



ACA Tennessee Organizing Education Initiative to Combat Paddler Fatalities on Easier Waterways

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Erwin, TN – On June 19th, a group of paddlers from across Tennessee are coming together in Erwin, Tennessee. But instead of coming for their own fun, these paddlers are traveling to Erwin to become certified as Rescue Instructors. During their class, they'll learn how to teach fundamental skills to prevent paddling deaths and to respond to common paddling accidents. Once certified, they'll return to their home communities across Tennessee to teach safety and rescue skills to casual paddlers and beginner whitewater boaters on class I and class II waterways.

This instructor certification course is part of a national effort by the [American Canoe Association \(ACA\)](#) to address the increasing number of paddlecraft fatalities. The ACA is the national accrediting body for paddlesport instructors and has long been held as the gold standard in education training and curriculum for kayaking, canoeing, rafting, paddle boards, and paddlesports rescue. Data from the US Coast Guard's Office of Boating Safety show that, between 2006 and 2018, paddlecraft fatalities increased by about 30%. Most of these fatalities could have been prevented or managed with simple measures, that instructor candidates will learn in this certification workshop.

Robin Pope, chair of ACA's Board of Directors and a certified Swiftwater Rescue Instructor Trainer Educator, will be at the helm. "When people think of rescues, they often think of complex skills performed under challenging conditions. Those skills are important, but they're rarely needed. Instead, most paddling-related deaths happen with inexperienced boaters who had little or no training, and who unintentionally got into a bad situation. To change the trend of increasing paddling deaths, we need to make rescue instruction more available for entry level paddlers," says Pope, who also participates in many safe boating initiatives in partnership with the U.S. Coast Guard and the National Boating Safety Advisory Council.

The Rescue Instructor certification class is happening June 19-21 at the [Nolichucky Outdoor Learning Institute](#), led by founder Scott Fisher. Under Pope's guidance, Fisher will be getting certified as an Instructor Trainer who can continue this effort to certify new rescue instructors for paddlesports in coming years.

"Paddling is supposed to be fun and nurturing and exciting, but we are seeing paddling fatalities happen in our region that are easily preventable with a little training," said Fisher, who has already achieved the highest level of certification as a Level 5 instructor of Whitewater Kayaking and Swiftwater Rescue. "If we point our great instructors at this growing population of recreational paddlers, I am confident we can make a difference."

According to a recent survey by the Outdoor Foundation, 22.9 million Americans participated in paddlesports in 2019 and, of those, 72% own their own boat. The overwhelming majority of those self-identify as casual participants. The Covid-19 pandemic seems to be driving further growth in the sport as people seek safe ways to gather with friends while maintaining social distancing. In 2019, the largest sub-group among paddlesport participants were the 11 million Americans who are classified as Recreational Kayakers, paddling easy lakes and class I rivers. Based on Coast Guard statistics, these are the people who are most likely to be involved in paddling accidents and, according to the Outdoor Foundation survey, 79% of them have had no training.

7 Instructor Candidates are coming to NOLI from many communities across Tennessee, several with support from the [Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association \(TSRA\)](#). For the last 4 years, TSRA has found tremendous success teaching Rescue for Rec Boaters, a class designed to teach safety and rescue to entry level paddlers who frequent lakes and class I rivers. TSRA is a nonprofit, statewide conservation organization led by a large group of paddling enthusiasts in Middle Tennessee. They offer paddler training as part of their mission but also use training classes to raise funds for conservation activities. In this case, the Board of TSRA offered 3 instructor scholarships for instructors who agree to volunteer their time teaching these rescue skills in TSRA sponsored classes. Notably, Covid-19 has curtailed TSRA's 2020 revenue producing activities and training classes, but the Board still thought this initiative was important enough to invest in these rescue instructor scholarships.

ACA Tennessee State Director Andrea White, a Level 2 River Kayaking instructor, was one of the co-founders of the TSRA Rescue for Rec Boaters course when she was a TSRA Board Member and has been a force behind the scenes to pull the resources together to implement this beta test for ACA nationally. "Robin and Scott are among the absolute best trainers the ACA has to offer and I am thrilled to be able to bring these resources together to point at the problem of paddler fatalities among entry level, casual paddlers," said White. "What I have seen across our state is that paddlers want to help other paddlers when they get in trouble on the river. If we provide an infusion of skills and knowledge to the casual paddler population, it will proliferate. They will teach each other. And using the ACA certified rescue instructor resources to start that infusion of skills and knowledge is the best way I know to start making a difference!"

[American Canoe Association \(ACA\)](#)

Founded in 1880, The American Canoe Association (ACA) is a national nonprofit organization serving the broader paddling public by providing education related to all aspects of paddling, stewardship support to help protect paddling environments, and sanctioning of programs and events to promote paddlesport competition, exploration, and recreation. ACA Tennessee is a chapter of this membership organization. The State Director is an elected, volunteer position voted on by Tennessee members.

[Nolichucky Outdoor Learning Institute \(NOLI\)](#)

Located on the banks of the Nolichucky River in the mountains of northeast Tennessee, the Nolichucky Outdoor Learning Institute (NOLI) offers year-round instruction in a wide variety of outdoor activities for everyone from the beginner to the advanced including kayaking, canoeing, wilderness medicine, water safety/rescue, survival, map/compass, hiking/camping, conservation/stewardship, outdoor arts/photography, and team building. Our outstanding instructors are committed to providing a fun safe environment to help you learn and grow, all in one of the nation's truly spectacular playgrounds!

[Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association \(TSRA\)](#)

Founded in 1966, the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association (TSRA) is a volunteer organization dedicated to the preservation, protection and restoration of the scenic, free-flowing rivers of our state. Based in Nashville, Tennessee, the organization has approximately 1,000 members. At its founding, TSRA campaigned hard for the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Act of 1969 which was the first such comprehensive act in the nation.

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION:

Statistics from 2019 SPECIAL REPORT ON PADDLESPTS & SAFETY BY THE OUTDOOR FOUNDATION

https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.americancanoe.org/resource/resmgr/sei-educational_resources/2019_Special_Report_on_Paddl.pdf

In 2018, 22.9 million Americans, or 7.6 percent of the U.S. population participated in at least one paddling activity. Recreational kayaking continues to grow in popularity and seems to be replacing many Americans' desires to canoe.

Even though paddlers self-identify as casual participants, they overwhelmingly report that paddling itself is the impetus for their outings. They set out for the water with paddling in mind, instead of tacking the activity onto a broader outing. 72 percent of paddlers own at least one type of paddle craft.

Today, recreational kayaking is the most popular type of paddling, with more than 11 million participants. A vast majority of participants—79 percent—have received no instruction.

The United States Coast Guard reported that paddlesport accidents from 2015 to 2017 resulted in reports of 1,624 injuries and 758 deaths. However, many paddling accidents go unreported, and the total number of incidents is likely to be much higher. Where cause of death was known, 79 percent of

paddle-related fatalities from 2015 to 2017 involved drownings. Of those drowning victims, an astounding 74 percent were not wearing personal flotation devices. In fact, 30 percent of paddlers do not own a personal flotation device.

Participants	2018 (000)	Participation Rate (of total US population)
All Paddling	22,929	7.6%
Canoe	9,129	3.0%
Kayak Recreational	11,017	3.7%
Kayak Sea/Touring	2,805	0.9%
Kayak Whitewater	2,562	0.9%
Rafting	3,404	1.1%
Stand Up Paddling	3,453	1.1%

National Paddling Fatalities from U.S. Coast Guard Recreational Boating Statistics

https://www.uscgboating.org/statistics/accident_statistics.php

USCG data show that in 2006, fatalities in canoes, kayaks and SUPs contributed 14% of all boating fatalities. In contrast, by 2018, these boats contributed 21% of all boating fatalities. The actual number of kayaking deaths increased dramatically over the same time frame, from 27 in 2006 to 84 in 2018, whereas canoeing deaths showed a large decrease, from 72 in 2006 to 44 in 2018. These trends appear to be driven by participation numbers and do not appear to be a result in changing behaviors.

Tennessee Paddlesports Fatalities so far in 2020: 5 Paddler Fatalities

Authorities confirm body of missing kayaker has been found

<https://www.wbjtv.com/2020/02/02/authorities-confirm-body-of-missing-kayaker-has-been-found/>

Accident Date: February 1

Body of Water: Spring Creek in Madison County, TN (class I)

Factors: cold water, no life jacket

Body of missing 51-year-old canoer in Elk River located

<https://fox17.com/news/local/search-for-missing-paddler-in-elk-river-to-resume-twra-says>

Accident Date: March 15

Body of Water: Elk River in Giles County, TN (class I)

Factors: cold water, high water dam release, no life jacket

Body of missing kayaker found in Caney Fork River

<https://smithcountyinsider.com/home-page-featured/body-of-missing-kayaker-found-in-caney-fork-river/>

Accident Date: March 27

Body of Water: Caney Fork River in Smith County, TN (class I)

Factors: cold water, high water dam release, no life jacket

TWRA: 32-year-old Mt. Juliet kayaker drowns trying to save dog in Giles County

<https://fox17.com/news/local/twra-searching-for-missing-kayaker-on-richland-creek-in-giles-county>

Accident Date: April 24

Body of Water: Richland Creek in Giles County, TN (class I)

Factors: paddler went over an active low head dam, capsized, made it to shore, put on life jacket and went back to rescue a dog that was traveling with him when he capsized. Paddler caught in hydraulic.

15-year-old girl from Manchester drowns in Duck River after kayaking accident, TWRA reports

<https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2020/06/01/twra-15-year-old-drowns-duck-river-kayaking-accident-parents/5307134002/>

Accident Date: Sunday, May 31

Body of Water: Duck River in Bedford County, TN (class I)

Factors: High water dam release, accident at non-functioning low head dam (no water over top). Location has mandatory portage but water eroded a channel around the dam which paddler attempted to use instead of portaging. Paddler was wearing a life jacket but got caught in a strainer in the eroded channel.