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Don't Rock The Boat: Safety Tips For Spring Paddlers

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Before April showers bring May showers, winter snowmelt swells rivers and brings paddlers and anglers back to the water. Laurie Gullion, clinical assistant professor of kinesiology at the University of New Hampshire and a nationally respected expert on canoeing and kayaking, offers tips to stay safe on the water.

"Sea and river kayaking are more popular than ever, luring more people to water during the spring as well as summer," says Gullion, author of the American Canoe Association's Canoeing and Kayaking Instruction Manual. She notes that the National Survey of Recreation and the Environment (2003) found that 19.6 million Americans paddle canoes and 9.6 million paddle kayaks. Kayaking has grown 272 percent in the past decade, and canoeing has grown by 50 percent; both activities are likely to grow steadily in popularity as Americans seek fun, healthy exercise that is environmentally friendly.

Springtime paddling brings several unique safety concerns, says Gullion. While air temperatures might be mild, water temperatures remain dangerously cold. And this past winter's high winds may have knocked down trees, making familiar river runs suddenly unfamiliar. Spring paddlers should dress for the water temperature, not the air, and be prepared to stop and scout river sections.

Paddlers should also get instruction in boating and rescue skills, says Gullion, citing U.S. Coast Guard research that shows a large portion of canoeing and kayaking fatalities involve people with little boating experience who lack fundamental skills. "One problem is that some victims don't see themselves as paddlers, so they don't seek out instruction. For instance, anglers may venture out without adequate knowledge of canoeing, rescue, and equipment because paddling isn't their primary focus," she adds.

Gullion offers additional safety tips for paddlers:

- Wear a PFD (personal floatation device, or lifejacket), regardless of swimming ability.
- Plan ahead; research the route and the weather, and choose a route that matches ability or fitness level.
- Paddle in a group, where other paddlers know how to rescue a capsized craft.
- Choose the right boat for the conditions; don't take a flatwater boat into whitewater conditions or onto the ocean.
- Avoid alcohol prior to paddling; eat and drink for energy and hydration even during a short day trip.
- Get instruction from a reputable organization to learn boat control skills, and make sure your rescue skills match your paddling skills.

- Keep your dog under control, or you may take an unexpected swim!

"There's a reason paddling is becoming increasingly popular – it's a wonderful way to enjoy the outdoors and experience the landscape from a new perspective," says Gullion. "By following a few commonsense precautions, being on the water can be as safe as it is fun."

For more information on Laurie Gullion, go to http://www.shhs.unh.edu/kin_oe/faculty_oe.html.