

*Paddle Smart
Paddle Safe
Have Fun!*

Smart Start Safe Paddling for



4

*Chapter 4:
Smart Decisions*



How To Use This Resource

Information presented in these slides support both the on-shore Smart Start for Safe Paddling program and the on-water Smart Start On-The-Water program.

- Those presenting the on-water program must hold, at minimum, an active ACA Level 1 Instructor Certification or Community Paddlesports Leader Certification.

These slides are designed to support instruction, not replace it. These slides are designed to accompany, not replace, teaching aids such as boats, paddles, and paddling equipment. Presenters should pair this content with real equipment, demonstrations, and discussion (not just lecture).

Select examples that match the craft, venue, and experience level of your participants.

When used on the water, instruction should include hands-on practice with the boats, paddles, and safety equipment participants will actually use.

**If this presentation is used to teach a course compliant with NASBLA's human-propelled boating standards, all slides must be used. If not, presenters should select slides that best meet their students' needs.*



Overview



The Smart Start for Safe Paddling program is a suite of resources that provides essential information to help novice paddlers stay safe and have fun while on the water. The comprehensive program book addresses each NASBLA core and human-propelled standard, and provides in-text citations for easy cross reference.

- Resource Book
- Student Workbook
- Facilitator's Guide
- Free Online Safety Course
- Presentation Slides (This Document)
- On-Water Course Outline
- Infographics
- And more!





Focus Areas



Smart Start for Safe Paddling gives paddlers a foundation for safe, enjoyable time on the water. This program presentation is organized into four focus areas. The following slides address Chapter 4: Smart Decisions.

1

2

3

4



Smart Gear

Smart Skills

Smart Plan

Smart Decisions

4

Smart Decisions



Making smart decisions on the water takes knowledge, practice, collaboration, and experience. Communicating with your group, reacting to changing weather or water conditions, and interacting with other waterway users are important and overlapping skills which contribute to the success of a paddling trip.

In this chapter, we will talk about:

- Making Go/No-Go Decisions
- Paddler's Responsibilities
- Group Management & Communication
- Avoiding Multi-Use Waterway Conflict & Paddling in Proximity to Other Vessels
- Nautical Rules of the Road
- Aids to Navigation

In addition, we'll discuss how your trip is just the beginning of incorporating the experience into your growth as a paddler. Reflecting on what went well, and opportunities for growth are all part of the fun!

First Section:
Making Go / No-Go
Decisions

4 *Making Go / No-Go Decisions*



Even a strong float plan may need to change once the group arrives and sees the actual conditions. A safe paddler knows that the plan is a starting point, not a promise to continue no matter what. If the water, weather, or route does not match the group's skills and equipment, it is time to adjust.

- Check current wind, waves, water level, current, and visibility
- Compare conditions to the group's skills, fitness, and experience
- Choose a simpler route, delay the trip, or cancel if conditions are too difficult
- Remember that changing the plan is a sign of good judgment



4

Making Go / No-Go Decisions



Check the Group, Not Just the Conditions:

Go / no-go decisions are not only about the water. Paddlers should also consider how each person is feeling physically, mentally, and emotionally before launching. Exhaustion, illness, injury, fear, distraction, or substance use can make a manageable trip unsafe.

- Check in with every paddler before launch
- Notice signs of fatigue, stress, fear, illness, injury, or distraction
- Stay home or sit out if you are sick, injured, exhausted, or under the influence
- Match the trip to the whole group, not just the strongest paddler



4

Making Go / No-Go Decisions



Speak Up and Use the Backup Plan:

A safe group creates space for every paddler to speak honestly about comfort level and concerns. If someone does not feel ready for the planned route, the group should treat that information as important safety input. A backup plan helps the group make smart changes without pressure or embarrassment.

- Encourage paddlers to speak up before and during the trip
- Listen when someone says they are uncomfortable or unsure
- Use a backup route, shorter distance, easier venue, or later launch time
- Make the safest choice for the group, even if it means not paddling that day



4

Paddler's Responsibilities



As the captain of your paddlecraft, you are responsible for learning how to operate your boat safely in the conditions you choose to paddle. Your safety, and the safety of those paddling with you, depends on awareness, good judgment, and respectful behavior on the water and at access areas.

- Know how to operate your paddlecraft in the conditions you choose to enter
- Make safety your top priority for yourself and others in your group
- Stay aware of your surroundings and take early action to avoid problems
- Never paddle in a careless, reckless, or negligent manner
- Be courteous to other waterway users by sharing space and avoiding conflicts at launches and access points



*Second Section:
Group Management &
Communication*

4 *Group Management*



Managing groups is a challenge. Different paddling environments and conditions affect group management, but the following general principles can help serve as a guide:

- The minimum recommended group size is at least three paddlers and at least two boats. Most paddling fatalities occur when the group contains only one or two people.
- Paddlers should have enough room to maneuver safely while also staying close enough for effective communication.
- Groups of five or six boats are large enough to respond to most emergencies, but small enough to stay together.
- Consider dividing larger groups into smaller groups. For example, a group of 12 might break up into two groups of six.

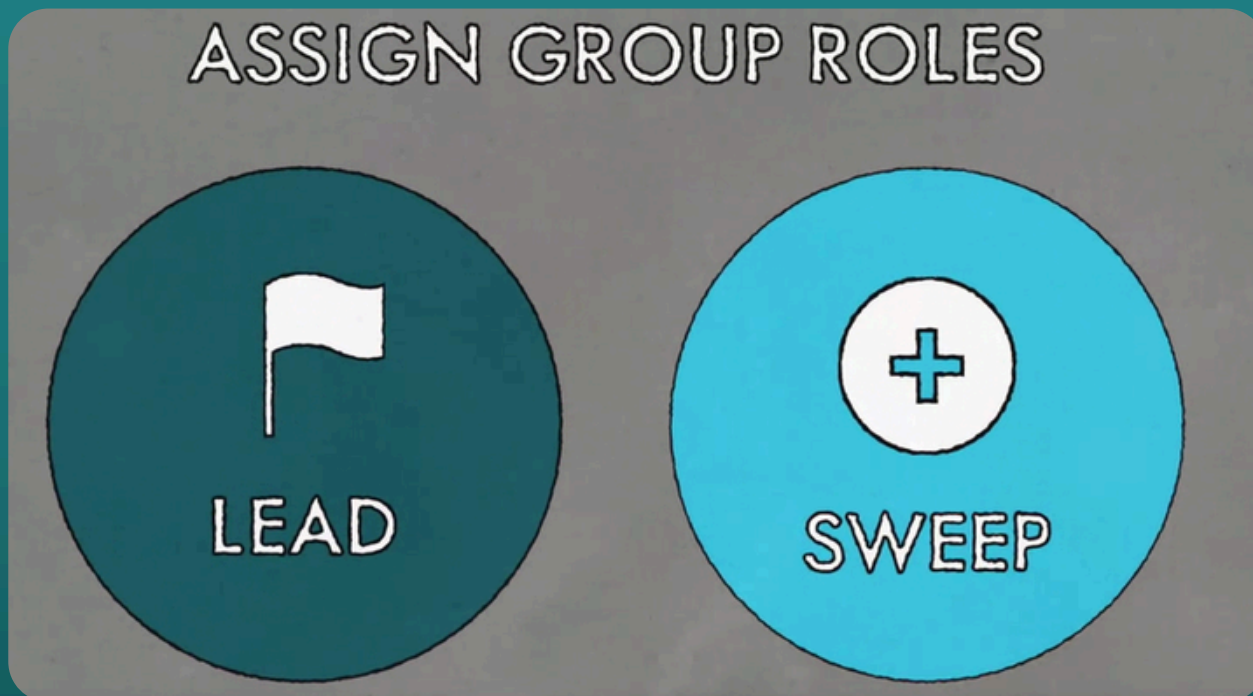


4

Group Management



Assigning group roles before launching helps everyone understand how the group will move, communicate, and respond if something changes. Clear roles reduce confusion, keep paddlers connected, and make it easier to support the whole group, not just individual boats.

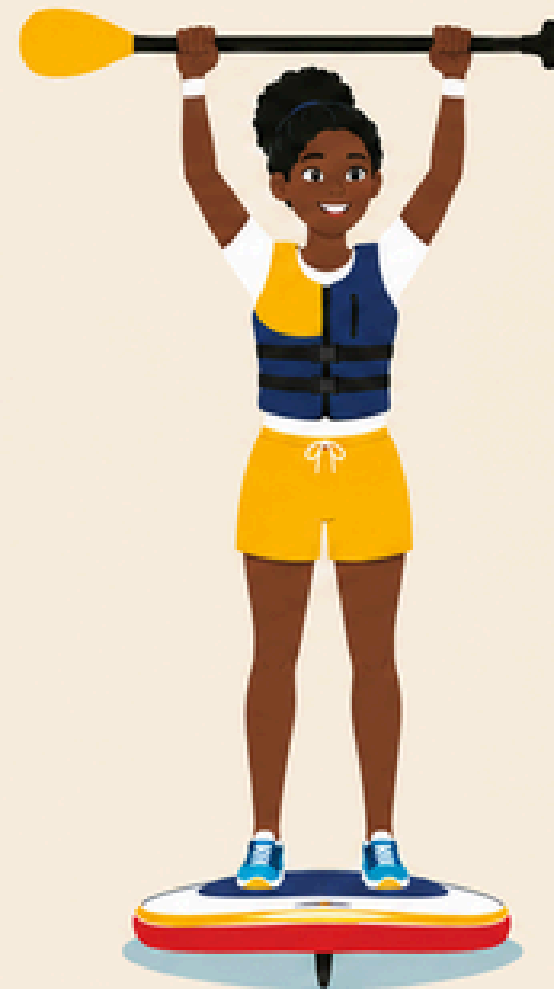


A well-organized group does not rely on one person to manage every detail; it shares responsibility so everyone can paddle more safely and confidently.

- **Lead boat:** Sets an appropriate pace, watches for hazards ahead, and keeps the group on the planned route
- **Sweep boat:** Stays at the back of the group, makes sure no one is left behind, and alerts the group if someone needs help
- **Navigation lead:** Tracks the route, access points, hazards, weather, and timing
- **First aid / rescue support:** Identifies who has medical, rescue, or instructor training and what equipment they are carrying
- **Every paddler:** Speaks up about concerns, watches nearby paddlers, and stays within the group plan

4 Group Communication

Managing your paddling group effectively requires good communication. Hand and paddle signals are used to communicate information over longer distances, and in noisy environments created by wind, waves, and rapids. Common signals include:



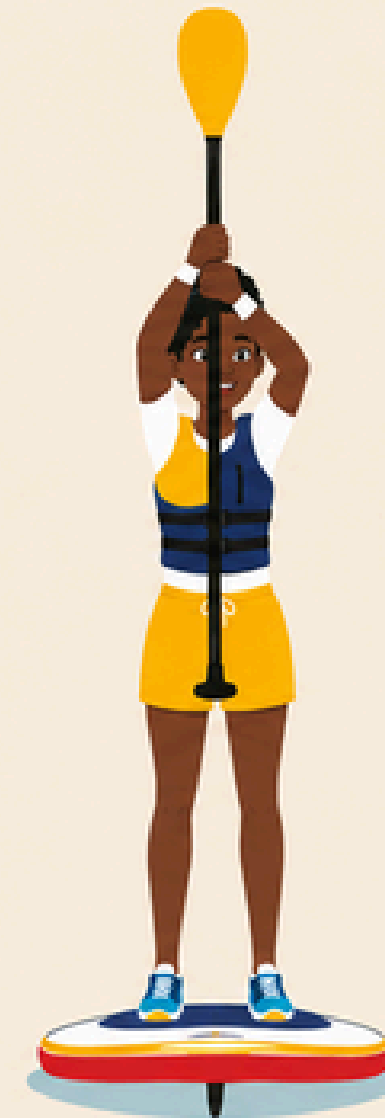
Stop

Paddle above head



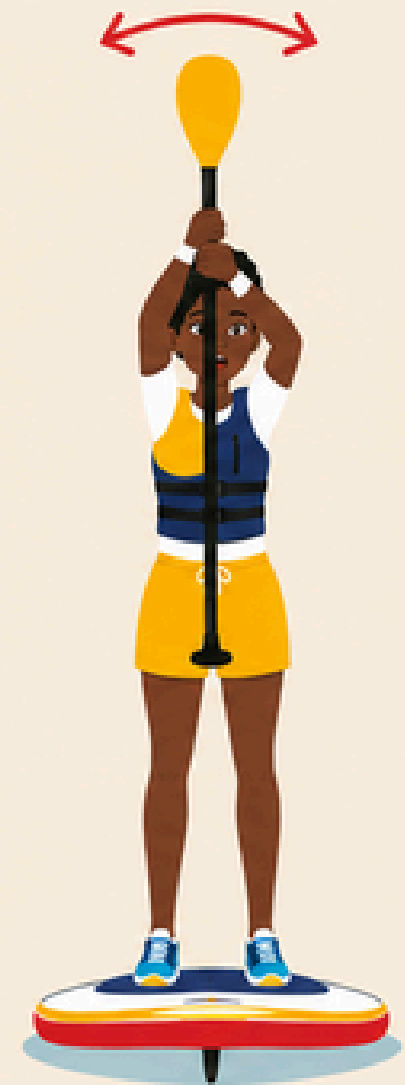
Directions

Point the paddle



Go / All Clear

Point straight up

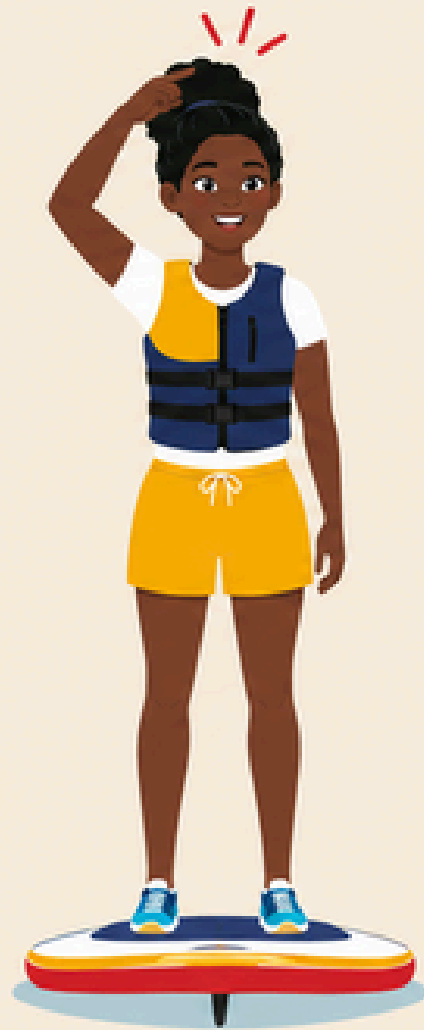


Help

Wave paddle left and right

4 Group Communication

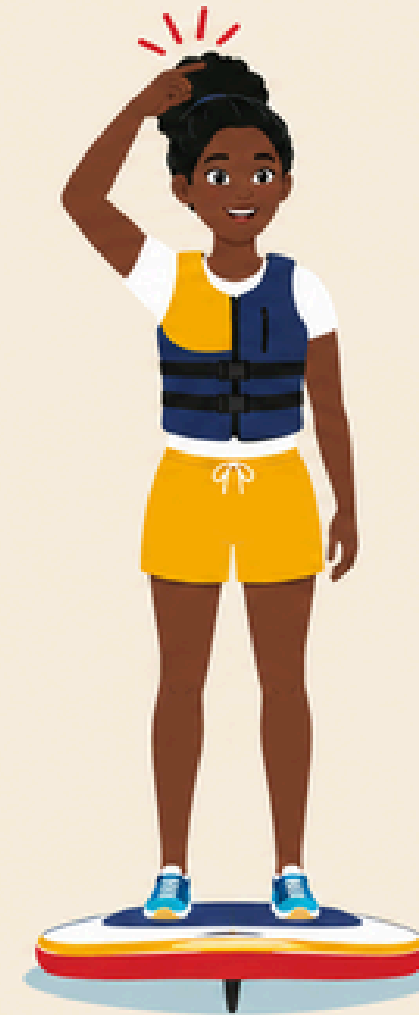
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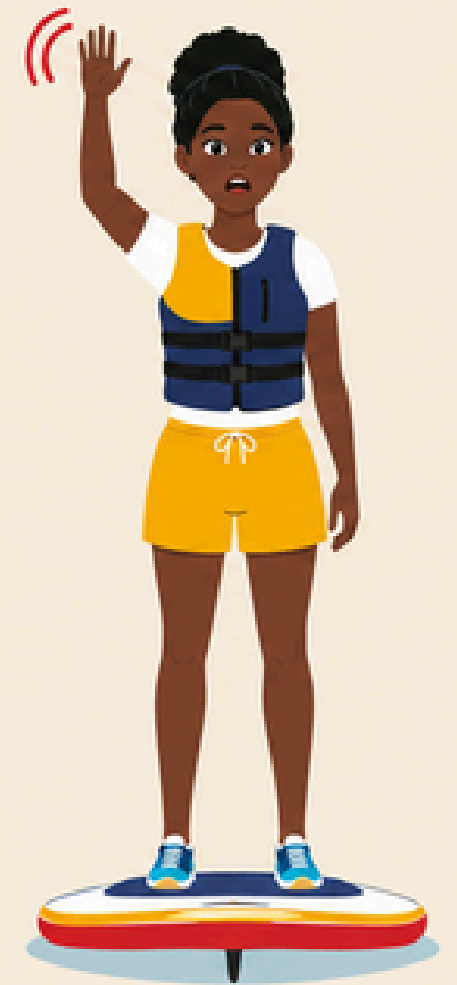
Are you okay?
Tap head



Are you okay?
Point to the paddler



Yes, I am okay.
Tap head



No, I need help!
Wave for help

4 *Group Communication*



- Clear communication helps the group stay together, especially when conditions change or visibility is limited.
- Checking in regularly allows paddlers to share concerns about fatigue, fear, injury, weather, water conditions, or route choices before they become serious problems.
- Agreed-upon signals, hand signs, or simple verbal commands help paddlers communicate over wind, waves, distance, or noise.
- Speaking up early gives the group time to slow down, regroup, choose a safer route, or turn back if needed.
- Good communication supports shared decision-making, so the trip is planned around the whole group rather than only the strongest or most confident paddler.

1 ONE SHORT BLAST



Get attention

Look at me • Check in

3 THREE LONG BLASTS REPEATED



Emergency

Help needed •
Come assist immediately



Review signals with your group before every trip.



4 Alcohol and Drugs



Safe boating requires good judgment. Alcohol and drugs slow reaction times and worsen judgment at times when paddlers are surrounded by a wide range of hazards. The impact of mind-altering substances is often worsened by the motion of the boat and by sun and wind exposure. According to the U.S. Coast Guard's boating accident statistics, when all types of boats are considered, alcohol is the most commonly identified contributing factor to fatal accidents. In addition to the safety hazards, boating under the influence is illegal. It can lead to fines, loss of a boating license or even a boat, and can directly impact a boater's driver's license.

ILLEGAL

Boating Under the Influence is Illegal.



Third Section:

Avoiding Multiuse Waterway Conflict

4 *Avoiding Multi-Use Waterway Conflict*



In general, there are three types of boats within the larger boating community:

- Motorized (including jet-propelled and propeller-driven)
- Sail
- Human-propelled (paddlecraft)

Avoiding multi-use waterway conflict begins with recognizing that paddlers share waterways with many other types of users - both boaters and non-boaters. Non-boating waterway users you may encounter can include swimmers, tubers, snorkelers, surfers, kite surfers, etc. Be kind, courteous, and cautious when sharing waterways with other users.



4 *Avoiding Multi-Use Waterway Conflict*



Motorized, propeller-driven vessels can travel at high speeds and are often loud. Jet-propelled craft also travel at high speeds and are loud. At low speeds, they can be tricky to maneuver. From a paddlecraft, it can be difficult to judge how fast these vessels are travelling, which can lead to collisions.

Jet-propelled craft may not track well at low speeds, and they can be tricky to maneuver near a dock.

Sailboats depend on the wind for propulsion. Wind pushing against a sail causes boats to lean, or heel. To counter this effect, sailboats have a deep keel, daggerboard, or centerboard.



4 Paddling in Proximity to Other Vessels



The term "vessels" covers just about anything floating used for transportation. Knowing how to paddle near other vessels is your responsibility and is also essential for your safety and the safety of others. Here are some important things to remember: transportation. Knowing how to paddle near other vessels is your responsibility and is also essential for your safety and the safety of others.

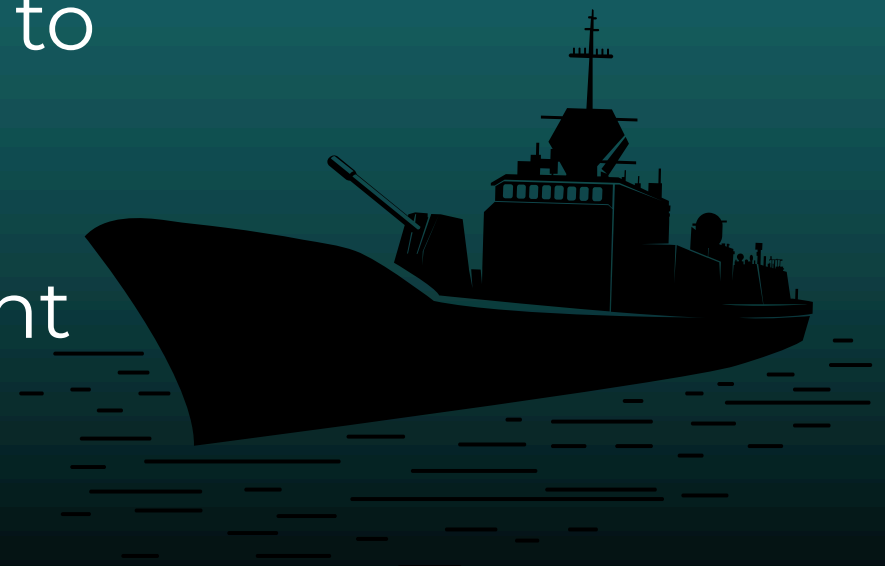
- Be alert
- Be visible
- Be clear
- Be channel smart



④ *Paddling in Proximity to Other Vessels*



- Give commercial vessels, sailboats under sail, emergency vessels, and large motorboats plenty of room.
- Watch for wakes from passing boats and turn your bow into the waves when needed to stay stable.
- Use bright clothing, reflective gear, lights, and sound signals to help others notice you.
- Communicate clearly with your group before entering shared or congested waterways.
- Choose the safest route, even if it means paddling farther to stay out of traffic.
- **Stay clear of restricted zones, security zones, marinas, ferry routes, dams, power plants, and naval or commercial vessels.**
 - Military and Law Enforcement vessels include vessels operated by the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Coast Guard, and many state and local law enforcement agencies. Federal boating laws require small boats to stay at least 100 yards away from military and law enforcement vessels, and recommend 500 yards of separation or more. The only exception to this rule is if the military or law enforcement vessel directs a boat to approach.



Fourth Section:

Rules of the Road

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Rules of the Road



The Nautical Rules of the Road, commonly called NAVRULES, are regulations which aid waterway users in safe navigation, just as driving laws aid vehicles in safe driving.

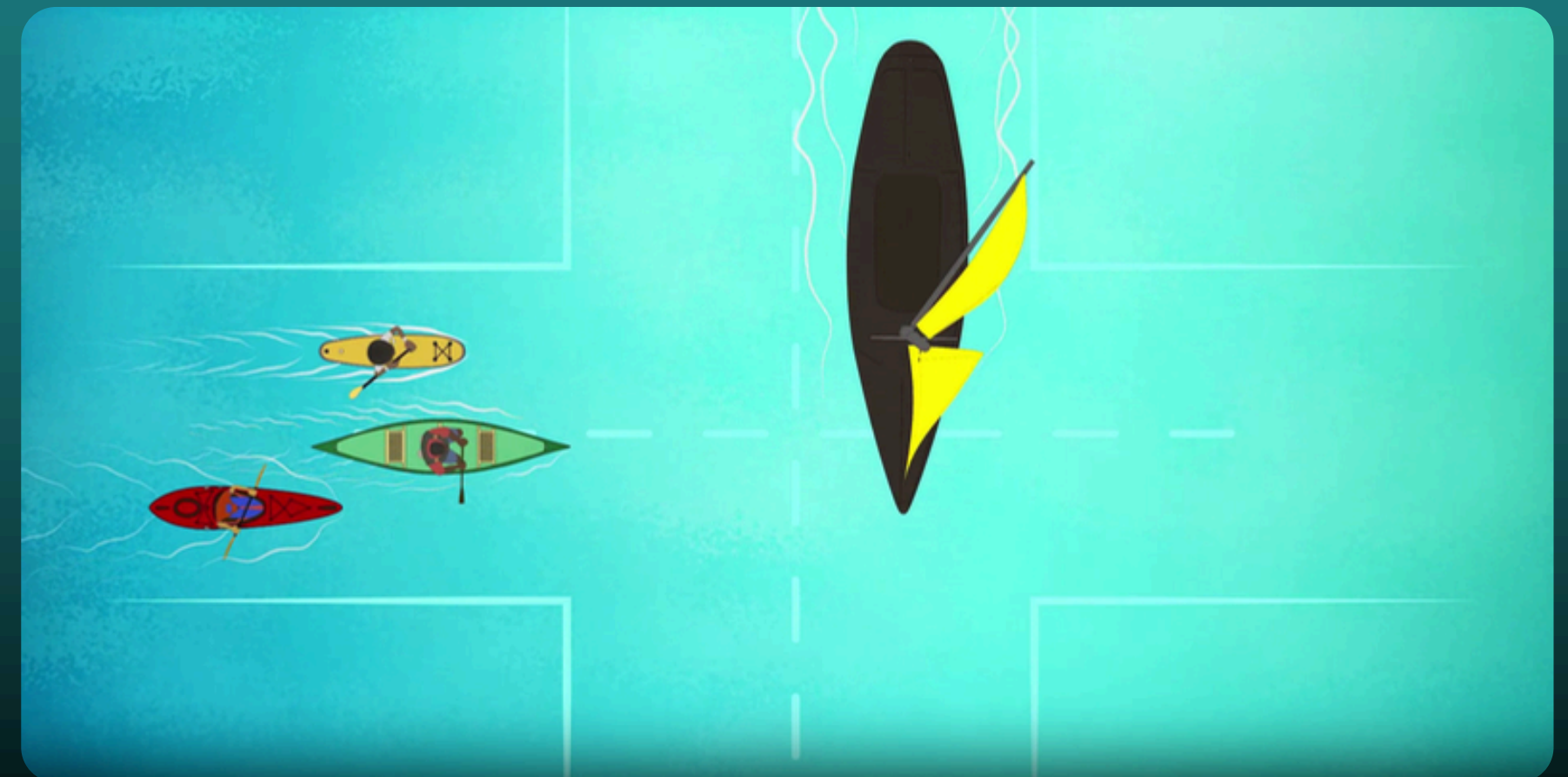
The specific and detailed rules of the road according to the International Regulations for Prevention of Collisions at Sea, 1972 (72COLREGS) and U.S. Inland Navigation Rules can be found: <https://www.dco.uscg.mil/NavRules>



Paddlecraft must follow the same rules as all other boats and do not have any special privileges or automatic right of way.

Paddlecraft are generally smaller, slower, and harder to see than other boats on the water.

Paddlers should give way to other boats.



4

Rules of the Road



**THE FUNDAMENTAL GUIDELINE:
AVOID COLLISIONS AT ALL COSTS**



Paddle Defensively: All boaters are responsible for avoiding collisions. Remember that paddlers are slow, small, and hard to see. Assume other boats don't see you, so you must be the one who takes the first step to avoid a collision.

If two vessels are approaching head-on, both should change course to their right.

If another vessel is overtaking you, it is their responsibility to avoid collision. However, they may not realize the impact their wake might have on you.

4 Rules of the Road



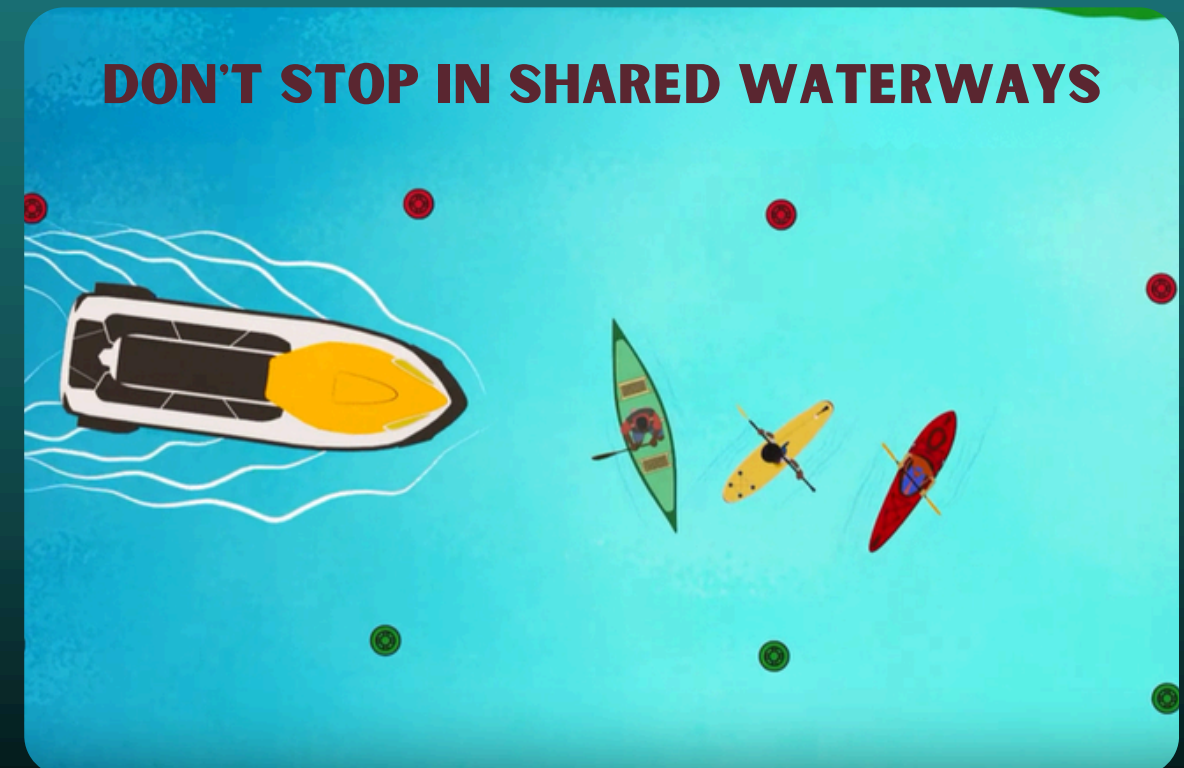
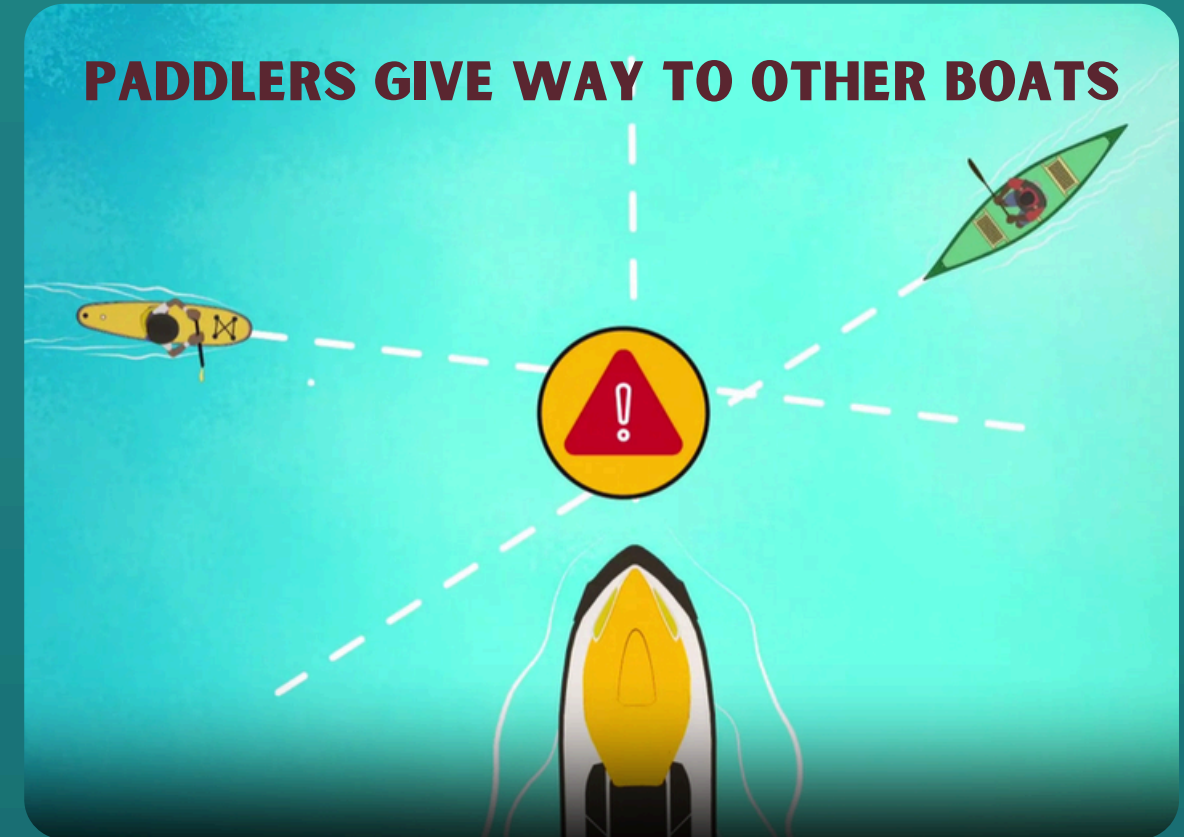
Avoid crossing in front of another vessel's path. It is much safer to cross their path behind them.

If a vessel is approaching from your left, they should cross your path behind you.

Larger vessels must stay in the deep water of channels so paddlers should avoid paddling in channels. If you must paddle in a channel, stay as far to the right of the channel as feasible.

Paddlers should avoid crossing channels. If you must cross a channel, try to cross at a narrow point, perpendicular to the channel, as a group, after checking to be sure you won't interfere with other vessels.

If you paddle between sunset and sunrise, or during other periods of low visibility, you must have a bright light that can be deployed in time to avoid collision. Getting off the water is, however, a safer choice.



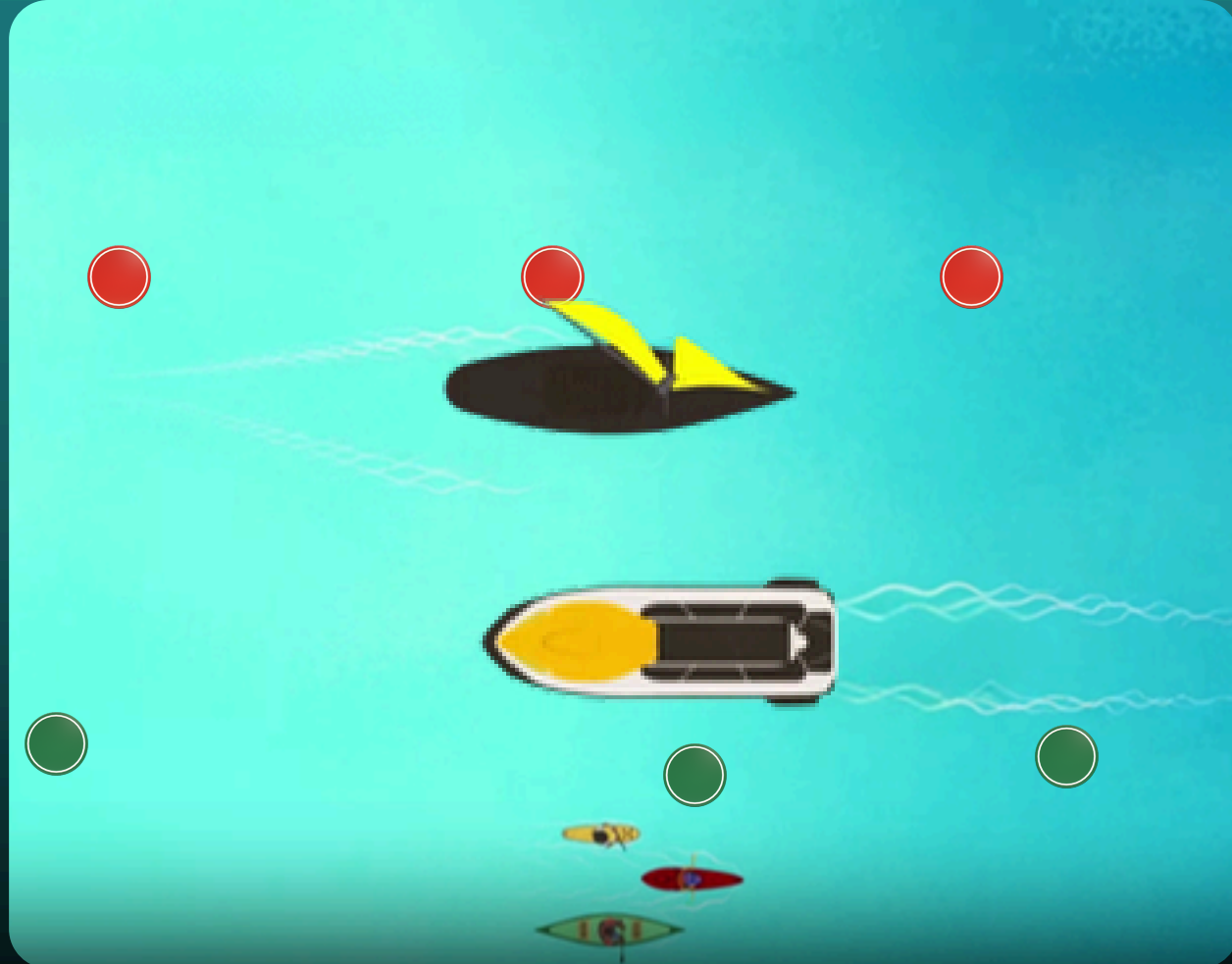
4

Aids to Navigation

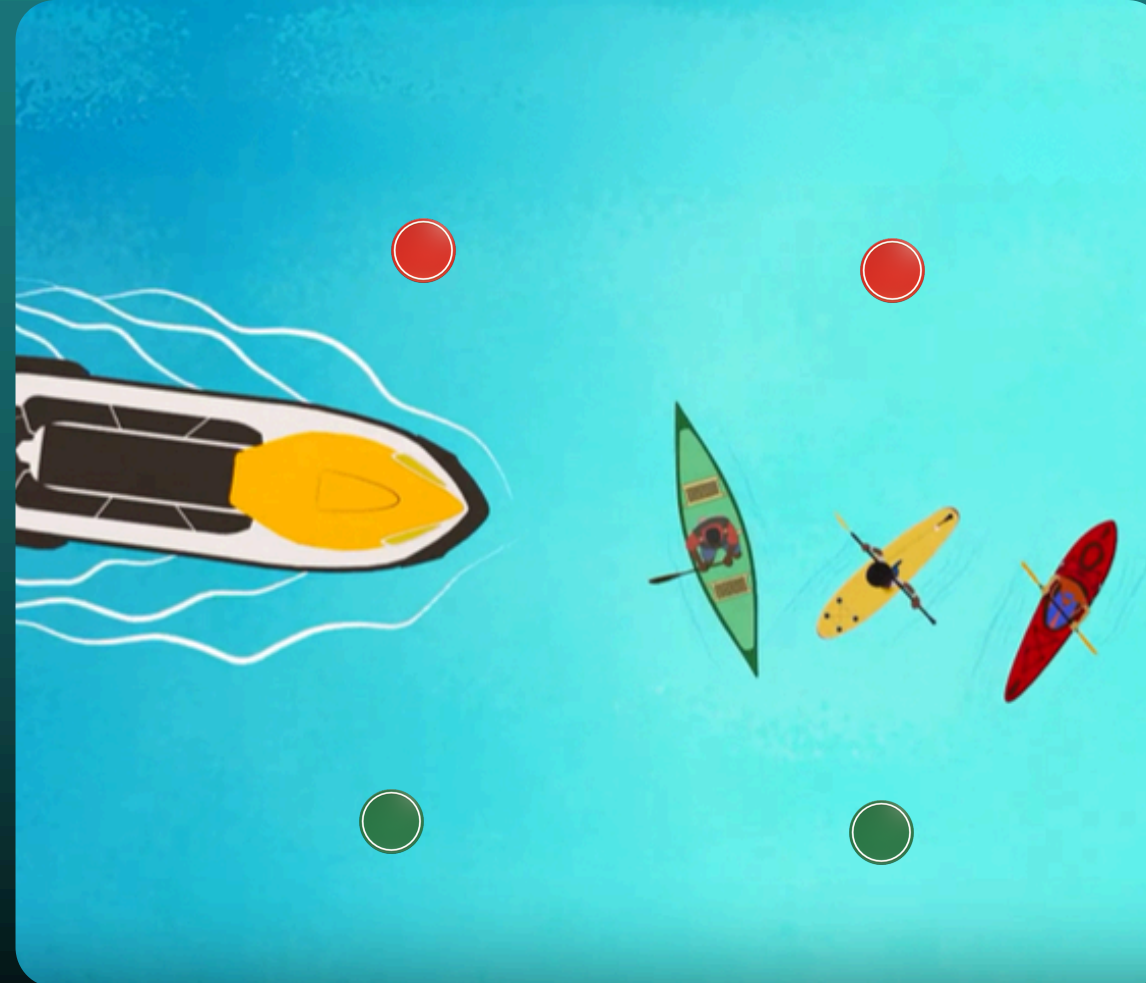


Channels, whether natural or man-made, are paths of water flow serving as transportation and navigation tools for boaters. The deepest water is located in the middle of a channel, and that area is reserved for the largest vessels.

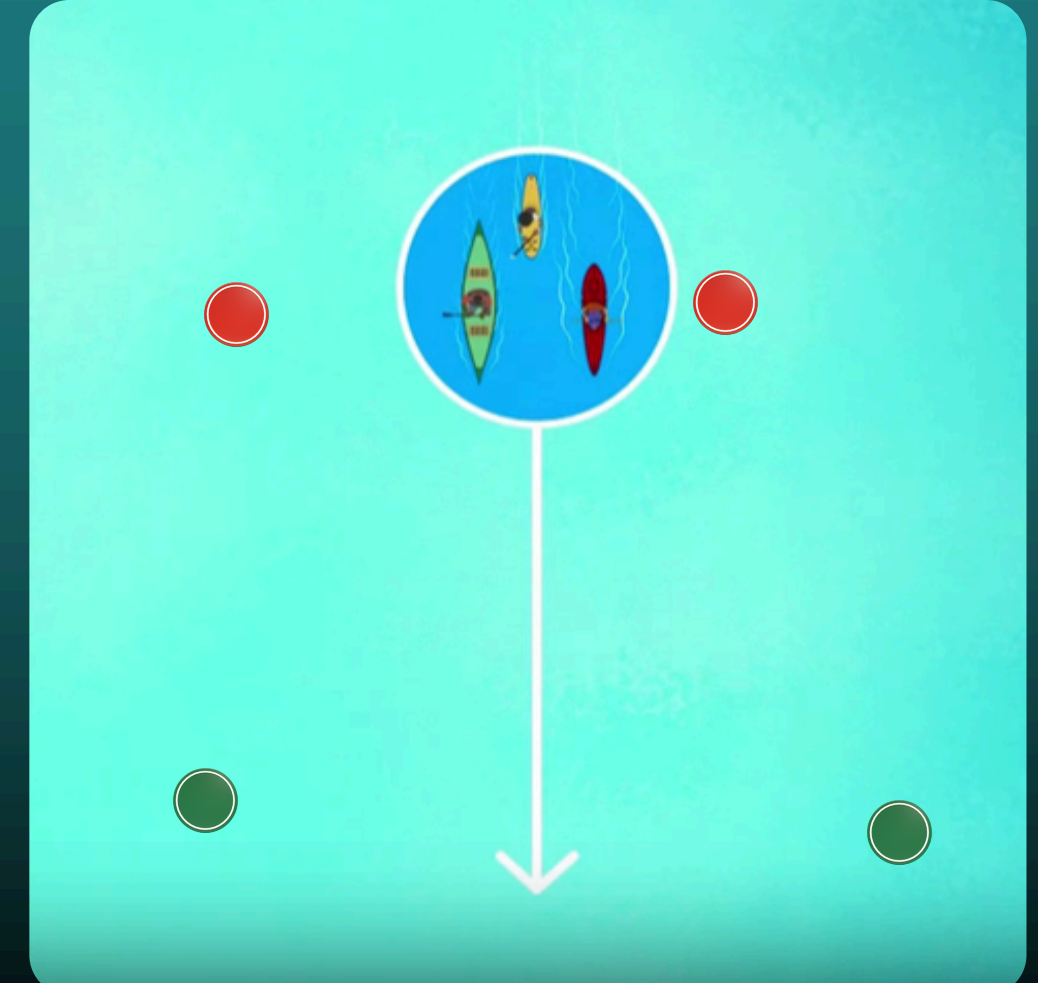
STAY ON THE OUTSIDE OF MARKED CHANNELS AND IN SHALLOW WATERS



DON'T STOP IN SHARED WATERWAYS



WHEN CROSSING, MOVE AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE AT A 90 DEGREE ANGLE



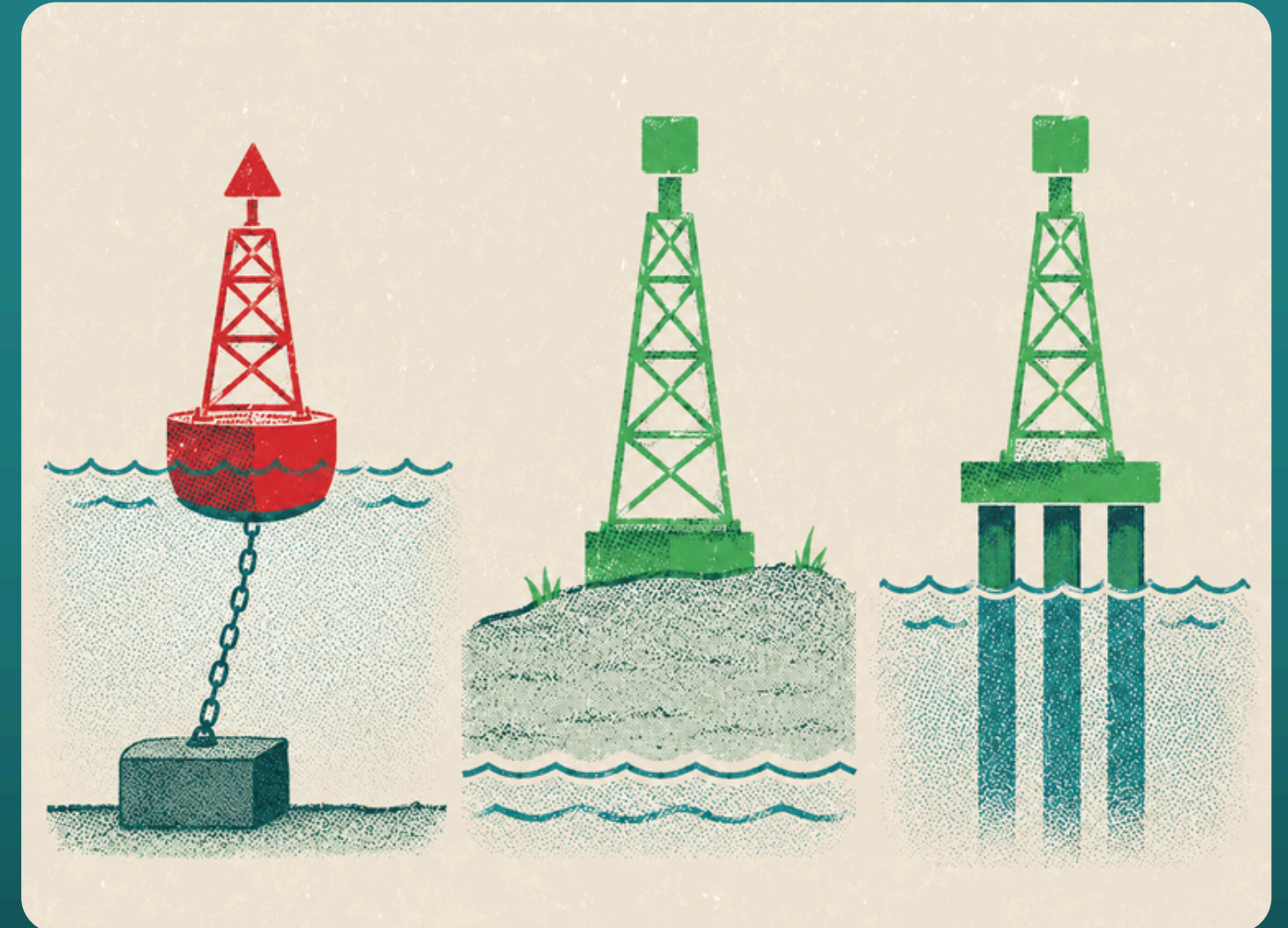
Fifth Section: Aids to Navigation

4 Aids to Navigation

Aids to navigation (ATONs) are used to designate safe paths, indicate hazards, and help direct boat traffic.

ATONs include buoys, which float and are anchored to the bottom and beacons, which are structures fixed to the ground. Beacons can be found on shore (e.g., a lighthouse) or placed in the water.

Channels are deep, safe routes for travel on the water. Channel edges are marked by green and red buoys and beacons, or lateral markers.



4 Channels

Red and green buoys, also known as lateral markers, are used to indicate the edge of a channel and help boaters navigate waterways safely.

- Green markers are identified using odd numbers. Green beacons and some green buoys will have a square shape on them.
- Red markers have even numbers. Some red buoys are conical and called “nuns,” and some red buoys are can-shaped and are called “cans.” Red beacons and some red buoys will have a triangular shape on them.
- Lateral marker numbers decrease as the channel heads out to sea.
- Returning to land: The phrase “red right returning” is a reminder that when returning from sea, red markers should be kept on the boater’s right.



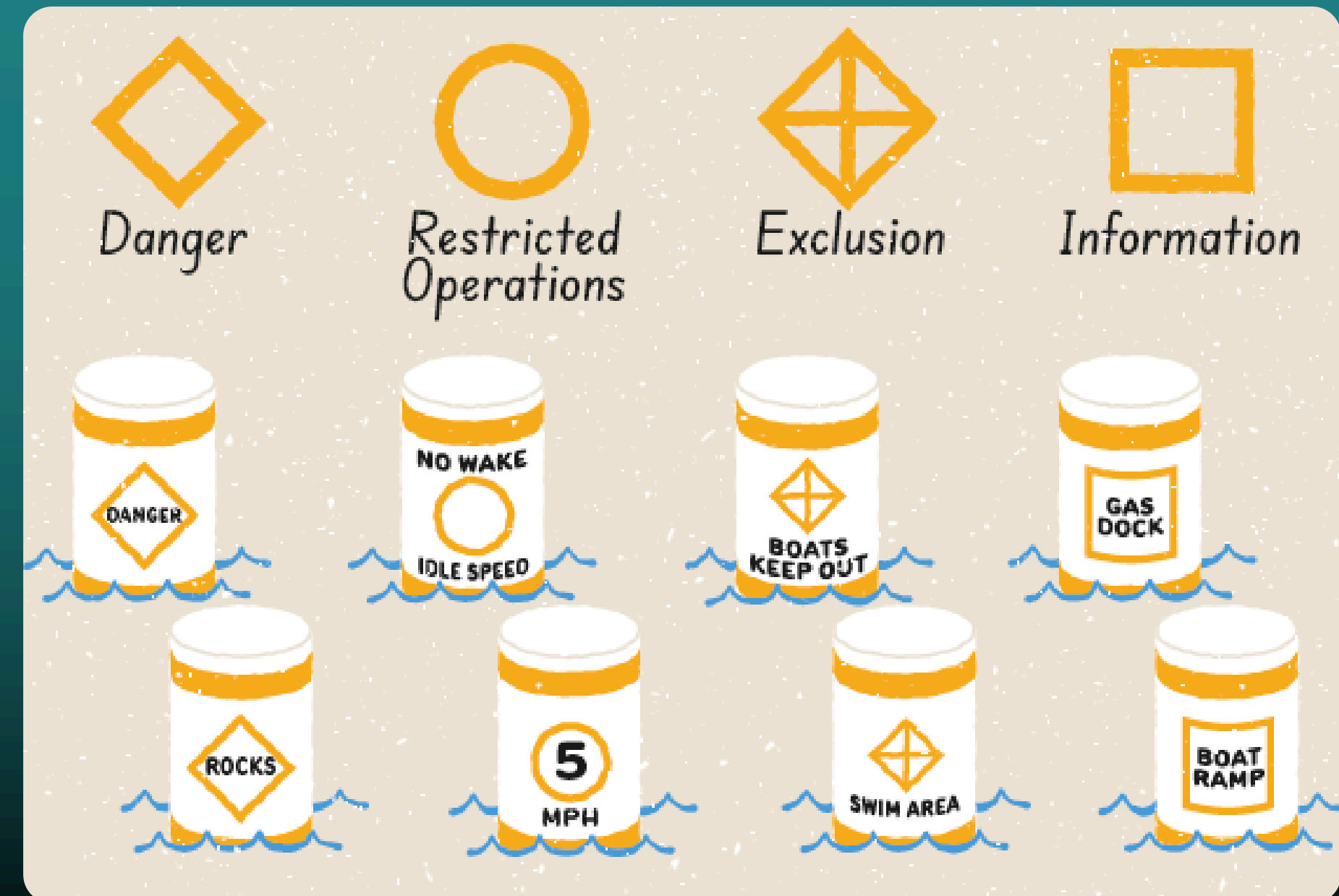
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Regulatory Markers



White regulatory markers are buoys or signs that use shapes and colors to communicate information to boaters. They are often white with orange bands and black text, and are used by local, state, and federal agencies to ensure water safety. The shape of the marker indicates the type of information it's providing.

- Control markers have a circle. Ex: “no wake” zones.
- Hazard markers have a diamond. Ex: “danger - rocks” signs.
- Information markers have a square. Ex: “marina entrance” sign.
- “Keep out” markers have a cross in a diamond.
- Obstruction markers have alternating black and white lines.



4

Regulatory Markers, Continued



- Mooring markers are blue and white.
- Safe water markers have alternating white and red lines. They indicate safe passage on both sides of the marker.



Mooring



Safe Water



Sixth Section:
Learning from Experience

4

Learning from Experience



Each trip is part of a paddler's ongoing growth: reflecting on what went well, what could improve, and what was learned is an important part of becoming a safer, more confident paddler. Be sure to make time to share discussions with your group members:

- What went well on this trip, and what helped the group succeed?
- Did the route, conditions, and timing match our float plan?
- How well did the group communicate before, during, and after the trip?
- Did the lead, sweep, and other group roles work effectively?
- Were there any hazards, close calls, conflicts, or surprises we should learn from?
- What skills, gear, or planning details should we improve before the next trip?
- What did each paddler learn that will help them grow in confidence and safety?



Last Section:

Chapter Summary

4

Chapter Summary



Chapter 4 emphasized that making smart decisions on the water takes knowledge, practice, collaboration, and experience. Through topics such as:

- Go/No-Go Decisions
- Paddler's Responsibilities
- Group Management
- On-Water Communication
- Avoiding Multi-Use Waterway Conflict
- Paddling in Proximity to Other Vessels
- Nautical Rules of the Road
- Aids to Navigation & Regulatory Markers

This content helped illustrate how communication, situational awareness, changing conditions, and shared waterway use all connect. These skills help paddlers make thoughtful choices, support their group, reduce conflict, and respond early when something changes. This chapter also reinforced that each trip is part of a paddler's ongoing growth: reflecting on what went well, what could improve, and what was learned is an important part of becoming a safer, more confident paddler.

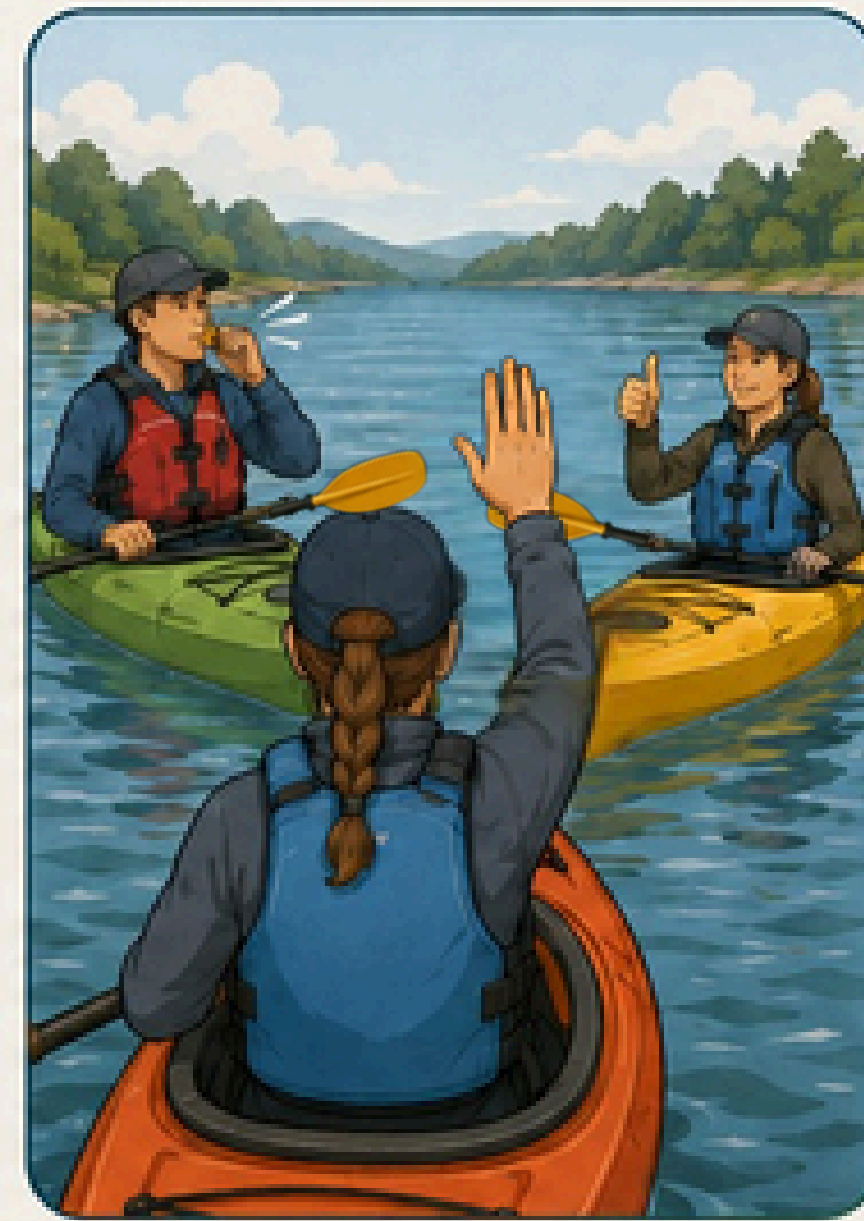
1 GO / NO-GO DECISIONS



2 PADDLER RESPONSIBILITIES



3 GROUP MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION



4 OTHER VESSELS, RULES OF THE ROAD & AIDS TO NAVIGATION





Thank You!



This concludes the Smart Start for Safe Paddling Chapter 4: Smart Decisions.

Be sure to review all of the chapters so that you have all the information you need to have a safe and enjoyable time on the water!

1

2

3

4

Smart Gear

Smart Skills

Smart Plan

Smart Decisions



Connect With ACA



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The American Canoe Association's (ACA) vision is to engage millions of paddlers with safe and healthy opportunities for challenge, learning, service, and enjoyment. ACA's Smart Start for Safe Paddling is a holistic program which features comprehensive books, student activity workbooks, free online coursework, instructor's guide with presentation slides, and a wide collection of complementary resources.

Find all this and more:

<https://americancanoe.org/smart-start>