

Paddling the Seas of Tsunami Capitalist Persuasion: Manipulated or Self-determined?

By Nils Vikander

All *friluftsliv*, or “open-air living,” is to some degree a “quest.” This certainly applies to paddling the big, open waters, although William James (1981) originally used the term to deepen our understanding of the Canadian soul during expeditionary travel on the great northern rivers. James was inspired in his task by the classical quest sequence of *Preparation, Separation, Tribulation and Return*. Gaining insight into the panorama of paddling the seas and great lakes of the world could be no less well served through viewing such voyages in terms of these historical quest segments.

Preparation

All *friluftsliv* beyond nude swimming involves equipment as mediating links between humans and nature, whether impediments, enhancers, or simply as necessities in the nature experience. Today, equipment for the outdoors is generally commercially produced, and this raises the question “Cui Bono?” or “To Whose Advantage?” Is the *friluftsliv* devotee likely to gain maximum satisfaction from equipment purchases or are the producers and retailers the main beneficiaries? Since the capitalist system of production is driven by the principle of profit maximization, the answer to “Cui Bono?” appears to favour industry. Reflections of this type are the result of my experiencing deep personal disjunctions over many years between paddling canoes and kayaks on the big waters in North America and Europe. Although I enjoyed both, my canoeing in such settings has drawn bafflement and sometimes outright hostility from observers, who must have viewed me as paddling against a tsunami of ideological correctness. Immersing myself into relevant literature in the area has confirmed my heresy. Being an “outlier” provided the impetus for my writing presented here.

Separation

I began this voyage by examining my paddling life history, which now spans more than half a century and includes both private and pedagogically oriented ventures. This was supplemented by a review of my *friluftsliv* writings as well as a wide-ranging document analysis of quantitative and qualitative texts and illustrations of canoeing and kayaking.

Tribulation

An intensive examination was undertaken of the assembled material with the objective to arrive at a just and sober comparative evaluation of the kayak/canoe debate. Now the paddling vessels are truly launched . . .

“Put-in”

As prominent Canadian naturalist Neil Evernden (1993) has pointed out, “the map is not the territory.” This compass needle affirmed my conviction that personal experience overrides all information from other sources. In the present case, I trust my finding that a canoe performs equally or, indeed, outperforms a kayak in open water. “Maps” are external and virtual worlds based on educated guesses, or at best, a series of tested hypotheses. As the philosopher of science Karl Popper (1957) wisely advised, “science must begin with myths, and with the criticism of myths.”

A major problem of industry is that, as medical researcher Servan Schreiber (2008) phrased it, “changes in lifestyle cannot be . . . patented.” This observation is especially pertinent in the present context, since *friluftsliv* is very much a lifestyle phenomenon. What, then, is industry’s solution to this profit barrier? Its response is the “persuasive communication” (Robert Tamilia, 2011) of advertising as the

tool of client shaping. Its desired socio/psychological process may be described in the following steps:

Perception → Recognition → Interest → Desire → Need → Addiction

The key to an individual's journey along this trail is, according to Canadian scholar Marshal McLuhan (1965), *repetition*. The lifestyle product is presented as an integral part of larger social purposes, and its commercial success is tied to "ad repetitions . . . quite in accord with the procedures of brainwashing." What can individuals do to protect themselves from this onslaught? Consumer psychologists Chartrand & Fitzsimons (2011) maintain that individuals in the marketplace can "defend themselves when unconscious processes can lead to negative outcomes." There is a growing literature with this purpose of equipping buyers with weapons of defence.

How does this intellectual discussion compare with my personal paddling experience? Have I done sufficient paddling in challenging environments to be certain of my position on the canoe/kayak evaluation issue? A list of the waters paddled may provide an indication. In addition to seas and large lakes, I have included mountain lakes where low water and air temperatures in combination with often rapidly changing wind conditions provide challenges comparable to big-water paddling:

Solo Sea Kayak: West coast of Vancouver Island, Princess Louisa Inlet (British Columbia), Puget Sound and San Juan Islands (Washington State), Stockholm archipelagos, south Swedish Baltic Sea archipelagos (provinces of Småland and Östergötland), Strömstad archipelago (Swedish Atlantic coast), Trondheim Fjord and Nord-Trøndelag Atlantic coast (Norway).

Double Sea Kayak: Väddö/Örskär archipelagos (Baltic Sea, north of Stockholm).

River Kayak: Gaspé coast (Quebec), north and south Stockholm archipelagos, Alta Fjord (Finnmark, Northern Norway), Trondheim Fjord and Nord-Trøndelag Atlantic coast (Norway), mountain lakes in Jämtland and Härjedalen (Sweden) and Nord-Trøndelag and Sør-Trøndelag (Norway).

Canoe: West coast of Vancouver Island; Lake Superior; Georgian Bay (Lake Huron); Gaspé coast (Quebec); Åland Baltic Sea archipelagos (Finland); Åbo Baltic Sea archipelagos (Finland); Vasa archipelago (North Baltic Sea, Finland); High Coast islands (North Baltic Sea, Sweden); Swedish Baltic Sea archipelagos Väddö – Kråkelund (ca. 350 km aerial straight distance); Sweden's three largest lakes: Vänern (5,655 sq km), Vättern (1,912 sq km), Mälaren (1,140 sq km); Trondheim Fjord (Norway); mountain lakes (Lapland, Jämtland and Härjedalen provinces in Sweden; Nord-Trøndelag and Sør-Trøndelag provinces in Norway).

Reflecting on the variety of these paddling experiences, and in particular, the vast archipelagos of the Baltic Sea, my self-assessment is that the volume of comparative data is sufficient for me to regard my evaluation of the merits of the canoe and the kayak in open waters as reliable and valid.

Kayak and Canoe in Writing and Colour Photography/Art

Although having lived and worked in Norway for many years, I am by origin Swedish, and have also spent a large part of my life in North America. My text below will span both sides of the Atlantic, and in view of my theme, this is appropriate. Canada and the Scandinavian peninsula are northern, sparsely populated regions, with lengthy coastlines and numerous lakes and rivers ideal for paddling craft. The geographical and cultural parallels are striking. My long-term memberships in Sweden's historic outdoor organizations opened doors to examining their journals for the topic at hand.

The Swedish Touring Club (STF), established 1885, is one of Sweden’s largest voluntary organizations (ca. 300,000 members), and has a marked friluftsliv profile. Its journal, *Turist*, reaches a readership far beyond its membership. A paddling content analysis of the journal from 1994 to 2003 was undertaken in two five-year segments.

The most striking change that took place over these years is the massive growth of kayak advertising in the second five-year period. From having been virtually invisible, the kayak industry began to present itself with great vigour. Was there a specific year that could be regarded as a watershed? Yes. In 2000 there were 18 kayak advertisements, as opposed to only two in 1999. In both these years *Turist* had no features on kayaking whatsoever. In 2001, however, five such features appeared (together with 11 advertisements); clearly the editors had changed their editorial policy as a consequence of industry advertising efforts.

In addition to *Turist*, I analyzed issues of the journal *Friluftsliv*, published by the

organization Friluftslivfrämjandet (established 1892, ca. 100,000 members), from 2004 to 2010. As made clear from its name, this is specifically a friluftsliv body. The content analysis of the seven-year period is shown in the table below for both journals

In *Turist* the exposure of the canoe remained modest at slightly reduced levels, while the kayak industry’s advertising eased off somewhat from the previous high level. The battle for the consumer was perhaps regarded as being “won”? The spectacular growth of free advertising through the journal’s own kayak presentations rendered industry-paid advertising less important.

The *Friluftsliv* kayak exposure was not less than extraordinary over this period. Advertisement and journal features stroked virtually synchronously at a high rate. The canoe was left far behind in the kayak’s wake. Of interest, though, is that the minimal canoe exposure was virtually identical in the two publications, while the kayak in *Friluftsliv* was given nearly three times the coverage it received in *Turist*.

Table 1: The Kayak and the Canoe in Swedish Touring Club Journal *Turist*, 1994–2003

Years	Vessel	Features	Advertisements
1994–1998 (2,392 pages)	Kayak	9	2
	Canoe	15	19
1999–2003 (2,628 pages)	Kayak	11	55
	Canoe	10	17

Table 2: Canoe and Kayak in *Turist* and Friluftslivfrämjandet’s *Friluftsliv*, 2004–2010

Journal	Vessel	Features	Advertisements
STF Journal <i>Turist</i> (3,726 pages)	Kayak	36	46
	Canoe	15	16
Journal <i>Friluftsliv</i> (2,368 pages)	Kayak	113	111
	Canoe	17	15

It should be noted that by far the majority of the items featuring the kayak in *Turist* from 1994 to 2010, and in *Friluftsliv* from 2004 to 2010 were in open-water settings, while very few such articles featured canoes. Combining the two journals from 1994 to 2010, 88 percent of the kayak presentations were open-water compared with 12 percent of canoe features, while 88 percent of canoe presentations were in river and lake settings whereas only 12 percent of kayak items were so.

The picture that emerged over these years was that the kayak has been presented as the paddling craft of choice in general, and in particular for open waters. The canoe has been portrayed as relegated to small lakes and rivers. This panorama is reinforced when viewing Friluftsrådet's national activity calendar for the 2007 summer season. The number of single, date-specific kayak events listed was 333, with 20 serial events to be added (events that recurred on given days of the week). The total kayak events were then estimated to number over 500. For those Swedes interested in canoeing, there were 16 single events on the calendar, and two serial events. The estimated canoe events totaled ca. 30. These numbers speak for themselves, and again, the kayak events were overwhelmingly open-water while the few canoe events were on sheltered lakes and serene rivers.

How, then, is this reflected at the retail level? Svima Sport AB, in the Stockholm area, is the country's largest and oldest (est. 1974) specialized paddling craft retailer. In 2011 the shop offered a spectacular choice of 59 solo sea kayak models as compared with the meager offering of four tandem canoes suitable for the big waters. Particularly noteworthy is that in the two years since 2009, the kayak model offering has nearly doubled (from 30) while that of the canoe has been reduced by one. Clearly the retail picture corroborates the journal presentations. The 2011 kayak prices range from 12,900 to 35,900 (mean = 26,324) Swedish kronor. For price-assessment, the Canadian dollar = ca. 6 Swedish kronor. The prices of the four canoes range from 13,500 to 17,900 (mean = 15,550). Essential in viewing

the cost of paddling is that most open-water kayaking is done in solo kayaks, whereas most canoeing in all types of water is performed in tandem. Thus, for two people, kayaking tends to double the number of vessels, not to mention more than double the cost. Noteworthy is that Svima offers only three double kayak models; their reputation as "divorce boats" is difficult to shake off.

What does the historical context say about the present inquiry? In my survey of the literature on the canoe in North American history, the following quotes may serve as examples of what caught my attention:

"The development of a satisfactory marine canoe came early; the Namu archeological site . . . dates back eight thousand years, and yet this camp is virtually inaccessible except by salt water." (Roberts & Shackleton, 1983).

"The Beothuk travelled in their canoes . . . also on the ocean. By sea they went as far as Funk Island . . . which lies about sixty kilometres out into the Atlantic . . ." (anthropologist Ingeborg Marshall, 1996).

"It is when the ocean meets the land that a canoe is born." (Raffan, 1999).

" . . . the recent popularity of kayaks on the Pacific coast overlooks thousands of years of aboriginal canoeing." (Grant, 2007).

"The canoe originates from the Indians in North America who paddled their craft on calm waters in conjunction with hunting." (Ericsson, 2009).

Aside from the last citation, these writers confirm the age-old characteristic of the canoe as ably challenging open waters.

The Ericsson quote is from Sweden, and is typical of the erroneous view of canoe history there and in many other parts of the world (North America included). Another Swede, Lars Fält (2004), was more accurate when he summarily wrote, "Without canoe, no Canada." Of course, the First Nation canoeists did not stop when they reached the large lakes and the oceans; they simply kept on paddling!

In Sweden the canoe did not find adherents until the 1920s, mainly due to the domination of the kayak since its introduction from Greenland via Britain in the 1860s. Paddling history could have been quite different, however, had Anders Chydenius received a more welcoming reception in the mid-eighteenth century. He brought the birchbark canoe to Finland (then part of Sweden), but his mission to convince the public of the merits of the craft was met with derision despite Chydenius's respected position in society at large. Canoe name-calling made its debut with "Barkboat-Anders" being hurled at Chydenius. Nevertheless, this pioneer made his mark in canoe history by writing at the University of Uppsala what may well have been the first scholarly treatise on the canoe.

The redemption of the canoe was a long time coming and the epochal event has been described by Billy Joelsson (1982): "The canoe's excellence as a tripping vessel was made evident to the Swedes . . . in 1923 by the English canoe pair, C.G. Anderson and his wife, who paddled from Vänern to Stockholm, crossing both Vänern and Vättern in difficult weather."

It should be added that when the Andersons reached the Baltic Sea they had well over 100 km of saltwater paddling before they would reach the more sheltered waters of Stockholm. This journey aroused considerable public attention and generated desire to try this craft. The kayak culture mobilized its opposition and the '20s and '30s were characterized by epithet attacks on the canoe such as "Bathtub" (in Nilsson & Ax, 1987), "Sunday toy" (Svartengren, 1927), "Columbi egg?", referring to an apparently insoluble, though actually simple, problem (Kantotisten journal, 1930's), "Fairweather boat" (in Joelsson, 1982), "Ugly duckling" (in Nilsson & Ax, 1987), and "Wood chopping" in relation to paddling technique (in Joelsson, 1982).

Advertising, whether free and negative, as in the above, or paid and positive, as in what the paddling industry inserts into journals, finds its framework within the Thomas

theorem (1928): "If we define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Words and pictures can become powerful forces for behaviour-shaping if they are regarded as credible, notwithstanding that the map provided is not the territory. The antidote? Personal comparative testing.

How does the kayak history compare? As with canoeing history, there is much mythology. Kayaks, like canoes, vary greatly as Dan Ruuska (1984) pointed out: "The Greenland Eskimo kayaks . . . were used primarily in protected waters. . . . True stormy water kayaks were used by the Western Alaska Eskimos. . . . They were more seaworthy, safer, drier riding, and the most well designed of all the Eskimo kayaks."

The Swedish Canoe Federation (2002), however, restricted itself to commenting on the Greenland kayak, and its views were not consonant with Ruuska. This was not unexpected, since the kayak in Europe was largely defined by the British infatuation with kayaking in relatively nearby Greenland: "The kayak was for many hundreds of years a tool for the eskimoese' hunting of seal and other animals on an unprotected, stormy and iccold sea around Greenland and the North Pole." (*sic.*)

But was the kayak really worth emulating for recreational paddling south of the Arctic? Steve Grant (2008) offers another perspective: "Even the Inuit, credited with inventing the kayak for hunting in the Arctic, also used open umiaks for transportation."

And what type of craft was the umiak? It was very much like a canoe, open deck and all. Moreover, the Inuit, practical as they are, were also quite ready to adopt the southern canoe when brought north by Caucasians.

In Sweden the kayak was an unchallenged innovation, promoted astutely from the mid-1860s, as described by Carl Smith (1892): "The modern tripping-canoe, which about 25 years ago was introduced to the civilized world by the Scot, John MacGregor, can be said to originate from the Eskimo kayak."

More than a century later, respected friluftsliv scholar Klas Sandell (1999) wrote: “The seakayak wave from particularly Great Britain (again!) still rolls onto the shores. With Derek Hutchinson’s book ‘Sea Canoeing’ from 1976 as an important milestone, the new narrower and Greenland-inspired fiberglass kayaks (ca. 5.5 x 0.55 m) with small cockpits and waterproof bulkheads made their commercial victory parade in Sweden.”

“Canoeing” terminology, it should be noted, was and is broadly used in many parts of Europe as an omnibus term for all paddling vessels. The canoe as we know it in Canada is still today called a “Canadian” in Sweden in order to distinguish it from the kayak.

Dan Ruuska (1984), legendary kayak builder in the Seattle area, is one of the few in the kayak industry who has articulated the role of marketing and advertising in the growth of sea kayaking: “The Eskimo kayak had to be good — otherwise the Eskimo would not have survived. Modern kayaks don’t have to be designed as well — promotion and salesmanship can sell anything.”

And how has this been done? In Ruuska’s eyes (1984) it was a British orchestration: “The British sea kayak style has become THE style to imitate, not because [of] its merits, but because of its promotion. Popular sea kayak books on the market are written by the British. Sea kayak symposiums have been sponsored by businesses involved with the sale of British sea kayaks. And, of course, keynote symposium speakers have been British, too.”

So far, much of the text here has dealt with broad paddling-craft issues. What about more specific characteristics?

Stability: The Swedish national newspaper *Expressen* (1996) featured an article by two inexperienced paddlers who had headed out into the Baltic Sea from Stockholm: “. . . we paddle sea kayaks, and we wobble precariously . . . I had visualized a safe and stable craft. Perhaps like a rowboat or at least in the direction of a canoe.”

Another comment and question by Dan Ruuska (1984) is pertinent in this regard: “We don’t see the point of narrow tippy kayaks for ocean touring. Do you?”

Width is a key factor in stability (Winters, 2001). Sandell (1999) indicated above that the British kayak wave rising in the late 1970s had narrower crafts (ca. 55 cm) than those found in Sweden prior to this. The 2011 Svima shop offerings referred to above had a mean width of 54.4 cm with the widest at 59 cm. Clearly the kayaks used in Sweden (internationally, a broader choice is available) have retained a very narrow design (the narrowest listed was 45 cm!). How does this compare with tripping canoes? The four appropriate Svima models had a mean width of 87.8 cm (range: 85–91.5 cm) — a spectacular difference from the kayaks. Clearly the wobbly Stockholm archipelago paddlers would have felt more stable in a canoe. And how do Ruuska’s Alaska-inspired kayaks measure up in this regard? His Polaris II sea kayak is 65 cm wide — not canoe-width, but more than 10 cm wider than the mean of Svima kayaks. Even the Ruuska river kayak I have used at sea was 61 cm, wider than the widest Svima sea kayak.

Skill: Hilding Svartengren ruminated about the nature of canoe paddling back in 1927: “No, ‘rowing’ like in a kayak . . . forces one into a static body position. Canoe paddling provides more variation. If you change sides every half hour and give yourself a 5 minute break every hour, then you can happily take an 8-hour workday at the paddle without any muscle problems.”

I can vouch for his seemingly exaggerated claims for the kindness of canoe paddling. My setting out on a long canoe trip without any paddling since the previous summer evokes no hardships. Really! And is kayaking that different? It certainly is: The locked-in body position and the monotony of the paddling movement lead fairly quickly to substantial stress and fatigue.

With rudders being almost legion in today’s sea kayaks, paddling skill development as such is hampered, as Ruuska (1987) asserts:

“When you’re ruddering, your feet move back and forth and your knees move up and down. When you’re not ruddering there are no solid footrests to keep your knees up in the kneebraces. But, you NEED to brace your feet and knees against something solid, otherwise you can’t KAYAK.”

What, then, happened after the kayak/canoe strife of the prewar era in Sweden? The canoe grew steadily more popular, and remained so into the 1980s. Possibly the impetus for the “Canoe Wave” (as the national federation eventually called its canoe promotion program), found its source in the Second World War when coastal paddling was not so enticing, while inland paddling was a safer alternative. This may well be an important root for the inland definition of the canoe in the Nordic region.

What insights, then, can the literature provide on the issue of actual comparisons of the kayak and the canoe? Friluftsrämjandet takes the challenge in 2006 and writes that “After the canoe wave of the 80’s, now it is the kayak-wave that matters. But the canoe still lives, though it is hardly noted in the kayak turbulence. A perfect vessel for our inland waters.”

Yes, the canoe is there, but barely. Not so in the United States. The Outdoor Foundation

observed that in 2008, 7.8 million Americans participated in kayaking while as many as 9.9 million were canoeing. So, on the other side of the Atlantic, the canoe still dominates, with approximately 27 percent more participants. What is the situation in Canada?

Some short quotes from Swedish literature illustrate the culture clash over the vessels:

Especially noteworthy here is the 2002 *Turist* canoe quote, where it is to be wondered why the canoe is recommended for “turbulent rapids” but not for waves and currents at sea?

Two other citations with “sins of omission” are presented here:

“We had from before no experience of canoes, which are not suited for the Karlshamn archipelago where we roam, and minimally out on the open sea.” (Bengtsson, 1946)

Bengtsson wrote here of a journey partially in the southernmost Swedish Baltic Sea archipelago. No mention whatever is made concerning encountering any paddling problems in the Baltic section!

“A canoe does not tolerate wind or heavier

Table 3: Assessments of Canoe versus Kayak in Swedish Writings

Canoe	Kayak
“Could be good enough for a pond, but on the real waters they are simply dangerous.” (Orre, 1930)	“ . . . for archipelago use.” (Sandberg, 1979) “ . . . for outer areas: here the kayak is the perfect vessel (Lönn, 1993)
“ . . . should be banned.” (Pseudonym “T”, 1934)	“ . . . easier to paddle and better equipped to cope with wind and waves.” (<i>Turist</i> , 1998)
“ . . . can be used in the archipelago in good weather and in protected areas.” (Sandberg, 1979)	“ . . . wholly unique freedom of movement.” (Ostkustkajak.se)
“ . . . tolerates wind and waves more poorly; is not suitable for outer areas.” (Lönn, 1993)	“ . . . comes closest to nature.” (Sjögren, 2007)
“The canoe is a craft for . . . lakes, streams and turbulent rapids.” (<i>Turist</i> , 2002)	“ . . . ideal for nature studies.” (SvD accent, 2011)

seas particularly well. It cannot be paddled speedily and is hardly suited out in the archipelago rim. . . .” (Alexis, 2006).

On the opening, facing page of the Alexis article is a photo of a solo canoeist stroking in the Småland archipelago of the Baltic Sea. No comment is offered on this paradox.

Wind: A common point of discussion in the canoe/kayak comparison is vulnerability to wind. The judgment of STF’s Jan Lönn (1993) exemplifies a frequently expressed view: “The canoe is sensitive to wind due to the heightened bow and stern.”

Swedish wilderness survival expert Lars Fält (2004), on a trip in Ontario’s Northwoods, appears to be of another opinion: “We rented a canoe of Canadian make, Souris Canoes, that was both light and stable, even in very strong sidewinds.”

In fact, tripping canoes do not have marked bow and stern upswings, whereas many sea kayaks do, negating their supposed streamlining from all wind directions. This kayak feature is not traditionally common, but seems to have resulted from the design modification enabling launching a kayak off steep British shorelines while sitting aboard.

Seaworthiness: In this criterion, so critical for big-water paddling, the kayak appears at first hand to be clearly superior. Craig Zimmerman (1996), in his writing on Lake Superior travel, noted as follows: “Remember a canoe cannot ride a breaking wave. If waves are crashing, watch calmly from shore.”

Prominent Canadian canoe writer James Raffan (1999) appears to differ, however: “In practiced hands a canoe can negotiate stormy seas and cranky whitewater with ease, with grace if it is done right.”

Swedish texts confirm this; the experience of Olof Thaning (1947), legendary 27-year editor of the STF Yearbook, offers an illustration: “It stormed on Lake Femund. . . . Never did I believe that canoes were such capable craft. Like corks they floated softly and pliantly over meter-and-a-half waves.”

Femund is Norway’s third largest lake (201 sq km), and I can personally substantiate the turbulence induced by its mountain setting.

A rarely mentioned factor in the kayak’s seaworthiness is its nearly ubiquitous rudder. Having it means that the kayaker never learns to paddle, as Ruuska (1987) noted above. Attempting to rudder-steer leads to a loss of firm body contact with the vessel, without which the kayak cannot be controlled properly. Moreover, the two paddlers described above who hesitantly headed out into the Baltic from Stockholm (Expressen, 1996), complained that despite rudders “. . . the kayaks have a turning radius like an archipelago ferry.”

This is understandable when taking into account the length of vessel waterline in conjunction with a solo paddler sitting in the vicinity of the middle. A tandem canoe, on the other hand, has the two paddlers placed close to bow and stern. Peter Alexis (2006) writes of the result: “Quick turn: Georg and Magnus paddle in separate directions each on their own side of the canoe. The result is that the canoe turns on a dime.”

It goes without saying that the capacity to make rapid directional changes is *sine qua non* in the sphere of seaworthiness.

Safety: This dimension is closely related to seaworthiness. There are, however, additional considerations to be taken. Matt Broze (1997), another prominent Seattle kayak builder and writer, cautions as follows: “Sea kayaking is so easy to learn that anyone with a few minutes’ practice can unknowingly paddle into a hazardous predicament.”

Why might they “unknowingly paddle”? Ruuska (1985) suggested that the industry deludes them: “Unlike other outdoor sports where hazards are obvious . . . sea kayaking doesn’t look the least bit dangerous, especially in promotional photos.”

Steve Grant (2008) directs us to the crucial factor of stability: “And while inattention can easily result in a capsizing in a single kayak, this is much less likely in a canoe.”

In addition, Grant leads the reader yet further into the canoe safety quest: “We approach capsizing as backcountry skiers regard avalanches. The consequences of either are so serious that virtually all the effort has to go into avoidance.”

A major part of avoiding capsizing is the skill development, attained through practice, that is so necessary for water travel safety. Because good canoe paddling is the result of long-term, focused practice, this is a major reason why big-water canoeing can be said to be safe. It is simply very unlikely that a canoeist, without well established skills, can manoeuvre into hazardous conditions.

Rain/Spray: A less central, comfort-oriented variable in the vessel debate is the degree of protection from moisture. Here the jury seems unopposed in favour of the kayak. The Swedish Canoe Federation (2002) phrased it as follows: “Well down in the kayak, and with the sprayskirt on, one sits delightfully dry and comfortable for hours, well protected from cold wind, rain and breaking waves.”

On the other hand, the Magnusson (Alexis, 2006) brothers were not so convinced: “In a canoe...there is less splash and spray, so a spraycover is not needed. In this way one can sit and enjoy without needing to sweat under a tight synthetic hood.”

Of special interest is the Magnussons’ final phrase. My personal experience confirms it; the spray skirt locks in perspiration as well as other moisture brought into the vessel when entering the kayak. Rest stops and even overnights rarely offer enough opportunity for the craft interior to completely dry out.

Whether in a decked or an open vessel, the paddler needs to be dressed to cope with moisture, so here there is no difference. Concerning baggage, this also needs to be waterproofed regardless of deck/no deck. After all, in the kayak the load needs to be taken out from time to time, particularly when making/breaking camp, so here again, waterproofing against rain is needed

regardless of vessel type. And is water-protection a big issue today? The answer is clearly “no”; waterproof clothing and packs are widely available.

Flexibility: In terms of multi-functionality, it is difficult to compete with the canoe. The craft is a sterling example of, as Buckminster Fuller puts it, “Doing more with less.” The canoe is simplicity itself, while the kayak has increasingly been burdened with an assortment of apparatuses, much of it attached externally since internal space is limited.

For the Magnusson brothers, “it is simply freer to paddle a canoe. The packs can just be placed in the middle of the canoe” (Alexis, 2006). Kayak packing and unpacking, on the other hand, are projects.

The Bengt Bengtsson trip (1946) referred to earlier is of interest for the present topic in that it is the only writing I have located so far that addresses both canoe and kayak in operation on a longer journey: “the kayak did not load very much, while the canoe could in that event compete with an Italian donkey.”

Finally, since sea kayaks are a specific category of kayaks, are there also specifically designed “sea canoes”? Generally, this latter term finds no resonance. The explanation may be found in the versatility of the canoe. Steve Grant (2008) reflects in the following way: “People use all sorts of canoes on the ocean. . . . Not having exactly the right design is no reason to stay home.”

Personal experience confirms this. My wife and I have paddled many makes, models, and lengths of canoes, made from a variety of materials, in the big waters, and always with pleasure. The basic design is so sound that it has never failed us.

Speed: It is remarkable that speed should come up in any form of friluftsliv discussion. Though the term is often found in kayak advertising, it rarely finds its way into canoe promotion. Dan Ruuska (1984) waxes perplexed over his kayak culture when he

quoted a client: “Top speed is the LEAST important consideration. . . . I didn’t buy a kayak to go fast. . . . If I wanted to go fast over water I’d bicycle fast over a floating bridge!”

But, given that there may be some speed-loving recreational paddlers, what of the quite uncontested claim of the kayak’s speed edge over the canoe? Steve Grant (2008) has pondered and researched the question. His findings: “Will the canoeist suffer a speed penalty? Basically, no. A modern tandem tripping canoe actually is faster than a single sea kayak. A double sea kayak is faster, but not over marathon distances.”

Be that as it may, the last word here on this topic goes to Bengt Ohrelius (1972): “Speed — just a doubtful joy: To travel quickly in the archipelago just for entertainment appears in some way wrong and in opposition to the laws of nature. One shall not be in a hurry in paradise.”

“Take-out”

Return

The words of William James (1981) sum-up the consequences of the striving embodied in a quest: “. . . there are lessons learned through the trials of afar that are brought back home for the betterment of all.”

This journey has uncovered contradictions, disjunctions, and paradoxes. Proposals and hypotheses have often been found to have been presented as facts. Empirical evidence is glaring in its omission.

I have met vigorous resistance in many quarters over my elucidation of the merits of the canoe vis-à-vis the kayak:

- “If it were true, we would know about it.”
- “The experts do not agree.”
- “People do not want to change.”
- “You are insane!”

However, Susanne Hoffman of the Swedish Touring Club (2010), in a lucid

communication may be right on the mark: “. . . the following thesis (no truths but just reflections): We Swedes are quick to pick up everything, and if many say that ‘kayak, that’s the thing’ then we jump. Without discernment! We want to test our limits, we want to be first, and many want to be adventurers like Ola, Göran, and Renata.” (Ola Skinnarmo, Göran Kropp, and Renata Chlumska are renowned Swedish adventurers/explorers.)

Yes, but is there any strategy that can protect us from what is, in essence, a collective behaviour tsunami, regardless of whatever good intentions may drive it? Of course there is. It rests on the personal examination of all claims made for friluftsliv equipment, activities and policies. In this way contributions are made to ensure that friluftsliv and its advocates are in charge of their own destiny.

This cannot be more vividly expressed than in the words of philosopher and dissident Victor Serge: “to always think yourself and not rely on either authority or majority.” Surely this wisdom should extend to all realms of life.

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Nils Vikander is a scholar of friluftsliv and nature sports who now looks forward to more doing and less reading/speaking/writing about it all! This article is based on his opening keynote at the 2011 COEO conference and was crafted at his Trondheim fjord basecamp.

