



WHITEWATER

A HISTORY OF KAYAKING IN AMERICA AND WHY INUIT HISTORY WILL ALWAYS REMAIN RELEVANT

By Mackenzie Dotson



“Life in us is like the water in a river.”

— Henry David Thoreau

Humans feel drawn to water on every level of society. We take trips to the well to get fresh drinking water or visit the beach to splash in the roaring waves. We study it as a chemical substance, marveling at its ability to exist on Earth in all three states of matter naturally. We herald it as a spiritual purifier, associating it with emotion and intuition, using it to cleanse the spirit as well as the body. At the very least, each of us relies on water to maintain our own individual health. Some, like me, recognize a playful quality in water; especially moving water. We are drawn to the river. As it turns out, play, like water itself, is a necessity, and as it has been throughout human history: the river provides. From hunting grounds to raceways to uncharted territory just waiting to be explored, kayaks have taken people out to sea and downriver for millennia.

The first to use kayaks were the Inuit tribe and other indigenous Arctic cultures such as the Aleut and the Yupik (Evans & Anderson, 1979). Given that the first boats were built from driftwood, bones, skins, antlers, and sinew they “do not generally preserve well”, but archaeologists have other indications that kayaks have been made and used by some cultures in the Arctic for over 4,400 years (Walls, 2012). Inuit oral tradition maintains that their tribes have used kayaks to hunt for about half that time. They hunted a wide range of animals, mostly seals, but also fish, caribou, polar bears, walrus, birds, and famously, bowhead whales. Kayak hunting was, and remains to this day, a team sport; the

success of the individual was heavily dependent on the team and vice versa. Unlike team sports that we imagine in the modern era, communication between hunting team members had to be silent so as not to startle their prey away. Hunters intuitively knew who was best poised to strike, how their individual actions would affect others, and who would best be able to assist if the situation demanded rescue. These social skills were just as crucial to their success as their technical skills, both as hunters and paddlers, their physical fitness, and their environmental awareness. Because of this level of complexity and difficulty, a new hunter was required to train aggressively before he was ready to join the others on an actual hunt. This learning began as soon as early childhood in some places. Parents and other senior tribes members used songs, games, toys and races to teach children of all ages basic necessary skills such as timing, balance, strength and dexterity, speed, and emergency procedures. Archaeological evidence shows that some tribes used rocks arranged in the shape of kayaks and further arranged into the shape of a fleet to practice skills on dry land before transferring to the water (Walls, 2012). Today, Inuits still practice these skills and engage in kayak hunting as a celebration of their traditions and for recreation.

By the mid-1800s, the kayak had found its way to Europe, maintaining its usefulness in freezing temperatures on Arctic and Antarctic expeditions (D, 2020). Popularity was widespread by the 20s, flatwater kayaking was a common recreational activity in developed countries worldwide. It wasn't until 1931 that someone decided to paddle one of these boats downstream. An adventurous man by the name of Adolf Anderle found his

way to the Salzachofen Gorge, where he earned the credit for being the creator of whitewater kayaking (Chavez, 2000). The International Scale of River Difficulty was soon established to describe the level of difficulty for sections of rivers. Half a decade later, 1936 saw both flatwater kayak racing and downriver canoe racing introduced to the Olympics. Today, the canoe slalom and the kayak sprint are still full medal Olympic events with consistent European winners (Olympic, 2020). Soon after, in 1938, the first woman (that we know of) paddled a kayak downriver. Genevieve De Colmont visited the scenic Green and Colorado Rivers in modern day Utah and Colorado respectively (Chavez, 2000).

Inevitably, Americans started making kayaks out of plastic. The first boats were reinforced with fiberglass to make them stronger and lighter. This allowed paddlers to push the boundaries of whitewater kayaking, testing rivers with bigger water, more complex lines, and severe consequences. This type of boat persisted from its invention in the 1950's until 1984, when fully plastic kayaks were strong enough to withstand the power of the rivers that had already been conquered. Unfortunately, their initial construction with fiberglass means that even modern airline travelers cannot bring their whitewater boats, regardless of its design. The latest kayaks are designed for all types of people, water and recreation. There is a boat for recirculatory waves, allowing the paddler to surf and perform complicated tricks and other maneuvers. There is a boat for long expeditions, carrying a passenger and her gear for miles down the Grand Canyon or the Back River of the north. There is a boat for the day-tripper, allowing them to punch

through rapids, carving delicate turns through nearly invisible lines of current. There are even boats designed for specific rivers or certain volumes of water. These boats are all agile and durable.

Modern designs and techniques resemble the traditional Inuits practices in an uncanny way. This of course, was mostly intentional, as something that has worked for centuries will not suddenly lose its efficacy. For example, Inuit paddlers wore animal skins that they could fit around the edges of their cockpit on their boats to keep out the frigid Arctic waters and enable them to roll back up should they fall underwater. Today, the only thing that has changed is the use of animal skins. Instead, you will find “skirts” made of neoprene and they serve the exact same purpose. A less obvious parallel is the method of communication kayak teams use on a paddling expedition. While the Inuits valued silence for its ability to prevent their prey from becoming suspicious, today’s river teams rely on non-verbal communication to replace indiscernible yelling; a barely audible mumble compared to the roar of whitewater. Both Inuits and Americans first turn to teaching and practicing skills on flatwater before taking novice paddlers to more dangerous waters with unforgiving currents and dangerous obstacles. Both groups value the ability to “instantly recognize and respond to subtle environmental cues” (Walls, 2012) in the form of rocks, wildlife, wood or the water itself. Even today’s kayaker is familiar with the term “Eskimo roll”, a fitting tribute to the first paddlers who were able to right their boats when turned upside down. The use of games as a teaching tool persists at modern whitewater schools, for children and adults alike. It is obvious that

without the ingenuity and talent of the Inuit nations, modern passion for paddling would be as flat as the only water we would know how to explore. While humans have come a long way from kayak hunting to kayaking for sport, less has changed than one might imagine. We still turn to kayaks for our vast variety of aquatic needs, and we will always seek out water, however unpredictable and mysterious it is.

Chavez, H. (2000). Greenland: Where the Kayak Was Invented. Retrieved November 24, 2020, from
<https://oceanwide-expeditions.com/blog/greenland-where-the-kayak-was-invented>

D, P. (2020, October 12). A Brief History Of Kayaking. Retrieved November 22, 2020, from
<https://www.kayakhelp.com/a-brief-history-of-kayaking/>

Evans, J., & Anderson, R. R. (1979). The Boats. In *Kayaking: The new whitewater sport for everybody* (pp. 11-12). Brattleboro, VT: Greene.

Lewis, L. (1992). *Water's Edge: Women Who Push the Limits in Rowing, Kayaking and Canoeing*. Seattle, WA: The Seal Press.

Olympic. (2020). Canoe Slalom. Retrieved November 20, 2020, from
<https://www.olympic.org/canoe-slalom>

Walls, M. (2012). Kayak games and hunting enskilment: An archaeological consideration of sports and the situated learning of technical skills. *World Archaeology*, 44(2), 175-188. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2012.669604>