
A Texas Nature Kayaking Guide

Rules and Suggestions for Kayakers

Here are some good rules and suggestions for kayaking with nature. Those which are not mandated by some agency are just plain good sense.

1. If paddling at night, you need to display a non-blinking 360 degree light that is visible for 2 miles. In many jurisdictions, the requirement can be satisfied by mounting a 360 degree white light above head height, or by mounting a lower light behind the kayaker with the kayaker wearing a head lamp. Red and green navigation lights mandated for power boats are not required for kayaks. A strobing light, which indicates danger, can be attached to the shoulder strap of a PFD (to be used only in the event of an emergency). It is an added safety device, but it is not required. If there is a possibility of being out after dark, a flashlight or headlamp is very handy.



Figure 1 A final check before we start our tour of the Lighthouse Lakes, Aransas Pass, TX.

2. If you put a motor of any kind (trolling motor included) on your kayak, in Texas you must register it with the TP&WD. Most other states have similar requirements.
3. If you put a sail on your kayak and your kayak is 14' long or over, you must register it with the TP&WD. Again, many other states have similar requirements.
4. Regulations require that you have a Coast-Guard-Approved PFD (personal flotation device) available. In most jurisdictions, those under 13 must wear their PFDs. If you are 13 or over,

wear your PFD; if you turn over and bang your head, you will not be able to swim, even if you are a championship swimmer. If you are not a swimmer, then the PFD becomes doubly important. Select a PFD that fits and is comfortable. There are inflatable PFDs that are activated by a carbon dioxide cartridge. Do not use an inflatable PFD unless you are a good swimmer and you are in an area where you do not anticipate using it. If that type is used, it must be worn. A PFD must fit snugly. Check the fit by picking the PFD up by the shoulder straps. If the kayaker comes with the PFD, it is fitted appropriately. Seriously, if the shoulder straps of the PFD can slip up to the ear level, it is not fitted correctly.

5. Regulations require that you have a noise maker (whistle, etc.) and that you use it only when in a life-threatening situation. If it is attached to your PFD, it is always available.
6. Wear sunscreen – the skin cancer you prevent may be your own. When on the water, you are attacked by the sun from above; but also, the water reflects more ultraviolet light than ground, grass, etc., do, so you are also attacked by the sun from below. A hat, sunglasses, and sunscreen are more important than they are for non-water-related outdoor activities.
7. Lots of insects are found around water, so if you are not interested in providing a banquet for mosquitoes, consider a good insect repellent.
8. A Signal Mirror is good if you are beyond shouting distance. There are Survival Mirrors which can be aimed easily. An AOL CD makes a good Signal Mirror. While AOL probably disagrees, there are some of us who think that may be the only thing it is good for.
9. Practice DEEP WATER RE-ENTRY. If you get dumped in DEEP water, you better know how to get back in/on. In fact, practice all aspects of unexpected exits. Even in shallow water, with little or no current, the surprise of being dumped can put you in a panic. Practice teaches you to close your mouth and not inhale.



Figure 2 Someone stabilizing the kayak makes it easier to reenter, but be prepared in the event someone sticks his paddle in the way, or no one is available.

10. Tie everything down. Or to phrase it in another way, "If you don't want to buy it again, tie it down."
11. Don't go alone.
12. File a float plan with someone every time you go out, so someone will know where you are going and when you are going to be back.
13. Have fun.
14. Be very cautious when anchoring in strong currents – better yet, completely avoid the practice. Disaster can happen in a heartbeat.
15. Never assume a power boater can see you, or if he does, that he will avoid you. Keep an eye and ear open for the boaters.
16. .. Attach a flag to your kayak so the power boaters will have a better chance of seeing you.
17. If you use a paddle leash (recommended in the Gulf of Mexico and in oceans, but not in rivers), ensure that you can get free when you tangle with it during a turtle.
18. Always look behind you. Double-wide barges "sneak" up behind you, especially if you have the wind to your face. Barges, ships, and fishing boats pulling nets cannot stop or change direction easily. Stay out of their way.
19. Always remember to put anything you don't want to get wet in a dry bag.



Figure 3 It was an important phone call and later she said, "I enjoy this as much as going to the dentist." Hopefully she was speaking of the phone call and not the kayaking.

20. Get instruction in the proper ways to kayak.
21. "Rig to flip, dress to swim."

22. Don't drink and paddle. We have laws against drinking and driving. Drinking and paddling is just as unsafe.

The first five rules are mandated by either Texas regulations or US Coast Guard regulations. Most other states have similar regulations, but check with your state to determine the regulations in place where you paddle. The suggestions are not mandated by law or regulations, but are mandated by common courtesy, experience, and so that your family can have closure if you mess up big-time.

The American Canoe Association reports that 90% of the fatalities associated with paddle sports involve not wearing a PFD or not having training.

Don't mess up big-time. It ruins other people's days, and you would not want to do that.