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Qajaqs On Muhheakunnuk (Kayaks On The Hudson River)

by Mark Price

The Hudson River has many secrets to reveal. Both the river and its tributaries are steeped in beautiful places, explored and discovered best by kayak. With the surge in popularity of paddle sports over the last few years and a increased desire to enjoy the Hudson Valley's outdoor activities many more people are using kayaks to explore the Hudson River. If you are going to paddle on the Hudson your experience depends on making the right choices. The paddle craft you choose, the skills you possess, and your understandings of the aquatic environment are the keys to an enjoyable and safe kayaking experience.

Choosing the Right Boat

Qajaq is the Inuit word for "hunting boat", or as we know them today kayaks. The people of the Arctic, to help provide food for their families, traditionally used kayaks. Today the only thing most people hunt for in them is adventure. To enjoy the Hudson River safely by kayak you will need the right boat. If you have been to your local paddle sport shop recently you have seen that there are many different kayaks to choose from. Recreational, whitewater, touring and sea kayaks are the basic types. To paddle safely on the Hudson your choice is very simple, you need a sea kayak. Sea kayaks are designed to handle the conditions of an ocean environment and are perfect for exploring the Hudson. These boats are 14 feet or longer. Most will have at least one bulkhead (a interior wall that seals off one or both ends of the boat making it watertight so if the boat capsizes it will not sink). The preferred Hudson River boat is 16 feet or longer with two bulkheads. Other features that make it an even better choice are a rudder or skeg (these help keep the boat on course if it is windy or the water current is fast), safety toggles, perimeter lines and deck bungees.

TIDES, 3WS, AND RULES OF THE ROAD

You could spend your entire lifetime studying the Hudson River, but to kayak the Hudson there is some basic information that you need to know about the river as a kayaker.

TIDES

Muhheakunnuk, or as the Native Americans observed "the river that flows both ways", we know today as the Hudson River. The Hudson River is unique as it flows through the Hudson Valley. The Hudson like all rivers flows from its highest point (source) to its lowest point (mouth). It starts high up on Mount Marcy at Lake Tear of the Clouds in the Adirondacks and meets the Atlantic Ocean at the

mouth of New York Harbor. The Hudson is also an estuary, which means it is a body of water connected to the sea. Being connected to the sea the Hudson has tidal cycles. Simply stated this means the water level of the Hudson rises and falls about 4 feet every 6 hours. This occurs from Manhattan all the way up the Hudson to Troy, where it is dammed. With this Flood (water coming into the river) and Ebb (water going out of the river) of the tide happening around the clock, the river current and water level is always changing and the kayaker should be aware of this. At one point in the day you may have enough water to paddle on a certain section of river, then a few hours later when the tide goes out you may be stuck in the mud.

It is also much harder to paddle against the current, turning a fun day into a real trudge. With these two things said make it a point to check the tide tables and plan your trip accordingly. A great source to check tide tables for the entire east coast is: http://tbone.biol.sc.edu/tide/sites_useastupper.html

3Ws

Weather, wind and waves. These three conditions can change at anytime and turn a great day on the Hudson into a really bad one. Again if you are aware of these variables you can plan your day of paddling around them. Luckily we can check our favorite local forecast and find out how the weather and wind for the day will be. The weather is the weather and Mother Nature will give us what she wants when she wants. Always remember that you should NEVER paddle if there is thunder or lightning or even if it's forecast. Wind can be your worst enemy and a good rule of thumb for the beginning paddler is to stay off the water if the forecast is for winds higher than 10 mph. Waves on the Hudson basically come from two sources, the wind and boat traffic. Wind waves get larger and harder to paddle in when the wind speed increases and the length of fetch increases. Fetch refers to the distance over which wind travels without encountering obstructions. The general rule is the longer the fetch, the more powerful the waves. Boats under motor of any size create a wake or wave. Depending on the size of the vessel and your proximity to it, boat wake can easily capsize you if you're a new or inattentive paddler. Just remember to keep an eye out for waves if you encounter boat traffic.

RULES OF THE NAUTICAL ROAD

One of the most present dangers to the kayaker on the Hudson is the commercial shipping traffic. The international shipping lane stretches from New York City to the Port of Albany. You will see tankers, container ships, ferries, barges and tugs, passenger vessels, fishing boats, yachts, sail boats, and jet skis on any given day kayaking on the Hudson. All of these vessels are much bigger than the kayaker and if you hope to return from your paddling trip in one piece then you should remember the unwritten Rule of Gross Tonnage. Simply stated if it is bigger than you, out of its way. You should also be aware of where the shipping channel is and how it is marked. Carrying a nautical

chart (map) of where you are paddling is a good idea. Using a nautical chart you will see the shipping channel is clearly marked with red and green buoys (nuns and cans). The safest place for the beginning kayaker to paddle is well outside of the shipping lane. There is an entire phone book size text of nautical navigation rules, but a little common sense goes a long way. To learn more about safe boating check out: http://nysparks.com/boating/edu_boat.asp

THE BOAT, THE RIVER, AND YOU

The following are a few things to keep in mind as you paddle. By no means is this article a complete guide to kayaking on the Hudson River. If anything on the following lists is not familiar to you find out what it is and how to use it. Please practice your skills, learn how to use your gear, seek out expert instruction and know your limits. Be safe and enjoy our Hudson River.

Qajaqs on Muhheakunnuk!

Paddler's checklist:

- Always wear a properly fitted PFD (lifejacket)
- Be comfortable in the water, know how to swim (can't swim? Take a lesson!)
- File a float plan (where and when you are leaving, where and when you are returning, file this with family, friends or the authorities in your area)
- Always dress for immersion in the water (dry suits, wetsuits, etc.)
- Always wear appropriate clothing and footwear (no cotton)
- Always check your boats flotation before you depart, check float bags and/or hatch covers to be sure they are functioning
- Paddle with a group
- Know how to rescue yourself and others if there is a capsized
- Always paddle within your limits and skill level
- Know and follow all local, state and federal laws
- Take a lesson

Things to carry

- Spare paddle
- Whistle and another sound signaling device (little air horn)
- Bilge pump and sponge
- Self rescue gear (paddle float, sling, tow rope)
- Compass and chart of the area you are paddling in
- VHF Radio and/or cell phone

- Tow rope or throw bag
- Knife
- Sunscreen
- Sunglasses
- Hat
- Spare dry clothing
- Lights and signaling devices
- Repair kit and duct tape
- First aid kit and matches
- Water and food
- Extra water and food
- Dry bags

USEFUL LINKS

Hudson River Watertrail Association

www.hrwa.org

American Canoe Association

www.americancanoe.org

Hudson Valley Pack & Paddle

www.hvpackandpaddle.com