. Coast Guard data shows 85 percent of all paddlesports drowning victims were not wearing a life jacket.
2. **Be prepared to get wet** – dress appropriately for the conditions including the possibility of cold water exposure. Compared to other types of boating, in paddlesports you’re far more likely to end up in the water. Or as paddlers say, “We’re all between swims.”
3. **Check conditions and weather forecast** – always check current weather conditions and the forecast before each paddle trip. Avoid conditions that exceed your experience and skill level. Water current and local winds could make it easy to get out and difficult to get back in.
4. **File a float plan** – share a simple float plan with friends and family that includes your anticipated departure and return times and locations. Ask them to alert authorities if you are not back on time.
5. **Always paddle sober** – U.S. Coast Guard data shows alcohol has long been the leading known contributing factor in fatal boating accidents. Safe paddling requires clear thinking and good decision-making. Don’t drink and paddle.

**About The Water Sports Foundation**

Headquartered in Orlando, Florida, the Water Sports Foundation is the non-profit educational arm of the Water Sports Industry Association ([WSIA.net](http://www.wsia.net#http://www.wsia.net/category/water-sports-foundation/)). Since 2011, the WSF has received U.S. Coast Guard boating and paddling safety outreach funding through their non-profit grant program. The Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund administered through Congressional action provides funding for the U.S. Coast Guard’s recreational boating safety initiatives. For more information contact the WSF at 407-719-8062 or visit [www.watersportsfoundation.com](http://www.watersportsfoundation.com)

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**Photo Caption**: (Photo courtesy of American Canoe Association) A record 37.9 million participants engaged in paddlesports like kayaking, stand up paddleboarding, canoeing and more during the pandemic in 2020 according to the Outdoor Foundation. Kayakers and stand-up paddleboarders, like those seen here, represent the largest group and fastest growing group, respectively, of paddlesports participants.