

VSC Checklist for Paddlecraft & Small Boats

For vessels propelled by paddle / oar such as a canoe, kayak, rowboat or small non-motorized Jon, Sport and Utility boats to be awarded a VSC decal, they must meet the following criteria:

Required Items:

- 1. STATE & LOCAL REQUIREMENTS:** [Owners / Operators must know, understand & comply with all Federal, State & Local Laws, Regulations & Requirements](#) for the location where the vessel is being operated. So be sure to check for and comply with all applicable rules and requirements as well as if your state offers paddle sport safety training modules as part of their boating safety program such as for canoeing and/or kayaking.
- 2. REGISTRATION / NUMBERING:** Most states ([including MD](#)) do not require registration or display of numbers for non-motorized vessels. If vessel registration is required, registration decals and numbers in 3" block letters of a contrasting color to the hull must typically be displayed plus registration documents must be available for examination (should be carried in a waterproof container that is tethered to the craft or stored in a dry bag). If registration and display of numbers is not required, locate hull identification number (HIN) and keep a copy in a safe place.
- 3. LIFEJACKETS:** Each person onboard must have an approved [Type I, II, III, or V proper size Lifejacket in good serviceable condition](#). For Kayaks & Canoes, Lifejacket should allow full range of arm movement, fit comfortably, not be bulky & have pockets with D-rings to tether safety equipment. Type III or Type V Lifejackets typically work best. Type I offshore or Type II near shore vests are typically not a good choice & could jeopardize safe operation in difficult sea conditions. **It is a best practice to wear Lifejackets when near or on-the-water.**
- 4. VISUAL DISTRESS SIGNALS (VDS):** [Applicable recreational vessel requirements apply](#). If carrying flares is required, **small waterproof easy to launch flares are preferred** (avoid conventional flare guns or complicated flare launchers since a person immersed in cold water may not be able to make effective use of them). Attach a marine signaling mirror to each Lifejacket with a 3 ft. tether and put it in a pocket (a small waterproof strobe light will facilitate night/low visibility distress signaling).
- 5. SOUND PRODUCING DEVICE:** [All vessels require a means of producing an efficient sound](#). A **Marine Distress Whistle** is the most effective way to satisfy this requirement on paddle craft, (oar), under 16 ft power & under 26 ft sailing vessels. A best practice is to attach whistles to all Lifejackets with a 3 ft. tether or lanyard and put them in a pocket.
- 6. NAVIGATION LIGHTS:** [All vessels are required to display navigation lights at night and during periods of reduced visibility](#). Sail, paddle or oar powered vessels less than 22 ft. can meet this requirement with a flashlight in good working order and additional spare batteries. Strobe lights are a distress signaling device and should only be used in the event of an emergency, so they should not be used for night navigation.
- 7. OVERALL VESSEL CONDITION:** The boat must be well maintained and suitable for the area of use (as applies to non-motorized boats).

Strongly Recommended Items:

- a. **Practice wet exits & re-boarding vessel** (especially kayaks & canoes) in safe, calm, shallow water to gain experience, confidence and capability in the event capsizing occurs on open, less friendly and deep waters.
- b. **Monitor & evaluate weather conditions** before heading out. Carry a portable waterproof weather or VHF radio to monitor weather broadcasts. Keep an eye on sky and sea conditions. Never operate in conditions that exceed personal ability or comfort zone.
- c. **Carry a waterproof First Aid Kit** and be sure it is secured to the boat. Paddle sports enthusiasts often operate in areas where medical attention is not readily available, so consider taking basic first aid and CPR training.
- d. **Carry a small PVC type bilge pump with a floatation collar.** A plastic container, large car-washing sponge and towel are good for removing small amounts of water, but are best when used in conjunction with a portable hand pump (a relatively inexpensive and worthwhile investment).
- e. **Carry rescue gear such as throw bag & tow lines** especially when traveling in groups. Paddle sports enthusiasts and all paddlers should be familiar with the deployment and use of this type gear and regularly practice using it.
- f. **Carry a spare paddle secured to vessel** with a paddle leash attached to a forward fitting or bungee cord to prevent its loss in rough water. It could make the difference between getting home safely or “being caught up the creek without a paddle.”
- g. **Carry communication & navigation devices** such as a VHF Radio, GPS and Cellular Phone placed in waterproof bags and a waterproof hand held compass as a back up.
- h. **Carry a trash bag** and make sure all refuse or trash is returned home with you. Leave every stop or camp site cleaner than when you found it.
- i. **Bring drinking water, snacks and extra clothing** - kayak and canoe users need to dress appropriately for expected weather conditions. Cold water requires use of wet or dry suits. In moderate conditions, layered clothing made of fabrics that provide warmth even when wet are recommended. Cotton materials should not be used in cold weather situations because they wick heat away from the body when wet accelerating the effects of hypothermia.
- j. **Wear a hat to provide protection from the sun** - a wide brimmed hat or one designed to protect the back of the neck, ears and head are best. Use sun sunscreen for additional protection.
- k. **Use an eyeglass / sunglass strap & a hat tether.** Eyewear and hats can easily come off if a vessel capsizes, rolls over or you are become immersed in water upside down. To prevent the loss of these items, use appropriate retainer straps.
- l. **Keep small items such as sunscreen, bug repellent, first aid items, food and snacks in a waterproof dry-bag tethered to vessel.** Make sure items are stowed in an area that will not interfere with user’s ability to operate or exit the vessel in the event of an emergency or vessel capsizes.
- m. **When operating in coastal waters or navigable rivers, familiarize yourself with basic coastal navigation procedures** - carry appropriate charts and try to obtain local knowledge of waterways, hazards and other items of interest.

- n. **File a Float Plan** that contains information about the operator, the vessel, vehicle used to transport the vessel, expected route of travel, date and time of arrival as well as return. An overdue SUB is a major concern because the effects of cold water and environmental factors can quickly create life threatening situations. Taking the time to leave a float plan with a trustworthy person is a worthwhile investment of time and effort.
- o. **Go with a friend** - it is usually more fun and always safer to paddle in a group.

Additional Items Suggested for Canoes:

- I. **Bailer** - comes in handy for getting water out of boat. One can be easily made by cutting the bottom off a gallon plastic bottle (milk or bleach) and leaving the lid on.
- II. **Kneeling Pad** - optional but much-appreciated comfort item for canoeists, some of whom glue theirs into the boat. Non-absorbent, waterproof foam, like the kind found in sleeping pads is best.
- III. **Thwart Bag** - accessible to the paddler and attached to the boat provides a place to store sunscreen, raingear, jellybeans, and other small items.

Additional Items Suggested for Kayaking:

- I. **Spray Skirt** - made of coated nylon or neoprene and matched to both kayak and kayaker will keep water out of the kayak (a kayak cockpit filled with water from a passing boat wake or unnoticed wave that got by is both uncomfortable and annoying). Learn how to properly attach it and how to quickly remove it in an emergency and practice detaching it.
- II. **Hand Pump with floatation collar** – helpful in removing water from recreational and touring kayaks. An absolutely essential accessory to get a kayak cockpit pumped out before the next wave breaks.
- III. **Paddle Leash to attach paddle to the boat** - helps keep track of paddle if dropped, when stopping to take photos or grab a drink or snack.
- IV. **Paddle Float** - an inflatable or foam device used to assist in solo re-entry of a kayak. The foam device is preferred since it is ready to go and can be installed quickly. The inflatable device should not be used in cold water, since it takes too long to deploy and inflate.
- V. **Helmet** - should be used by paddle sports enthusiasts venturing onto whitewater, rapids or kayaking through a surf zone.

Source: USCG Auxiliary National Department for Vessel Exams

Thanks to the many USCG Auxiliary Members, especially Alex Cascione, Paul Leuchner, and Lenore J. Combs, who shared their valuable insight to help produce this document.

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