RISK ASSESSMENT
Appendix 6: Paddlesports During the Age of COVID-19
May 22, 2020

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to present a set of suggested paddlecraft practices, based on currently available information. These suggestions are provided to assist paddling instructors and event organizers and do not replace guidance from federal (e.g., CDC), state, and local authorities (e.g., health departments). In certain cases, it also may be advisable to check with your health care provider, attorney, insurance representative, and other appropriate experts. Local risk will depend on numerous factors. Individual instructors and event organizers are responsible for appropriate risk assessment and risk management.

Key Question: Is it Safe to Paddle?

One of the questions that must be asked prior to commencing a paddlesports event is: "Is it safe to paddle?" This question can become even more difficult to answer in the age of COVID-19.

In one sense, this question is easy to answer: It is never completely safe to paddle. The reality is that there always have been, and always will be, risks.

Ultimately each paddling leader, and each paddler, must decide for themselves whether the potential risks are outweighed by the potential rewards. In the discussion below, we present a model for performing such an analysis: the GAR model. This model is in routine use by the United States Coast Guard. We have adapted this model for paddlesports and given specific focus to COVID-19 related considerations which may factor into the decision-making process.

Irrespective of the model, there are times when it is obviously inappropriate to paddle; for example, if paddling will violate, or is likely to violate, federal, state, or local COVID-19 guidelines and boating regulations.

NOTE: Although our adaptation of the GAR model focuses on COVID-19, paddlers should not lose sight of the big picture and must give due consideration to other factors that they may have considered prior to the emergence of COVID-19.

Use of the GAR Model

There are seven core components to the GAR Model: Planning, Event Complexity, Paddlers, Boats/Equipment, Communications/Supervision, Environment, and Other Factors. The basic idea is that each of the components can have a significant impact on risk. Each of the above seven factors is discussed, and risk levels assigned (*low, medium, high*). Subsequently, an overall categorization of risk (*low, medium, high*) is developed.

Once an overall assessment of risk has been performed, the potential gain of the event (also using a scale of *low, medium, high*) is then assessed. From the perspective of paddlesports, it is hard to envision any *high* gain events (there may be a few exceptions – e.g., exiting a dangerously flooding campground with a rising tide). Most paddling events are likely to be *low* gain or, at most, *medium* gain.

Finally, the potential risk is then balanced against the potential gain and a decision is made as to whether, or not, to proceed. For example, if an event is *high risk*, but *low gain*, then it should not be executed. On the other hand, a *low risk*, but *low or medium gain* event, may be more appropriate to execute.

GAR Model Template (Adapted for Paddlecraft)

Planning
LOW MEDIUM HIGH

To the extent that a paddlesports event is "thrown together" at the last minute, it is much more likely to have a higher risk level than an event which has been methodically planned. Specifically, with respect to COVID-19, if an event has been planned with proper infection prevention and control interventions put into place, it is likely to be less risky than an event which has not incorporated this level of planning.

Event Complexity
LOW MEDIUM HIGH

From the perspective of COVID-19, more complex events increase risk because of a variety of reasons, e.g., increased difficulty in keeping paddlers appropriately spaced (far enough apart for social distancing, but close enough for supervision). In addition, more complex events generally increase the need for assisted rescue, thus raising the risk of disease transmission.

Paddlers
LOW MEDIUM HIGH

Key factors include:

- Skill level of paddlers (All else being equal, less experienced paddlers are likely to be at higher risk than are more experienced paddlers. *However,* this is highly influenced by multiple factors including event location and complexity.).
- Skill level of leader
- Physical fitness, fatigue, etc.
- Potential COVID-19 signs & symptoms; pre-existing medical conditions (see **Health Screening Tool).** *It is critical to remember that a significant percentage of people who are infected with COVID-19 may be asymptomatic – but still capable of transmitting the disease.*
- Size of group (too large or too small?)

Boats & Equipment
LOW MEDIUM HIGH

Key factors include:

- Boats (appropriate for the event/location/environment)
- Equipment (appropriate for the event/location/environment)
- *Each* paddler has PPE (see **PPE)**
- All boats, and equipment, including PPE, are clean and in good working order

Communications/Supervision
LOW MEDIUM HIGH

Key factors include:

- Will it be possible to maintain adequate communications throughout the duration of the event?
- Will it be possible to observe and properly supervise (including infection prevention and control measures) throughout the duration of the event?

Environment
LOW MEDIUM HIGH

Key factors include:

- Complexity/difficulty of the physical environment (wind, waves, current, etc.)
- Complexity of the regulatory environment (current state of guidance with respect to "opening up," beach and other water access closures, prohibited activities, e.g., is it legal to tow, etc.)
- Current epidemiologic status of COVID-19; for example, what are the current incidence rates (number of new cases) in the vicinity of the paddling event? Is this trending up or down? ***Unfortunately, there is no easy way to assess the significance of these numbers because the ability to do so may rely on epidemiologic skills and knowledge. In addition, reported numbers are continually changing, and may be subject to errors due to a wide variety of factors including testing rates and accuracy, reporting delays, and political influences.***

Other Factors (aka "throw downs")
LOW MEDIUM HIGH

Although the above six factors generally provide a comprehensive overview of potential risks, "special cases" do occur. Hence, the GAR model allows for "throw downs" to be added into the framework. An example of a throw down might include, for example, the possibility of a large gathering, in the immediate vicinity, with a high risk of people not taking proper infection and control precautions.

OVERALL Risk Level
LOW MEDIUM HIGH

GAIN Level
LOW MEDIUM HIGH

DECISION
GO/NO-GO

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