



# CHAPTER 9

## Organisation

*Figure 9-1 (above) a small group of experienced boaters who have paddled together before, need very little organisation. River Guil, French Alps.*

*Photo: Dino Heald*

Once afloat, small groups of experienced paddlers often find that they have no need for a leader as such. Each paddler assumes a position or role they are happy with and, should a decision be necessary or a rescue need dealing with, whoever is in the best position to do so temporarily assumes the role of leader/coordinator.

Unfortunately this state of perfect cooperation is rare. Teams are seldom so well matched. The greater the disparity in experience and the larger the group, the greater the need for more formal organisation and leadership.

No matter how little need there is for a formal leader, any group that wishes to paddle in safety will need to be organized to a degree. Each member of the group needs to know:

- **The role of each team member**
- **The way in which the group is going to tackle the river**
- **The order of descent**

## Roles

In order to make a safe descent of a river each member of the group will have to accept responsibility and take on one or more roles.

- ▶ **TEAM MEMBER** - All members of a team must have the safety and well-being of the whole group as their top priority. We all paddle for our own selfish reasons; however, if these come before our concern for the safety of the other members of the team we are a liability.

All team members need to be honest about what they have to offer, and their own limitations. It is better to say that you are not prepared to take on a certain role than to accept it and foul up through lack of skill or confidence.

- ▶ **THE 'BUDDY' SYSTEM** - This system involves every member of the party pairing up with another. From that point on, as well as their normal responsibility for the other members of the team, each person is particularly responsible for the welfare of their buddy. This is particularly useful in large groups where it might otherwise be possible for someone to go missing without anyone realising.
- ▶ **LEAD PADDLER/RAFT GUIDE** - This person is not necessarily the leader. This role is often taken on by the more experienced and skilled paddlers or by the person in the group who has paddled the river before. Because of the linear nature of rivers, whoever is out in front has the following responsibilities:
  - **Choosing a line**
  - **Spotting and avoiding hazards**
  - **Deciding when to bank inspect**
  - **Getting the group off the water well above any portages**

Figure 9-2 lead raft with the guide looking well ahead. Scheif'seck Rapid, River Sanna Austria.



Being lead paddler is an exciting, challenging and satisfying role, (see Chapter 7, Scouting Techniques). Taking a turn at being lead paddler on a suitable stretch of river is an important part of a paddler's personal development. If you don't normally take the lead, insist on having a turn out in front on the easier sections. Don't let anyone hog the lead and have all the fun.

Photo: www.swiftwaterrescue.at

- ▶ **BACK MARKER** - Sometimes known as 'Tail-End Charlie'. This is another role that is usually taken by one of the more experienced paddlers. This is because they have to pick up the pieces and therefore must be able to take on the role of chase boater. They are also at extra risk because everybody else tends to look downriver. If they get into trouble there is the possibility that it won't be noticed for some time. When boating, I prefer to have two people take on this role, frequently changing places as back marker. That way they act as a team within a team and feel a special responsibility for each other (the Buddy system).
- ▶ **CHASE BOATER** - Chase boating is the art of rescuing swimmers or their equipment from your boat rather than from the bank (see Chapter 14). It is a high-risk activity requiring a high level of skill and confidence, fast reflexes, even better judgment and the ability to think on the move. In some groups every paddler will be able to take on this role. In others there may be only one or two people willing and able to take it on.

Figure 9-3 chaseboating, the paddler has dislocated his shoulder. River Guil, French Alps. Photo: Peter Knowles



- ▶ **SPECIALIST RESCUE ROLES** - There are some situations that may require specialist knowledge, skills or aptitude. Examples are rescues that might involve ropework skills or where there is a risk of ending up in, or a need to enter the water. In the case of the latter it is important that such roles be taken on by people who are strong swimmers and water confident. Should such a rescue situation arise, time will be precious, so it is better to identify who can take on these roles in advance.



**IF YOU ARE NOT KEEN ON SUCH A ROLE, DON'T BUY A CHEST-HARNESS BUOYANCY AID.**

- ▶ **MOTIVATOR/AGONY AUNT** - Not all team roles involve paddling skills. Everybody needs a shoulder to lean on or a sympathetic ear at some stage.
- ▶ **TEAM LEADER** - The leader takes on a multitude of roles. At the very least he is an organiser, motivator, risk assessor and communicator. He may well find himself having to be counsellor, psychologist, coach, pillar of strength and wisdom, to name but a few!  
A team leader will also have a role as a safety advisor. Where there is a legal or moral obligation, or the consequences of someone else's poor judgment puts the welfare of the team at risk, he may have to veto an individual's decision.

## Tackling the River

How a group is best organised will depend on:

- **The size of the group**
  - **The nature of the river**
  - **The nature of the group**
- ▶ **SIZE OF GROUP** - It is seldom a good idea to solo paddle on white water. To paddle as a pair is acceptable although, if one paddler gets into trouble, that only leaves one potential rescuer, which would limit the number of options available. With two rafts working in tandem this is less of a problem as there will be plenty of person power, even if only the two raft guides are experienced. If you decide to paddle as a pair, bear this in mind when assessing risks and err on the cautious side.
- Three is a good number from a safety point of view. Four is probably the ideal. This is because it allows people to 'buddy up' and operate as two pairs who, although still members of the team of four, are particularly responsible for the welfare of their 'buddy'. It is also a small enough team to operate with a minimum of organisation.

*Figure 9-4 (below)  
two rafts travelling in  
convoy with a kayaker  
acting as scout and  
chase boater. River  
Sanna, Austria.*

Photo: www.swiftwaterrescue.at



► **THE RIVER** - Different types of river require different approaches.



Figure 9-5 moving together. River Guisane, French Alps. Photo: Bob Timms Boating & Trekking

► **EASY LOW & MEDIUM VOLUME RIVERS**

- On low and medium volume rivers that are fairly straightforward it is usually best to travel as one small group, one behind the other, keeping fairly close together. If the leader is not the lead paddler he may well position himself in the centre of the group so that he can see both the lead paddler and the back marker.

► **HIGH VOLUME RIVERS**

- On high volume rivers the distance between safe eddies, and the size of the water features mean that there has to be a reasonable gap between each paddler. It is probably best to travel as semi-independent buddy groups (pairs). One of the good things about the buddy system is that you can pair a young hot-shot paddler with an experienced paddler. The experienced paddler will have the eyes to choose a safe line and the hot-shot the skills to stay on it. With this arrangement, instead of being able to see the whole group, paddlers will only

be able to see the pair immediately in front and behind them, and only then intermittently, from the top of waves. It is therefore vital that the lead pair stop whenever they find a large enough eddy to regroup and count heads.

► **TECHNICAL RIVERS** - On technically difficult low and medium rivers it may also be better to travel as semi-independent groups of two or three paddlers. The twists, turns and drops restrict visibility and the technical difficulty means that paddlers need more space.

A group of six would split into two semi-independent groups of three or three semi-independent pairs. Each group of three would act independently, obeying the 'line of sight' principle within the sub-group. Whenever the back marker of the first group lost sight of the lead paddler of the second group, the first group would stop and wait until the second group came back into view.

In the above section we looked at how different factors might make us choose different ways of moving together as one group. On some sections of river, it may be preferable that not all paddlers are on the move at once. With all the following techniques it is essential that every member of the group understands what is required and that a simple and efficient system of signals is agreed on (see Chapter 10, Communication).

- **ONE AT A TIME** - In its simplest form, the lead paddler runs the rapid first and then makes a signal. On seeing this, a second member of the group runs the rapid. Everyone else stays put until the lead paddler/raft guide signals again for the third person and so on.

Figure 9-6 running the rapid one at a time on the lead paddler's signal. Rio Chotohuasi, Peru



On harder rapids where a bank inspection has taken place, most or even all of the other members of the team may provide bank protection while one member of the team runs the rapid. In a large group it is essential that the group are well briefed and that the leader uses a clear set of signals to keep things moving.

As soon as the paddler reaches the bottom of the rapid he must get out and change places with one of the people on the bank who is then free to get ready to run the rapid. If possible it is best to keep two people free of bank protection jobs. That way, while one person is running the rapid, another is getting ready to run it. This speeds up the process considerably.

Figure 9-7 running the rapid one at a time with bank protection. River Guil, French Alps. Photo: Dino Heald



- **LEAPFROGGING** - This works particularly well with small groups of boaters on rivers where there are lots of small eddies that will only take one boat at a time. A large group of paddlers would have to break into two or more sub-groups to make this work. Often this technique and eddy hopping are only used for short technical sections, the group reverting to moving together, or one at a time, as the river becomes easier or harder.

With this method every paddler in the group takes it in turn to be lead paddler and back marker. The lead paddler signals the back marker, who leapfrogs the whole group, becoming the new lead paddler and so on.

Figure 9-8  
leapfrogging:

- 1 the lead paddler signals down tail end charlie to the next safe eddy below, becoming the lead paddler.
- 2 the new back marker makes the eddy in the bottom right, becoming the lead paddler.
- 3 + repeat.

Photo: Dino Heald



► **EDDY HOPPING** - This works in similar situations to leapfrogging. A possible advantage over leapfrogging is that the order of descent doesn't change. Strangely enough the disadvantage is that it is harder to keep control of the group. This is definitely easier if the group splits into semi-independent pairs.

The lead paddler moves down to the next eddy that he thinks all the other members of the group will have the ability to paddle into. On the lead paddler's signal, the rest of the team move down one eddy. It is vital that paddlers do not set off until the paddler downstream of them is well clear of the eddy they want to move down to.

Figure 9-9  
eddy hopping:

- 1 the lead paddler breaks out in the next safe eddy below.
- 2 the next paddler moves to occupy the eddy left by the lead paddler.
- 2 the back marker moves to occupy the eddy left by the paddler in front.
- 3 + repeat.

Photo: Dino Heald



With a group of evenly matched paddlers it is only really necessary to decide on who is the lead paddler and who are the back markers. Everyone else can paddle in any order they like, as long as they keep an eye on the person in front and the person behind them. With a mixed ability group it is best to pair people up so that the more skilled/experienced paddlers are teamed up with the less able, the exception being the back markers who both need to be good paddlers.