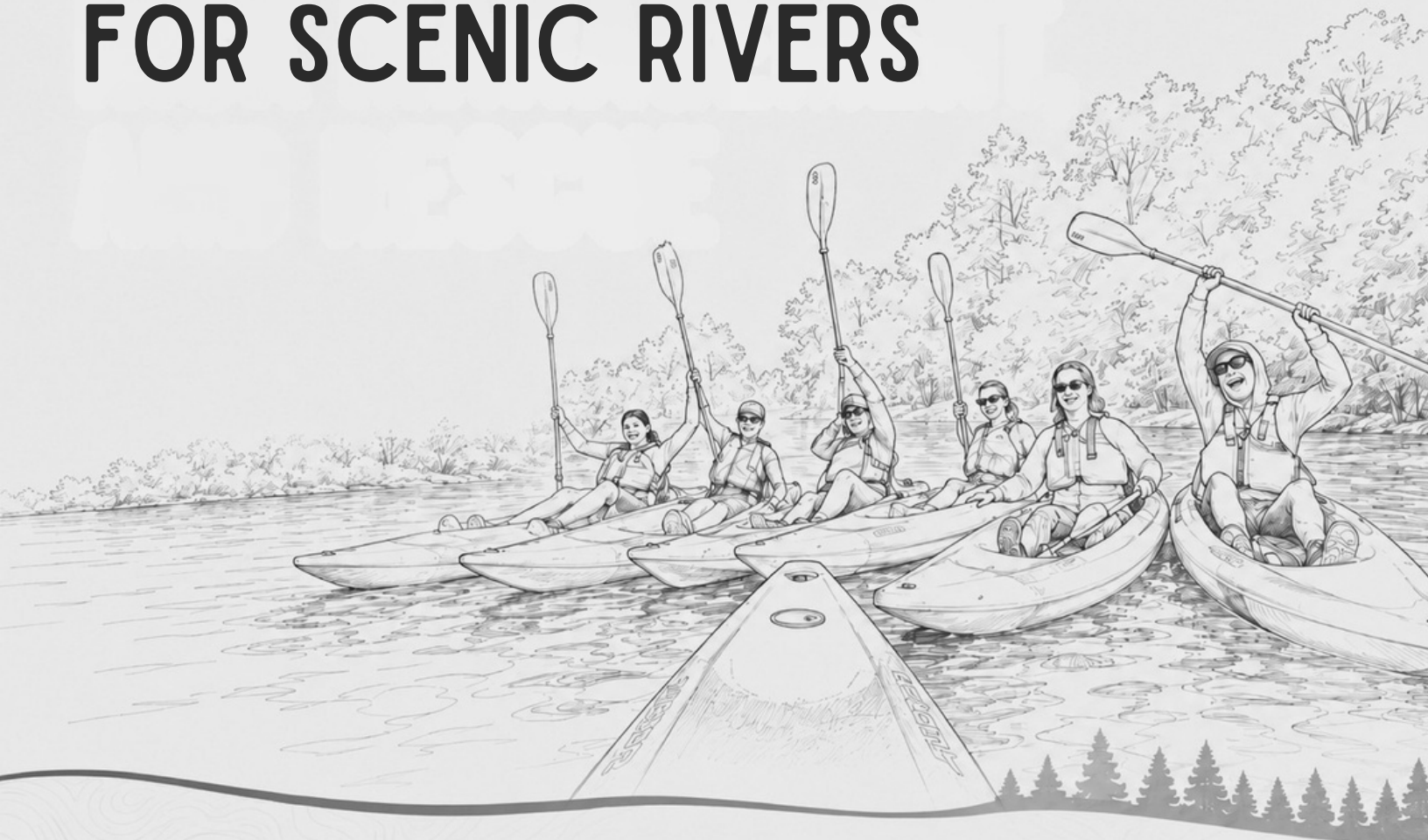


PADDLING ETIQUETTE FOR SCENIC RIVERS



BY ANNE WESTBROOKE, BOARD MEMBER, BIRMINGHAM (AL) CANOE CLUB AND
KELSEY BRACEWELL, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION, ACA PADDLESPORTS

Paddling Etiquette for Scenic Rivers

July 17, 2026

By Anne Westbrooke, Board Member, Birmingham (AL) Canoe Club and
Kelsey Bracewell, Director of Education, Insurance, and Membership, ACA Paddlesports

Good paddling etiquette helps protect scenic rivers, reduces conflict among visitors, and creates a safer and more enjoyable experience for everyone. Conditions and local regulations vary, so paddlers should always follow posted rules, respect instructions from land managers and trip leaders, and use good judgment.

1. Share the Water and Avoid Collisions

There is no universal rule that downstream paddlers always have an absolute right of way. Paddlers traveling with the current may have less time and room to maneuver, particularly in narrow channels, swift water, or areas with obstructions. Whenever possible, paddlers traveling upstream, entering the current, or moving away from shore should avoid blocking their path.

All paddlers are responsible for maintaining awareness, controlling their boats, communicating clearly, and taking reasonable action to prevent a collision. Do not assume another paddler sees you or can move quickly.

When swimming, wading, standing, fishing, or resting in the water, remain out of the primary travel channel whenever possible. Never stand in a location where approaching paddlers have limited visibility or little room to change course.

2. Maintain Safe Spacing

Do not follow the boat ahead of you too closely. Leave enough room for that paddler to slow down, change direction, avoid an obstacle, get unstuck, or recover after a capsize.

Spacing should increase around:

- Rapids and swift current
- Blind turns
- Low bridges and narrow passages
- Strainers, rocks, and other hazards
- Busy launches and take-outs
- Inexperienced paddlers
- Avoid forming a side-by-side group that blocks the channel. Paddle single file through narrow passages and other bottlenecks.

3. Pass Other Paddlers Courteously

Slower paddlers and large groups should allow faster paddlers to pass when a safe pullout, eddy, or wide section of river is available. Do not stop or drift as a large cluster in the middle of a narrow channel.

Before passing, communicate your intention in a calm, friendly manner. Pass one boat at a time when practical, leave adequate space, and avoid creating unnecessary wake, noise, or confusion.

Never pressure another paddler into entering a hazardous area simply to make room. Wait until there is enough space for everyone to maneuver safely.

4. Respect People Who Are Fishing

Give anglers a wide berth and watch carefully for fishing lines, hooks, and equipment. When practical, pass behind an angler rather than traveling between the angler and the bank or casting area.

If you are unsure where the line is located, politely ask which side is safest for passing. Avoid splashing, loud conversation, or unnecessary disturbance near someone who is actively fishing.

Participants who would like to fish during an organized paddling trip should ask the trip leader in advance. Fishing stops can affect the group's pace, spacing, supervision, and planned take-out time, and may not be appropriate for every trip.

5. Keep Launches and Take-Outs Clear

Boat ramps, access paths, docks, and shoreline entry points are shared spaces. Prepare boats and equipment away from the immediate launch area whenever possible.

At the Put-In

Unload boats and equipment in a designated staging area without blocking vehicle traffic, ramps, or access paths. Move the vehicle to the appropriate parking or shuttle location before completing final boat preparation.

Put on your life jacket, secure loose equipment, adjust foot braces or seating, and complete other preparations before moving into the active launch area. Once at the water, launch efficiently and move away from the immediate shoreline so others can use the access point.

At the Take-Out

After landing, move your boat and equipment away from the ramp or main landing area as soon as it is safe to do so. Keep pathways open and stage equipment to the side.

Retrieve the vehicle only when the group is ready to load. Load efficiently, secure all boats and equipment, and move the vehicle away from the active loading area before making final adjustments.

Never leave an unattended boat, paddle, cooler, or pile of equipment where it blocks the ramp, trail, roadway, or shoreline.

6. Use Courtesy When Landing

When several paddlers are landing on a current-driven river, the first paddler should generally land near the upstream end of the available landing area. The next paddlers can then land progressively downstream without crossing directly in front of one another.

When space permits, position boats to be perpendicular or at an angle to the shoreline rather than leaving them parallel to the water where they may occupy the entire beach. Move boats enough above the waterline to be secure, but avoid dragging them across sensitive vegetation or unstable banks.

Do not crowd a small beach, campsite, or rest area that is already occupied. Continue to another suitable location when it is safe and reasonable to do so.

7. Respect the Quiet Character of the River

Keep music, shouting, and other unnecessary noise to a minimum. Many visitors come to scenic rivers to experience wildlife, natural sounds, and a sense of solitude.

Speakers should generally be left at home. Earbuds and headphones are also discouraged while paddling because they can prevent you from hearing approaching boats, changing water conditions, warning signals, wildlife, or instructions from other members of the group.

Use voices and whistles for necessary communication, not for unnecessary noise. A whistle should be carried as a signaling device and used according to the group's established communication plan.

8. Paddle Responsibly as a Group

Organized groups should identify a trip leader or responsible lead paddler who understands the route, expected conditions, group abilities, and emergency procedures. A capable paddler should also remain near the back of the group to help ensure that no participant is unintentionally left behind.

- The trip leader should establish expectations for:
- Group spacing and regrouping locations
- Whistle signals and other communication methods
- Rapids, hazards, and appropriate routes
- Rest stops and lunch stops
- What to do following a capsized or separation
- When and where participants may paddle independently

Participants should remain within the agreed group structure. Do not paddle far ahead, leave the planned route, or intentionally lag without communicating with the trip leader.

Groups may divide into smaller pods when conditions permit, but each pod should include a responsible and experienced paddler with appropriate safety and communication equipment.

9. Prepare for the Route and Conditions

Proper preparation is both a safety responsibility and a courtesy to the rest of the group. Review the route, weather forecast, water conditions, known hazards, access restrictions, and anticipated trip length before launching.

Download maps, driving directions, access information, and emergency contact details in advance. Cell service may be limited or unavailable near remote put-ins, take-outs, and scenic river corridors. Printed maps or screenshots stored on a charged device can provide a reliable backup.

Every paddler should know:

- The planned put-in and take-out locations
- The expected distance and duration of the trip
- Where the group plans to stop or regroup
- The location of significant hazards
- What to do if separated from the group
- Who to contact in an emergency
- Tell a reliable person where you are going, who is with you, and when you expect to return.

10. Bring Appropriate Personal Equipment

Bring the clothing, equipment, food, water, medications, and personal supplies needed for the planned trip and expected conditions. Do not rely on another participant to provide basic personal equipment unless arrangements have been made in advance.

Every paddler should:

- Wear a properly fitted life jacket while on or near the water
- Dress for the water temperature, not only the air temperature
- Carry adequate drinking water and food
- Secure loose equipment
- Know how to control and exit the boat
- Carry an appropriate signaling device, such as a whistle
- Protect important personal items in a secure, waterproof container

Consider carrying identification, emergency contact information, a health insurance card, vehicle keys, and essential medical information in a dry pouch attached securely to your person or life jacket. Items stored only in a boat may become separated from the paddler during a capsize.

Sun and insect protection are also important. Depending on the conditions, bring:

- Sunglasses with appropriate ultraviolet protection and a secure retainer
- A brimmed hat
- Sunscreen
- Insect repellent
- Protective clothing
- A dry change of clothes

During cold-weather trips, additional layers and a complete change of dry clothing should be readily available in waterproof storage.

11. Carry Group Safety and Emergency Equipment

Trip leaders and experienced paddlers should consider the needs of the entire group when selecting safety and emergency equipment. The equipment carried should reflect the route, weather, water temperature, group size, remoteness, participant experience, and availability of emergency services.

(continued on the next page)

Appropriate group equipment may include:

- A well-stocked first aid kit
- Rescue and towing equipment suitable for the paddling environment
- A multi-purpose tool or repair kit
- Spare paddles or essential replacement equipment
- Emergency communication and signaling devices
- Extra food, water, clothing, or shelter materials
- Fire-starting equipment when appropriate and legally permitted

Before carrying or using any fire-starting equipment, check land-management regulations, seasonal restrictions, drought conditions, and burn bans. Fires should never be built where prohibited or where they could damage the site or create a wildfire risk.

Equipment alone is not a substitute for sound judgment or training. Participants should use only equipment and techniques they understand and can employ safely.

12. Protect the River and Leave No Trace

Pack out everything you bring, including food scraps, fishing lines, hygiene products, and small pieces of packaging. Secure trash and equipment before launching so they cannot blow or wash out of the boat.

Do not bring glass bottles or other breakable glass containers onto the river. Broken glass creates a serious hazard for barefoot visitors, swimmers, paddlers, wildlife, and cleanup volunteers. Use reusable plastic or metal containers where permitted.

When safe to do so, paddlers are encouraged to collect litter found along the route and dispose of it properly. Do not place yourself at risk to retrieve trash from swift current, steep banks, strainers, or other hazardous locations.

Use durable surfaces for landings and rest stops. Avoid trampling shoreline vegetation, disturbing nesting areas, or creating new access paths.

Observe wildlife from a respectful distance. Do not chase, feed, touch, or surround animals. Avoid approaching nests, dens, young animals, or groups of resting waterfowl.

Leave flowers, plants, rocks, historical objects, and natural features where you find them. Do not build decorative rock stacks or cairns. Moving rocks can disturb aquatic habitat, alter the appearance of the site, and create misleading route markers.

Follow all local requirements concerning fires, camping, human waste, pets, fishing, alcohol, and protected areas.

13. Offer Assistance Respectfully

Do not assume that another paddler needs or wants help. Ask before touching another person, boat, or equipment unless immediate action is necessary to prevent serious harm.

A simple question such as, “Would you like a hand?” allows the paddler to explain what assistance would be useful. Respect the answer and avoid taking control of someone’s equipment without permission.

In an emergency, alert others, contact appropriate responders, and provide assistance within the limits of your training and ability.

14. Practice Safe Shuttling and Communicate Courteously

Shuttle plans should be established before the trip begins. Drivers should know the destination, route, vehicle assignments, and contact information rather than relying entirely on following another vehicle.

Do not follow the vehicle ahead too closely in an effort to keep the shuttle together, but do not lag too far behind, either. Maintain a safe following distance and obey all traffic laws. If vehicles become separated, continue to the agreed destination or use a safe location to communicate.

Ask permission before entering someone else’s vehicle in wet or muddy clothing. Bring towels, seat covers, dry footwear, or a change of clothes when appropriate. Treat vehicles, trailers, and borrowed equipment with care, and help remove any mud, sand, water, or trash you leave behind.

Courtesy often prevents minor misunderstandings from becoming safety problems.

Communicate early, clearly, and respectfully. Thank others for making room, offer reasonable assistance, and be patient with beginners and visitors who may be unfamiliar with the river.

Scenic rivers are shared public resources. Responsible paddlers help ensure that these places remain safe, welcoming, and protected for future visitors.