

Why we paddle and make decisions

Heading out on to the water can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience with a huge range of benefits for the paddler. Identifying why we choose to paddle and what we gain from it can help us to understand our motivations and ultimately help with our decisions on and off the water.

Your motivations

What is it that draws you towards getting on the water? Is it for adventure? For a personal challenge? To relax? To enjoy nature? To be with other people? Maybe it's a combination of all of these or even something completely different and unique to you?

For some paddlers they may not even fully know or understand why they enjoy being on the water, but they simply know that they belong there and that it is something that they feel compelled to do. Why not take a moment to consider your favourite moments on the water and then ask yourself what makes them so special. Was it the location? The people you were with? The challenge of the water? Or maybe that you felt your skill level on that occasion was particularly high?

There may well be common themes that thread between the special experiences as well as certain aspects that stand out as being unique. Some of these rewards could be intrinsic, such as the feeling you get when you roll a kayak, sail a canoe or catch a wave on a SUP and some may be extrinsic such as achieving a finisher's medal in a paddling challenge or being cheered on in a competition. A mix of these rewards is often present on the water and they can keep paddlers engaged in the sport for a lifetime with many agreeing that there simply isn't a better reward than the feeling you get when you paddle your boat or board well!



Balancing our motivations and the decisions we make

There is a direct connection between our motivations for paddling and the decisions that we make when we get on the water. In many situations we may choose to compromise on our motivations, for the sake of making a safer decision or in the interest of others in a group. We may also find that we could be in a position where we may wish to make a decision which is of higher challenge or risk, but which successfully satisfies our personal motivations. In both of these instances, being aware of the balance between these two aspects of our paddling is important as an imbalance could lead us to a high risk situation or to become frustrated. We would often find that our most enjoyable and successful paddling experiences are when our motivations and our decisions are clearly aligned.



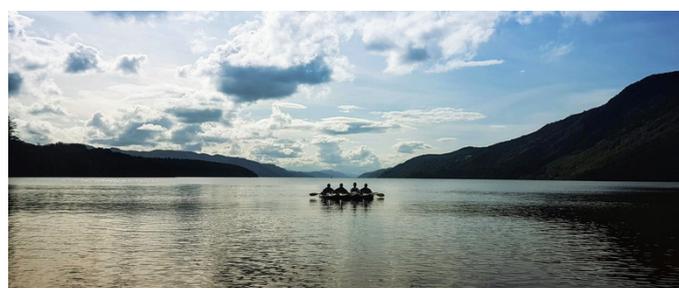
"When I'm on a paddling holiday, I'm always up one more run, I just really want to get the most out of my time on the water. However, keeping going when I probably should have stopped for the day because I was tired has led me into a tricky situation on the river on more than one occasion!"

Chris Brain



What if our motivation has faded?

Whilst our motivations may change and develop over time, for many people their earliest motivations will still remain long into their paddling career. If you find that you need to reignite your passion for paddlesport, you may wish to reflect on what attracted you to paddling in the first place. If you can use those motivations to shape your future decisions on where you might go and what you might do, you may find renewed enthusiasm for the sport and a desire to get back on the water more regularly. Alternatively, if it is a change that you seek you could find that trying a new discipline, exploring new places, or paddling with different people will be helpful. The great thing about paddlesport is that there is always something new to try and somewhere different to go!



Your next paddle

To help you best prepare the next time you want to get out on the water, ask yourself the following questions:

What do I want to get out of the paddle today?

Take time to consider the level of challenge that you want to experience during the day. It is completely normal to sometimes want an easier paddle as pushing your skills regularly can be very tiring and you may need time to consolidate your experience.

Example - A sea paddler who is normally motivated for challenging surf and advanced sea states may, at times, wish for a more sociable and gentle tour with a club or friends.

Where am I planning on going and is this the right location?

Whilst you may well be motivated to paddle in a particular location, it may well be that the duration on the water or the distance you need to cover is simply too much to be achieved. Changing or adapting your plans may be the right way to balance your motivations and decisions.

Example - Due to recent rainfall, a canoeist who is motivated for a white water journey may choose to head to some open water instead as the river levels may be too much for their skills and experience.

Who am I going with and how will that affect the paddle?

How motivated you are to paddle with the people that you are with will affect your decisions. Often a group has great success when the individuals enjoy paddling with each other. If everyone's motivations are well aligned, there can be a great feeling on the water. Remember to share your motivations with others and be open about what you would like to do, as this can help to manage the expectations of everyone involved.

Example - A SUP paddler who is typically motivated to paddle longer distances at a faster pace, may recognise that this would separate them from the group and choose to adapt their paddling to stay more connected to the group.



Taking ownership and responsibility of your paddling

Even a less experienced paddler can take ownership of their own paddling decisions and creating a culture of everyone doing this can be a great attribute to have in a group. Understanding that your own motivations and decisions can have a direct impact on the others around you is very important, and recognising when these motivations may not be aligned with the others around you can help to avoid issues happening on the water.

If we haven't been on the water for some time, our skills can fade and we might find that they are not as sharp as we remember them being. Whilst we may have been able to paddle at a certain level, perform specific skills or feel comfortable in a certain environment, it is actually very normal that our personal ability changes over time to a point where we might not feel as good as we once were. Key factors can affect our skills, such as the frequency of our paddling, how often we experience this level of environment and also our physical condition. It can sometimes be difficult to acknowledge that our skills may not be what they once were and, whilst it is possible to regain them over time, recognising this and adapting your plans accordingly is a very responsible action as a paddler.

As many paddlers choose to work with a coach to develop their skills, it can be really helpful for both the coach and the paddler to consider the motivations they have. Coaches will be working to understand what motivates you and to incorporate this into your coaching session. Leaders will also be adapting their approach to help meet your needs and to be able to tailor the trip towards the outcome that you want. If you share your motivations with your coach or leader, you will be able to maximise your time on the water and to gain the most from the experience.

"One of the things I love about paddling, and keeps me going back time and time again, has been the opportunity to paddle with people and groups who consistently support you to progress as well as just enjoy being on the water. From the cheers when you achieve something you were scared about, to the general encouragement and fun. As well as coaches who empower you to believe you can do so much more than you think you can."

Lisa Dickinson



What affects our paddling performance?

There are a wide range of contributing factors that can impact our performance on the water and can also affect our motivations and decisions for paddling. For some people, these areas could easily be overlooked as they may not feel as important as our technical paddling skills, but they should certainly be considered when we take a holistic approach to understanding our performance.

Nutrition and Hydration

All paddlers will have different requirements for nutrition and hydration when they are on the water. This will differ depending on whether you are planning on paddling for long distances, short distances, racing, touring or spending an hour out on a lake, but it is something that every paddler can consider in their preparation.

- Have you had enough to eat before you paddle?
- What was the quality of the food you have eaten recently?
- What food will you take with you on the paddle and will this sustain your energy levels?
- What will you eat when you get off the water? Will this food help your recovery?
- Are you suitably hydrated before you start the paddle?
- How will you stay hydrated whilst you paddle?
- Have you considered what you are drinking and will this aid your performance/recovery?
- It is certainly not advisable to paddle under the influence of alcohol.

For many paddlers, considering and adapting their nutrition and hydration could be the key to feeling better before, during and after their time on the water, and making small changes could lead to a noticeable improvement on their performance.



Your physical and mental wellbeing

Our overall physical health is an important contributing factor to our performance when we paddle and considering your strengths, weaknesses and limitations will help you to evaluate if you are ready for your intended goal. Reflecting on the following questions will be helpful to consider:

- What does my overall fitness feel like currently?
- How strong do I feel right now?
- What is my cardiovascular fitness like?
- How flexible am I?
- Has my weight changed? Will it affect my performance? Is it connected to my fitness levels?
- How much have I been paddling recently? Will this affect what I am capable of?
- Am I carrying any injuries?
- Do I have any medical conditions that could affect my performance?

When we consider how we are feeling, we can think of this as a scale which takes into account different factors which affect us rather than giving a simple "ok or not ok" answer to the question. Whilst we may feel "ok", are we actually at our best, or are there certain things which are affecting our performance? If we don't feel at our best, what is it that is affecting us and how will this change how we are on the water? It is important to recognise that it is perfectly normal to not feel at your best all the time and there may be things that are affecting how we feel in the short term, but also things that affect how we feel in the long term too.

- How has your sleep been recently?
- Are you feeling well rested and ready for the paddle?
- Are you experiencing stress, anxiety, nerves or excitement about getting on the water?
- How prepared are you for the day? Have you been rushing around to get ready, or are you well organised?
- Is anything else happening in your life right now that could be affecting how you feel?

One of the great things about paddling is that it can have a significant effect on how we are feeling and the benefits of a great experience on the water can have a long term, positive impact. Contemplating your current mental and emotional wellbeing and how this will affect your decisions and performance will be of great benefit to yourself and those you paddle with.

"I'm naturally a very competitive person, for me, there's no better feeling than winning a race and there are three important factors to my training and racing. Firstly, I remind myself how each session relates to that goal and keep in mind that my competitors are also putting in the hard hours. The second factor is being connected to a large training group, who all have similar paddling related goals. There is a really positive attitude, everyone wants the training group to be successful and as such we hold each other accountable for the training we do, the early mornings are a lot easier when you've got a group of people to meet. Finally I make sure my nutrition and hydration are the best they can be, before, during and after any paddling that I do."

James Russell



Group motivations

Enjoying time on the water with other people is a key motivational factor for many paddlers and collectively a group can often achieve fantastic things and offer experiences that would have otherwise not been possible.

Recognising that a group may have its own goals and that these may, or may not, align with your own motivations is an important consideration when you are choosing who to paddle with.

- Do you know what the group collectively wants to achieve from the paddle?
- Who has set this goal and have you contributed your thoughts to it?
- Do these motivations align with yours and what will you do if they don't?
- Is the group capable of achieving this goal and how do you know?

Example - A group of SUP paddlers meet in the morning and decide collectively that they want to travel the length of Windermere. For one paddler, this is much further than they have paddled in one go and they hadn't really intended to go out for that long or that far. They were hoping for a much more gentle trip out and haven't really brought enough food and water for the day.

In this instance, the goals of the group are not aligned with this individual and they should raise this with the group.



Transformational groups

So many paddling groups and clubs take an inspiring and transformational approach to being on the water and are willing to listen to its group members, change plans, adapt their goals and support and encourage everyone involved. This is what keeps paddlers engaged with the group for a long period of time and the feeling of being involved with a group like this is so rewarding.

As a group, see if you can aim to incorporate the following qualities into your next trip out on the water:

- Ask the group members what they want to get out of the paddle;
- Encourage people to speak up if they are not happy or if they want to share their opinion;
- Involve the whole team in the decision making, even new paddlers can contribute their thoughts;
- Recognise that success may be seen differently by each paddler and value those achievements when they occur;
- Aim to view anything that doesn't quite go to plan as an opportunity for improvement next time rather than a failure;
- Encourage reflection with group members during and after your paddling;
- Remember that things happen off the water that are also a large part of the paddling experience, aim for those to be positive and empowering moments too.

How to be a great group member

As a paddler, it is essential that you consider the impact that you can have on a group and that you also have the responsibility to be an important part of the team. In your group aim to:

- Contribute to discussions, planning and reflections, even if you are new to paddling or the environment;
- Ask questions;
- Speak up when you don't feel confident in a decision;
- Try to understand the motivations and needs of the others around you (they may be different to your own);
- Look for opportunities to give support and encouragement to those around you, even people who may be more experienced.

Effective teamwork (both on and off the water) is important for a successful paddling trip. We should all aim to share responsibility and contribute to decisions. Taking ownership helps to create a culture of empowered and independent paddlers who make informed choices and consider their decisions.



"I love being out on the water and the sense of freedom that it gives me. Paddling with others can make it so much more special as we can have that shared experience together. A strong bond can be formed when paddling with others, creating a sense of solidarity; they can support and empower you in challenging environments and help keep you safe. I think it's always important to understand what motivates your paddling buddies by sharing your expectations for the day, so you can all be on the same page and have a fab time together."

Sarah Keights



Other helpful resources

There are many more resources which may be helpful to you, available at the British Canoeing Awarding Body Website

[Safety Resources](#)

[Leadership & Raft Guide Resources](#)

[Digital Library](#)