Safe in your own canoe

In past editions, we have occasionally reported comment from trade members of the outdoor industry, from professionals, and from the opinion-formers who frequent the outskirts, to the effect that a great deal of the clothing and equipment on offer is over-specified. That is to say, that the performance characteristics of the textiles and processes applied to the products go way beyond what might be experienced by the majority of users. One well-qualified commentator involved in both mountaineering training and rescue went so far as to suggest that the performance of the equipment actually led leisure activists into hazardous situations that were beyond their physical abilities and expertise. "The clothing blunts their senses. They don't feel the cold quickly enough," he said.

What wasn't reported at the time was that the commentator is also an instructor in kayaking, sea going and river-led, and that he aimed the reverse comment at that aspect of his activities, i.e. that over-specification is a plus factor. As far as he is concerned, clothing and safety equipment for the canoeist or kayaker (take your choice of title) should never be the subject of an either/or option, and particularly so where personal flotation devices (PFD) are concerned. In North America, both in the USA and Canada, they are a legal requirement; in Europe you can guarantee that your insurance will be invalidated without one. To quote a piece of American advice, 'get one, wear one, and practice jumping in with one, so you know how it works'.

Statistics of the horror variety drive home the logic; the US Whitewater Accident Database reports that, in 1996, 85% of drowned water activists were not wearing a PFD. It is understood that in the following four years little has improved.

Legislation versus progress?

As in all matters where safety is the subject of legislation, the phrasing of the various national and international regulations governing manufacture and performance of PFDs can be almost draconian. So much so that it initially begged the question of legislation stifling development and research. However, practice has proved that authority in this case is primarily concerned with quality in performance - working to the design parameters and development in manufacturing method are left to those who do it best.



A simple Yak PFD design, the Centre is colour-coded by size as an aid to extended use in schools and adventure centres.

The former issue in particular has forced lateral thinking to become part of the designer's armoury and the radical nature of the resulting improvements has been most marked. Style and cut have as strong an influence in PFD design as they do at the hairdressers. Silhouette enhancement is enabled because increased acquired buoyancy has enabled the bull-frog look to be slimmed down. Slabs of foam have replaced (in most product ranges) those hideous vertical blocks that gave the impression that the wearer was about to audition for the next saga in the Alien movie series.

Lining fabrics, now almost universally oxford-weave nylon, have been supplemented with nylon mesh to ensure rapid drainage, but a number of whitewater equipment suppliers also use neoprene as a liner both for its warmth retention and impact absorption characteristics.

Taking it with you

Canoe touring has grown in popularity in line with the explosion in adventure-based vacations. In this activity the gadget factor is often as important (to the user) as the ability of the PFD to save a life. Thus there is a designed multiplicity of pockets, fixed and removable; lashing tabs for knives or other hardware; quick release belts; snap hooks for keys or other danglies, and retro-reflective patches to aid rescue in poor lighting conditions.

Nowhere is the switch to positive thinking to counter the possibly imposed negativity of legislation more apparent than in colour schemes. Obviously the brighter the better as an aid to visibility in situations where rescue is necessary, but modern dyeing techniques allied to high performance fabrics have moved PFDs away from the ubiquitous orange red of yesteryear. Certainly you can still have the adventure centre look if you wish, but consider electric blue and silver, or mango and blue, or flame red and black, or stone and navy.

Attracted? Happy paddling.

Derryck Draper.



One of the most modern PFD specifications available, Palm's Fusion vest features a DuPont Cordura shell, Airex foam and stretch side torsion panels.



Kokatat's Tributary Hydration System, a PFD specific system designed to be carried on the back of a PFD and facilitate hands-free drinking. Tributary boasts a rugged Cordura outerpack, stretch-mesh pocket and sides, compression lacing, 60oz. food-grade polyethylene reservoir, non-crimp drink tube with nylon lapel clip and no-drip bite valve. Designed primarily to be worn on a Kokatat PFD, the entire system may be mounted to any boat with deck tie-downs.



The Extrem Axis whitewater PFD from Palm Equipment. Described as practically indestructible, its distinctive mango/black colour scheme gives it an edge in visual acuity.