

# Risk Management for Paddlers

Why do we paddle? For some it is the peace of a quiet day on the water. For others it is the thrill of running a wild river, or riding a crashing wave. Whatever your motivation, there is no doubt that paddling involves risk, and understanding these risks can help us become better paddlers.

Why do we take risks, not just in paddling, but also in life? Pushing the limits by taking risks increases confidence, boosts self-esteem, and is often just plain fun. Understanding our motivation for taking risks is important for helping us determine strategies for managing with them.

## Risks and Hazards

We need to understand a couple of definitions as we begin this analysis of risk management for paddlers. First, what is “risk”. Risk is the possibility of injury or damage. In paddling, risks arise from conditions on the water, or actions or inactions that we take in the boat. These conditions and actions are called “hazards”. For example, paddling in the winter in a “hazard” that increased the “risk” of hypothermia.

“Risk reductions strategies” are a means to reduce a risk, or eliminate it entirely. Wearing proper cold-water gear (wetsuit or drysuit) is a “risk reduction strategy” that can reduce the “risk” of hypothermia. The ultimate risk reduction strategy is avoidance, like staying off the water in cold weather. While avoidance is an important strategy for dealing with the most dangerous risks, it is not a strategy that can be applied in all cases, or we would never paddle at all.

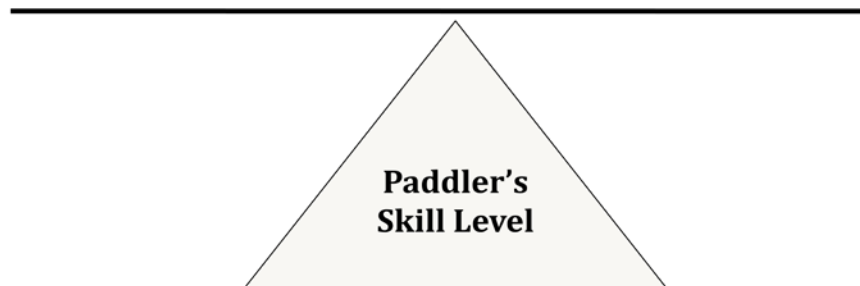
## Types of Risk

A risk at its most dangerous level is called the “absolute risk”. Through risk reduction strategies, we can reduce the level of risk to a more manageable level, which is called the “real risk”. In most cases, a paddler’s objective is not to eliminate the risk entirely, but to match the level of risk to that paddler’s skill level.

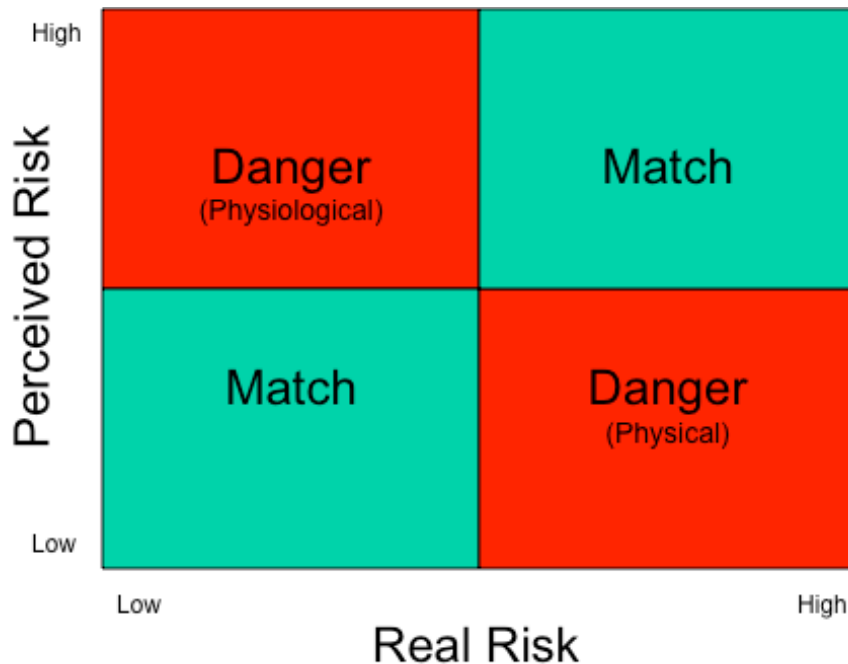
**Avoidance**

**Real Risk**

**Absolute Risk**



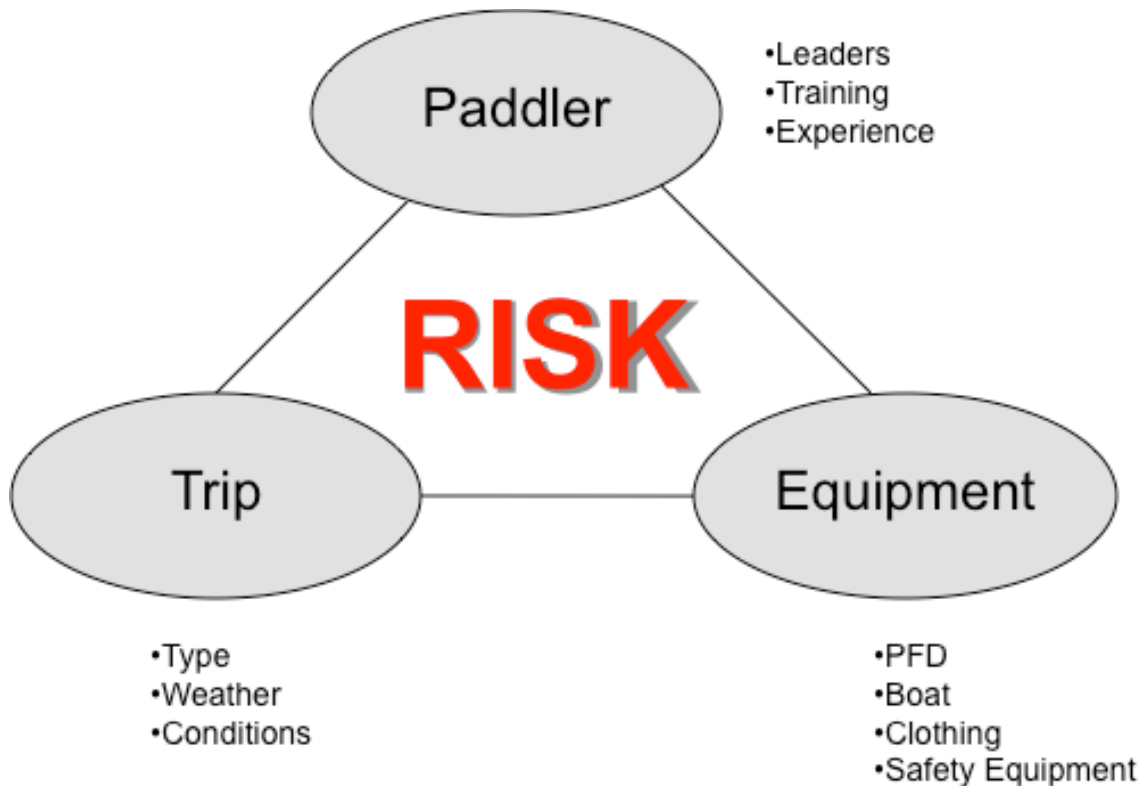
Difficulties sometimes arise when a paddler's subjective assessment of risk do not match the real risk. This is especially dangerous if the paddler's "perceived risk" is significantly less than the real risk, putting the paddler in danger of physical harm. On the other hand, if the paddler's perceived risk is significantly higher the real risk, that paddler may be avoiding situations that are within their skill level, and that they would find fun and rewarding to paddle.



There are many factors that effect a paddler's perception of risk including confidence level, familiarity with the trip, training, experience with similar trips, and physical condition (tired, hungry, etc.). It is also important to look at our own biases when evaluating risk. Familiarization (a reduction in the perception of risk after earlier successful attempts), risk shifting (a reduction in the perception of risk due to the availability of other more skilled paddlers or safety protocols), and "get-home-it is" (becoming less careful as the trip progresses and the paddler get more anxious to complete it) can inhibit our ability to objectively evaluate risk and make safe paddling decisions.

### **Factors Effecting Risk**

For paddlers, a trip's risk is dependant on three critical factors – the trip itself, the paddler and their skill level, and the equipment used.



While accessing the risks of the trip itself can be difficult, especially if you have never paddled it, there are rating guides that can help. For river trips, the AMC River Guide provides a consistent means to measure the difficulty of a river. For sea kayaker, similar systems have been developed that are often based on the skills needed to successfully complete a trip. While still subjective, these rating systems provide a consistent means to compare trips and their relevant risks.

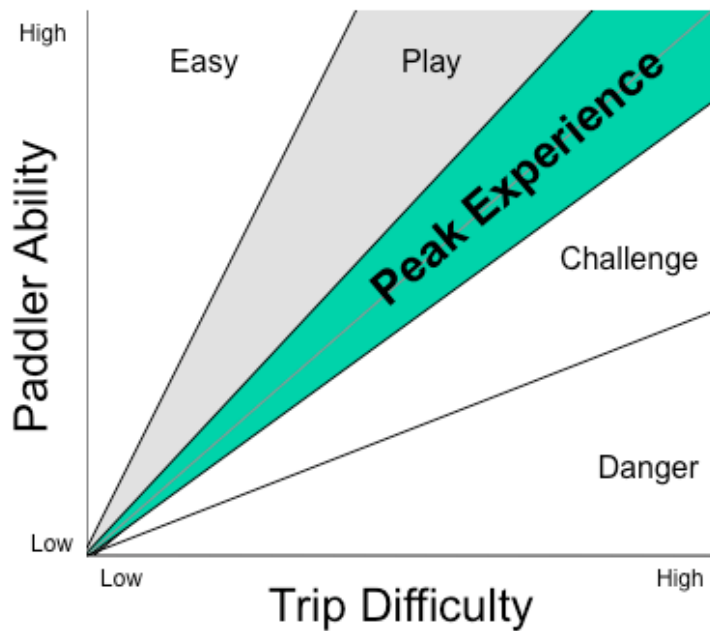
Based on the type of trip that is being undertaken, choosing appropriate equipment is usually an easy decision to make. While a short, highly rockered boat may be appropriate for a whitewater river, it is probably not appropriate for a sea kayak trip. Paddlers also need to consider appropriate clothing, safety gear, and of course, a PFD.

Perhaps the most difficult factor to assess in determining risk is the paddler themselves. Not only is a paddler's physical condition, training and experience important in determining risk, but also their mood, confidence and emotional state, which can be much more difficult attributes to measure.

### **How Much Risk Is Acceptable**

Determining the amount of risk that a paddler wishes to take is a very personal decision. Some paddlers prefer easy trips that barely challenge their capabilities. Other paddlers prefer to push the extreme, always paddling at the edge of their

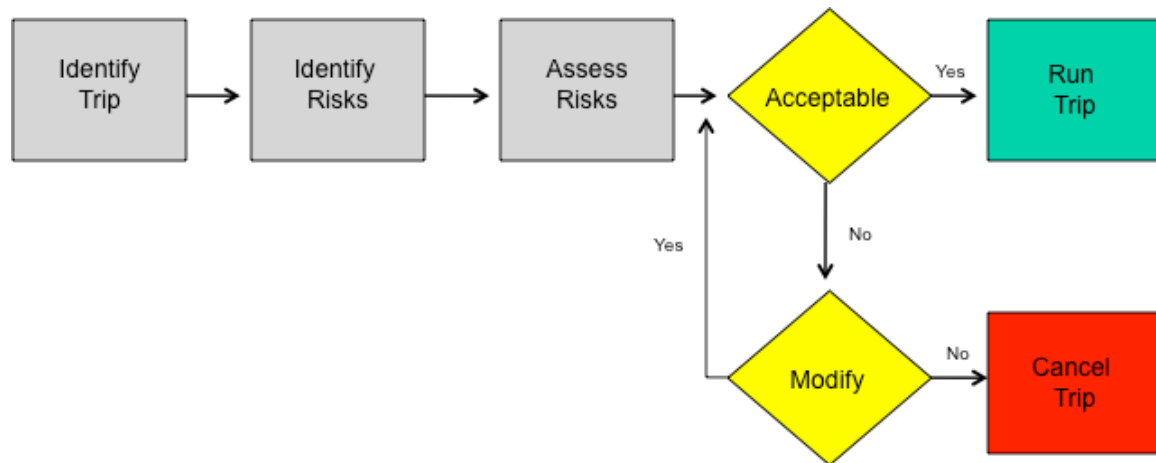
ability. For most of us, our “peak experience” lies somewhere in between – just enough to provide a challenge, but not enough to put us in danger.



One of the challenges in running trips is that this peak experience level differs from paddler to paddler. On any given trip, some paddlers may find the trip easy, while other will find it challenging, or even dangerous. Running trips that are suitable for many different skill levels is one of the challenges facing trip leaders.

### **Trip Planning Process**

The trip planning process serves the dual purpose of preparing leaders, and providing paddlers who will be participating in the trip with appropriate information that will help them decide if the trip is right for them. Trip planning includes choosing the trip, assessing the hazards, identifying required equipment and determining appropriate skill levels.



## Choosing a Trip

The first step in the trip planning process is to choose the trip. The trip should always be a trip that the leader is familiar with through prior experience, and through the scouting of current conditions. Scouting is an extremely important step since conditions can change greatly over time and in differing weather conditions. The trip might include a flatwater, quickwater, or whitewater river, large lake or protected bay, or the open ocean.

## Identifying and Assessing Hazards

Once the leader has chosen a trip, they need to identify and assess the potential hazards. The hazards for an open water trip might include wind, waves, tides and long crossings. The hazards would be very different for a river trip, and might include high water levels, ledges and low head dams.

Once a hazard has been identified, appropriate mitigation strategies can be identified. This might include portaging a dangerous rapid, or timing a trip to avoid a dangerous high tide.

## Required Equipment

The equipment needed on a trip will be driven by the trip itself. Everyone will need a boat that is appropriate for the conditions, a paddle and a PFD. Person gear will include clothing appropriate for the conditions, a whistle or other signaling device, food, water, and other personal needs. It is also necessary to consider group gear such as a spare paddle, first aid kit, throw bag or towline, cell phone and emergency contact numbers.

## Communication

Communication is an ongoing process that begins by providing relevant information to potential paddlers in a concise trip description so they can make an informed decision on whether the trip is right for them.

## **Leadership Models**

Another important variable that greatly effect the risk of a trip is leadership. For many the term “leader” comes with an implication of potential liability, so many people avoid the term. Still, whether you use the term “leader”, “trip coordinator”, or something else, effective leadership can greatly reduce the risk of a trip.

While leaders play a critical role, not all trips are run with a single leader who is responsible for all aspects of the trip. On many trips, leadership is flexible, and shared among participants. This style of leadership is called the common adventure model, and with more experienced paddlers, this less formal structure can react more quickly to changing conditions.

## **The Role of the Leader(s)**

One of the most important functions of the trip leader is to know the conditions on the water, and to advise paddlers of the hazards they will encounter. This is often communicated through a safety talk at the start of the paddle that includes a description of the trip and its hazards, an introduction of the other leaders, and a review of the safety rules such as PFD use and staying with the group.

The leader may also have to recruit other qualified paddlers to fill key responsibilities on the trip. These might include a lead boat that is familiar with the route and sets the pace; a sweep boat that makes sure that no one gets left behind and can perform rescues, and others to cover important hazards along the way.

It is important for the leader to insure that the group gear and safety equipment gets distributed to the group. This would include the first aid kit with someone who knows how to use it, tow belts with strong paddlers, and throw bags with paddlers assigned at specific hazards.

On the water, leaders need to stay aware of changing conditions and make adjustments as necessary. They need to maintain contact with other leaders to make sure that critical roles are covers, and they need to monitor paddlers to make sure that they get help on the event of problems like fatigue or hypothermia.

## **Crisis Management**

One last skill critical to effective risk management is crisis management. While the likelihood of an accident can be reduced through risk management, the risk will probably not be completely eliminated. In the event of an accident, the group will need to implement a crisis plan that includes removing a paddler from a dangerous

situation (perhaps a pin in whitewater, or an open water rescue while sea kayaking), provide first aid to treat injuries, and evacuate an injured paddler to a location where additional help is available.

### **Conclusion**

Like all of life's activities, paddling is a sport that involves risk. While this risk can be managed, it cannot be completely avoided. Ultimately, each paddler is responsible for their own safety. Personal responsibility is the key to safe paddling.