



RISK ENHANCEMENT

Some Bad Arguments for Skipping Thermal Protection by Moulton Avery

An Oregon paddler posted the following comment on Facebook about his decision to selectively dress for the water temperature. He raised some classic excuses and rationalizations, every single one of which has been debunked countless times over the past 30 years. I strongly disagree with virtually everything he said, and I've responded to the points he made below.

His comment is in *Italics*.

"This is a topic I have spent a great deal of time thinking about. The conventional wisdom is to dress for the water temperature. That is a good "starting point". It is not, however, the best choice in all circumstances. You've hit on one of the cases where dressing for the water temperature can be a problem. If the air temperature is high and the water temperature is low, you may have to worry about hyperthermia. Also, immersion wear can be really uncomfortable. Paddling clothing tends to favor people with "normal" body sizes. Being short and fat, I have a terrible time finding dry suits that fit. So I often do not dress for the water temperature."

"My rule is dress for the reasonable worst case scenario. If I am surfing or in the open ocean, I wear a dry suit even in the summer. If I'm paddling on the Multnomah channel, a place where I am generally 10 or 20 yards from shore, I don't wear a dry suit even in the winter. Of course a winter swim would be seriously unpleasant, but the chances of a swim given my rolling abilities is essentially zero. And even if I did swim, I'm only a few strokes from shore."

"Which raises another point. If you have a bomb-proof roll, the chances of a swim drop dramatically. And since I know this could raise some objections, I define a 'bomb-proof' roll as one where barring injury or physical entrapment, you know you will roll up. Therefore, if conditions are not intense (i.e. no large breaking waves) or I am not playing in current around wing-dams, I often push the envelope on dressing for immersion. Given the fact that immersion wear can be quite uncomfortable, if it's not needed due to a thoughtful risk assessment relative to skills/conditions, skipping it when not needed can be a wise move."

Note: The Multnomah Channel is a 22-mile-long distributary of the Willamette River that lies just north of Portland, Oregon. It averages 30 feet deep and 100 yards wide.

My Response:

1) The foundation for the majority of these excuses is the irresponsible "Challenging Conditions" myth that was first

promoted almost 40 years ago by TASK, a trade association of sea kayak manufacturers and others with a financial interest in the growth of the sport. See *Additional Information* at the end of this article.

2) Dressing for the water temperature isn't just “conventional wisdom” and “a good starting point”. It is in fact one of the most basic safety rules in paddlesports. There are no valid exceptions to that rule, and it is absolutely the best choice in all circumstances.

3) Thermal Protection:

Lack of comfort is a very poor excuse for skipping thermal protection. Wetsuits and drysuits definitely take some getting used to – just like wearing a PFD or a seat-belt – but that initial period of adjustment is a small price to pay as opposed to the horrendous and life-threatening experience of cold shock and rapid physical incapacitation.

4) Swimming for Shore:

Saying that a “winter swim” in the Multnomah Channel would be “seriously unpleasant” betrays a lack of understanding about the reality of trying to swim in 38F (3C) - 40F (4C) water without thermal protection. It's excruciatingly painful, and characterized by a complete loss of breathing control and swimming failure.

Swimming 20 yards under those circumstances - even with a well-secured PFD - would be a physically demanding and

frightening ordeal. At that distance, without thermal protection, you definitely aren't "only a few strokes from shore".

Here's an [account](#) of one paddler's desperate 90 foot swim in freezing water while wearing a PFD.

5) Rolling:

Unless you have plenty of experience rolling without thermal protection in very cold water, you have absolutely no idea whether your "bombproof" roll will work in those conditions.

Unless you're wearing ear plugs or a neo hood, cold water entering your ear canal will likely cause instantaneous vertigo – a well-known cause of blown rolls.

Furthermore, without thermal protection, there is an additional and very ominous hazard – suddenly drowning before you're able to roll up or even exit the cockpit. This well-documented hazard is caused by gasping and inhaling water due to cold shock. It's discussed in detail on the Center's web site.

6) There's a simple workaround for the overheating issue, which is to use evaporative cooling to offload excess heat. This is very easy to do because you're surrounded by cold water. (See *Additional Information* below.)

7) Risk Enhancement:

None of these excuses constitute a "thoughtful risk-assessment". The only situation in which "skipping" thermal protection can possibly be a "wise move" is if the water is warm

enough so that it's not needed. Anything less is risk-enhancement.

Original Source: National Center for Cold Water Safety - Facebook Post / April 2018

Additional Information:

[Keeping Your Cool In The Heat Article](#)

[Keeping Your Cool In The Heat Video](#)

[Bared SKIN](#) - Where The Sea Kayaking Industry Went Wrong on Cold Water Safety:

This is an ANORAK (Association of North Atlantic Kayakers) article on the historical roots of the “Challenging Conditions” myth developed almost 40 years ago by the Trade Association of Sea Kayaking.

[Anatomy of A Bad Decision](#): This 2010 Sea Kayaker Magazine article by Moulton Avery explains why the “Challenging Conditions” argument undermines cold water safety.

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