



RULES OF THE SEA

Megan Pryke takes us through a very useful summary of some of the “Rules of the Sea” for sea kayakers. Images by Megan unless marked.

The golden rule for boaters is to avoid a collision, thus the existence of International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (Colregs). Kayaks are passive waterway users without the grunt of motors or power generated by a massive sail. Instinctively we understand that large and more powerful boats can be a hazard and common sense does a great job at guiding us. Although we do not need a boating licence, at times an understanding of some of the maritime rules can help to predict how larger boats behave, and to get along with the many other waterway users. The key things are to have clear intentions, keep a lookout and understand visibility issues.

Where are you? Visibility Issues

Sea kayaks are low and narrow. We are a speck compared to many boats and often just not visible. Just because you can see a larger boat does not mean the boat’s skipper can see you. If you cannot see a friendly, human face, it is best to assume as a kayaker that you are invisible. Rain, sun-glare, fog, yachting sails and other factors

can further reduce visibility. Bright colours, a flag, or some reflective tape may assist other skippers in seeing you or your kayak. A group of kayakers is more likely to be seen so in busy waterways keep together. Use appropriate lights at night so you can be seen and consider having a spare torch available in case of an unexpected late return.

For larger boats, the give way rule for two oncoming vessels is to pass to the right (or port to port). An excellent way to communicate your intentions to an oncoming boat is to turn to the right. When side on your kayak will be more visible, and by heading right, you indicate you understand the boating rules. Monitor motorised boats and yachts as they travel at different speeds to a paddler, cannot turn or stop quickly and the skipper may not see you. Be aware of yellow markers set up for yacht races, or pilot and tug boats heralding the arrival of a larger ship in or out of port.

All rules are trumped by doing whatever it takes to avoid a collision. In a worse case scenario, getting attention by moving your paddle may help; or for a last ditch effort maybe use a flare, frantic waving and whistles or VHF communication.

Boating channels are not a good place to practice skills. As kayakers with a shallow draft, we have

options in regards to choice of where to be compared to many larger boats.

When crossing a boating channel think of it as a road. Considerations for where to cross a channel include crossing at a narrow section and in the visibility of boating traffic. Channel markers provide a visual reference for a regroup place and a clearer channel boundary. Cross channels as a group, aiming to cross behind larger vessels and do not dilly-dally. Kayakers trickling across a boating channel can be annoying for the skippers of less responsive, larger boats.

In busy ports monitor VHF channel communications and be aware of additional restrictions that may apply for kayakers. Often these limitations are communicated by signs or boating markers. When paddling with less experienced paddlers, consider allowing having enough time for the group to cross considering time needed if a paddler capsizes. The group can only travel as fast as the slowest paddler.

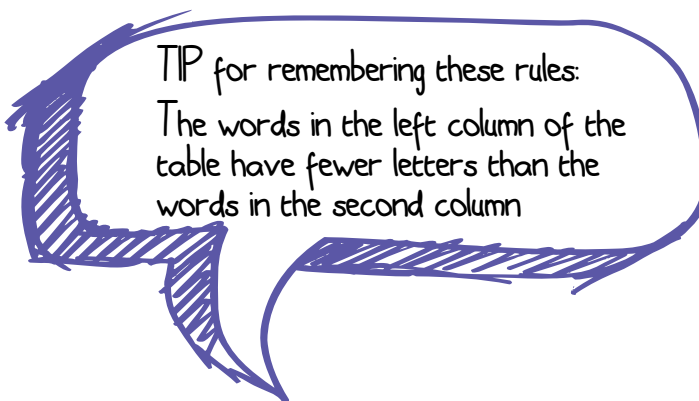
Larger boats use horns to signal intentions. One short blast indicates an intention to turn to starboard (right) and two short blasts turning to port (left). Three blasts are stopping or reversing, and five or more short blasts means “I am unsure of your intentions”.

Identifying Boating Channels: Lateral Markers

Lateral markers are the most common boating markers, being the red and green ones, indicating the left and right side of a designated route. Australia is part of region A, the American continents part of region B.

Often there is only one marker or one type of marker present. Thus you may need to identify channel markers in isolation. If you are red - green colour blind the good news is that lateral markers usually have unique shapes being cans and cones. Larger markers are used for major channels such as those marking the way into shipping ports. See the table for an explanation of the rules.

As sea kayakers we may not need to be inside the boating channel, however, occasionally, due to topographical or other reasons, paddling inside a boating channel is the better option for us. Do not impede a vessel that has to use a boating channel. RMS recommend that kayakers keep to the starboard side (i.e. right side) of a boating channel if you have to use one and are travelling in the same direction of the larger boats. It could also be a good idea for kayakers to be in single file. Remember that large vessels can be moving faster than they appear and cannot easily turn so give them plenty of room.



Left	Right	When on a boat looking towards its bow, the left side of the boat (or sea kayak) is known as port, and the right side is known as starboard.
Red	Green	Relates to the colour of lateral markers and the flashing lights at night. Also the colour of the left and right lights on larger boats.
Port	Starboard	Terms used for red and green lateral markers.
Cans	Cones	Relates to the shape of lateral markers.

This rhyming sayings apply for region A for larger boats that have port and starboard lights:

- Green to Green when going upstream
- Green to Red when seas ahead

Note that for NSW coastal estuaries that the flow is usually associated with tidal current rather than a stream. However, up harbour or into port does not rhyme as well as upstream. In some places you need a map to determine which direction is up or downstream especially on inland lakes.



Cardinal Markers

There are four markers that indicate that deep or safe water is located in the quadrant to the north, east, south or west of the marker. In areas that can be impacted by swell and seas, sea kayakers may need to heed the cardinal marker, as a submerged object may create unexpected, breaking waves when a wave set arrives. Cardinal markers use two black cones usually on top of a black and yellow coloured pole and a white light with a particular flashing sequence for night navigation.

NORTH

Two cones point up
Pole: Black top, Yellow bottom
Continuous flash

EAST

Top cone up, bottom cone down
Pole: black mid section (yellow top and bottom)
Three flashes

SOUTH

Both cones pointing down
Pole: yellow top, black bottom
Six flashes and one long flash

WEST

Cones are pointing at each other.
Pole: yellow mid section (black top and bottom)
Nine flashes

Think of a clock face, as this helps to remember the white light flashing sequence. Continuous light = 12 = North, 3 flashes = East = 3 o'clock, 6 flashes = South = 6 o'clock et cetera.



An isolated danger marker near South Head in Sydney Harbour (hence the surf) (Image - Rob Mercer)

The cones for North and South cardinal markers point up and down respectively. 'E'ast is 'E'gg shaped, and 'W' is 'W'ine glass shaped.

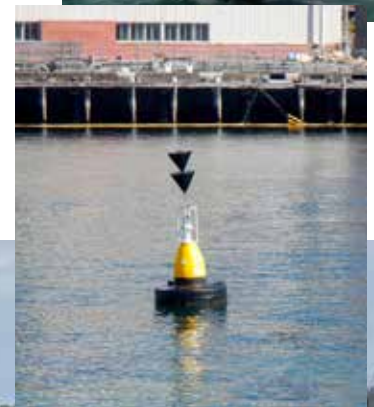
Other markers

Special markers are yellow, and at night they have a yellow flashing light. They can be a tide gauge marker, a swimmers area buoy or other buoy indicating a restricted or special area. These yellow markers can also act like lateral markers, and when they do so they may be can or cone in shape.

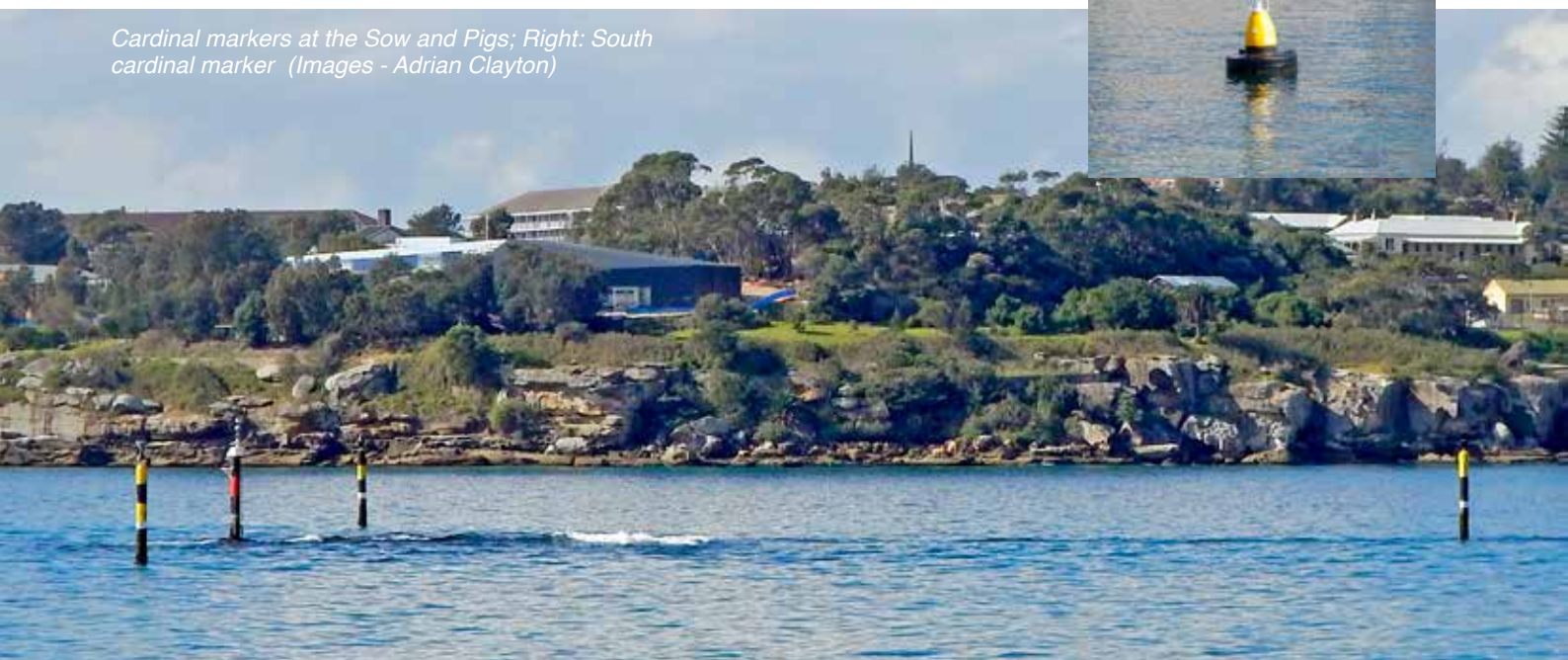
Isolated Danger Markers are like cardinal markers, your need to avoid one depends on local knowledge and conditions. If you don't have local knowledge, avoid them. There are a few Safe Water Marks in Sydney harbour that are usually a good place for kayaking regroups.



Left: Sanctuary zone marker; Right: Lateral marker (Image - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lateral_mark#Region_A)



Cardinal markers at the Sow and Pigs; Right: South cardinal marker (Images - Adrian Clayton)





Ferries and ships

Major Ports, ferry terminals and naval bases often have additional restrictions associated with regulating commercial traffic and keeping busy waterways safe. You must not impede ship or ferry traffic.

Ferries in general, particularly the public transport ferries around Sydney's waterways, have the right of way along the set routes and timetables. All ferries have a yellow flashing light when operating. For cable ferries it is more obvious that the boating channel is closed, passing behind has the additional hazard of submerged cables. The exact route of a ferry can vary with conditions; for example, the Manly ferry will swing wider when there is significant swell impacting the harbour verges.

Look out for ferries arriving and departing and give way. As with all larger boats, aim to pass ferries behind the stern. Ferries and ships should give three horn blasts when heading astern as they leave a wharf, however some ferries have forward engines thus do not need to reverse out. Be aware of pilot and tug boat movements as these can herald the arrival of a large ship coming into the harbour.

VHF channel 13 is often used for Port movements. You may also check Internet sites such as Port authorities <https://www.portauthoritynsw.com.au/> for scheduled departure and arrival times of ships for NSW larger ports.

Hans Schmidt watches a looming P&O liner (Image - Adrian Clayton)



In open seas ships move fast and often on auto pilot. Larger yachts can often be seen on a ship's radar; sea kayakers are not. There are websites and Smart Phone / Tablet apps that track shipping movements and locations. Sea kayakers will find such tools impractical or difficult to use on the lively water. Shipping channels shown on charts can be substantially wider than indicated and there can be several ships in a day along the same course. Due to the size of a ship they are often visible when they are several kilometres away. They are large and are travelling quicker than they appear to be when seen from far away. Remember that ships can come from behind you and they are fast. Monitor them.

If both you and the ship are travelling at a constant speed and angle you can estimate a possible collision course over time. Take note of a compass bearing to the ship from when you first see it over the horizon and do the same 15 minutes later. If the angle has not changed, you are on a possible collision course thus you may need to alter your course. If the angle has changed, it is likely that the ship will either pass behind or in front of you. Keep monitoring the ship, as it could alter its course or speed. If you still feel that a collision is possible you may consider issuing a VHF Securite message or flare or contact the Port authority.

Lights at Night

At night larger boats should display Port (red) and Starboard (green) lights that are shielded from rear view. If you can see both the green and red light a boat could be coming straight towards you. At the stern of a ship or ferry, there is a white light. A white light could also be a yacht.

As kayaks are narrow, a red and green light would be confusing for other boating users as the lights would be too close and low to the water. The main reason for needing a light is so that other users can see you. When kayaking a torch must be carried between sunset and sunrise as a minimum. The RMS has issued further guidelines (not rules) for paddlers: "If paddling in restricted visibility or between sunset and sunrise, exhibit two all round continuous or flashing white lights, one attached to the canoe or kayak at or near the forward end and the other one attached at or near the aft end. The light is to be visible in clear conditions from a distance of one kilometre and may be masked so as not to interfere with the vision of the occupants, provided at least one light is visible from any direction."

For sea kayaks a flashing white light can be confusing for other boaters who may think you are a navigation feature, especially if you are not moving quickly. A light shining on the front deck can spoil your night vision.

If paddling in a group at night, a light is important so that your mates can see you. If there are multiple lights on you and your kayak, it makes it difficult to count group members versus counting one light for each paddler. A light on the stern may occasionally be shielded from view by your body. An elevated light is recommended for sea conditions for better visibility, either on your head or raised above the deck.

There is no particular ideal or prescribed product; it depends on



where and who you are paddling with and the conditions expected. What works well is to have a stern light or a hat light (on your head) plus a strobe light attached to your lifejacket in case you are separated from your kayak. In the event of capsizing you can then turn it on. A head torch is a good backup and will help you pack away your gear when you land.



Identifying Boating Channels at Night

Lighthouses have been around for hundreds of years. Each lighthouse has a particular flashing sequence so that mariners can identify which lighthouse it is from the sea. Once closer to a harbour other lights will help boaters take a safe line.

At night port lateral markers flash red, and starboard lateral markers flash green to indicate where a boating channel is.

Lead lights are two lights, often triangular, which when lined up indicate a safe transit into a harbour. The rear lead light will point down, and the closer light up. The colour of these lights varies (e.g. orange, blue). They are often set up for commercial reasons or at major ports (eg. fishing ports).

Sector lights are set up at one location and will indicate green, white or red depending on the divergence of the transit line. If displaying white, the boat is in a safe zone or sector. If red, the boat should turn to starboard. If displaying green, the boat should turn to port.

Safe Distances

Powerboats should keep 30 to 60 metres from a kayak and travel at 6 knots when within 30 metres of a kayak. This is still roughly twice the speed of a sea kayak. Faster boats travelling in the same direction can overtake you on either side.

Scuba divers often use flagged buoys (usually blue and white) to alert other boating traffic of the presence of a diver down under the flag. Larger boats are required to keep 60 metres away from swimmers and divers who are displaying a dive flag. Although kayaks may be an exception, please be considerate and paddle wide around a diving or swimming group.

Other power vessel's, including personal water crafts (jet skis), should keep 30 metres from kayaks when travelling at more than 6 knots. Once they are 60 metres away the recommended speed is 10 knots. Despite the rules, you may still need to be wary and expect the unexpected. Ian Fletcher recounted a tale of a rouge tinny in Port Hacking. You can find it on our the club's website at: <https://nswskc.wordpress.com/2010/12/28/expect-the-unexpected/>

The overriding rule is to avoid a collision and keep safe.

As sea kayaks are designed to handle waves a bit of boat wake is not of great concern. For beginner kayakers or those paddling without a spray deck a large wake can be hazardous, especially if the wake builds up over shallows or bounces against a sea wall or cliff.

Shoreline fishing occurs along cliffs (rock fishermen), harbours, bays and also along our surf beaches. Fishing lines are difficult to see and can also be expected near anchored boats or even trailing off moving boats. Beware of possible entanglement with fishing lines and the possible nasty, barbed hook at the end.

There are special considerations for landing a sea kayak in a surf zone. Avoid other beach users or be prepared to deliberately capsize your sea kayak to reduce the speed if you are being pushed by wave on a collision course with a swimmer or surfer.

Conclusion

Sharing our enjoyment of the sea with all other waterway uses is best achieved by having a friendly attitude and understanding their perspective. Be friendly and acknowledge other users when you can, as they have just as much right as you to be there. Always be prepared to take action to avoid collision and expect the unexpected.

Gareth waiting behind a starboard marker to pass astern of a boat in the boat channel.



References:

<http://www.rms.nsw.gov.au/maritime/safety-rules/rules-regulations/big-ships-small-boats.html>

<http://www.rms.nsw.gov.au/maritime/safety-rules/rules-regulations/navigation-marks-and-signs.html>

<http://www.rms.nsw.gov.au/maritime/safety-rules/other-boating/canoes-and-kayaks.html>

<https://nswskc.wordpress.com/2010/12/28/expect-the-unexpected/>

“Sea Kayaking Illustrated: A Visual Guide to Better Paddling” by John Robison, 2003 Ragged Mountain Press

Saltiest submission **WINNER**

EXPEDITION KAYAKS.com

Rob Mercer reported really enjoying Steve Hitchcock's Rock 'n' Roll Rock Gardening. He found it “a short but engaging account of a good learning lesson laced with generous amounts of challenge and fun”.

Steve says “I liaised with Mark and decided to spend my winning voucher on a pair of warm dry socks. Yes, I know it's summer and not now required, but I'm

planning ahead for next winter. These are Enth Degree socks, so the best of the best. They fit nicely, feel warm and are definitely watertight and dry in my bedroom. Thanks to Mark, Rob and EK for choosing my article. It was a pleasant and very unexpected surprise.

Don't forget, another winner will be selected from this edition. May the saltiest submitter succeed!



EXPEDITION KAYAKS

Drop in anytime from 0830 to 1800 Monday to Fridays.

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