

## **Canoeing on the Sea - A Guide to Good Environmental Practice**

Canoeing and kayaking on the sea offers a fantastic platform from which to watch seabirds and seals, and even whales and dolphins in their natural environment. To experience the nature of the sea at such close quarters is an amazing privilege, but like all privileges it carries a responsibility.

It is important to avoid and keep to a minimum any possible disturbance or impact by becoming more knowledgeable about wildlife and habitats in the marine environment. For instance, an awareness of the breeding seasons of birds and seals and not getting too close when they are most sensitive to our presence.



### **Minimising Disturbance**

When encountering wildlife, whether on sea or on land follow these basic principles:

- Try not to startle or panic wild animals; never surround them, and don't block them in from their escape routes. You will enjoy the sightings much more if they are relaxed about your presence. Sudden movements scare wildlife and give you away.
- Be aware that the size of your group, the length of time you are there, and the frequency of a human presence are all factors that could threaten their wellbeing.
- Be aware of protected area designations – Special Sites of Scientific Interest (SSSI's), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's), Special Protection Areas (SPA's apply to rare and vulnerable species of birds), National Nature Reserves, and Marine Nature Reserves (to be known as Marine Conservation Zones).
- Don't linger for too long when you are close to wildlife. By all means look, but then move on.
- As well as avoiding disturbance to marine animals, also be aware of the need to avoid damaging plants and the habitats that the animals depend upon.
- Remember, you are sharing the environment – leave it undisturbed for the wildlife and those who follow.

### **Sea Birds**

Cliff nesting seabirds are most vulnerable when the adults are with their eggs and young chicks. If they are suddenly scared off the ledges they may lose their young, which may fall or be taken by predators. It is good practice to move by quietly and steadily so as not to panic the birds. As well as being aware of cliff nesting birds whilst you are on the water, remember that your presence whilst walking on cliff tops could also be threatening to the birds.

In preparation for your journey check to see what animals and birds might be affected by your presence and when the breeding and nesting times are and manage your behavior and journeys appropriately.

Many birds nest in burrows or even on open ground along the tops of cliffs. Walking over a burrow can crush the nest, or cause the adult to desert its young, so do try to be aware of their presence. Be vigilant for nest grounds and move out of any breeding area as soon as you realise you are in or close to it.

It is therefore vital that we do our best to avoid disturbance and help seabird numbers to become re-established.

### **Birds on the Open Sea**

Try to avoid panicking seabirds on the water into flight. Adult birds at sea are likely to be feeding or resting so disturbance is likely to cause them to expend extra energy, thereby reducing their feeding time, which in turn affects their survival chances. In late summer many birds moult and are at their weakest and most vulnerable. You can help by moving away quietly and steadily as soon as you are aware of being close to a colony.

### **Seal colonies**

Never land on a beach with a colony of breeding seals, except in an emergency.

Avoid beaches with small pups on them, as a sudden disturbance can lead to pups being squashed, or separated from their parents. Common seal pups can go into the sea almost immediately after birth, whereas grey seal pups remain on the beach for about 3 weeks as they cannot swim.

Seals will often watch canoeists pass by, either from a rock or in the water. Do not use your ability to approach quietly as a way to get close to seals. If you approach silently, seals (and other animals) may be startled by your sudden appearance. The best way to avoid causing them to panic is to avoid making eye contact. If you watch a seal out of the corner of your eyes it is far less likely to dive. Try to maintain a slow, steady and predictable rhythm as you paddle past seals.

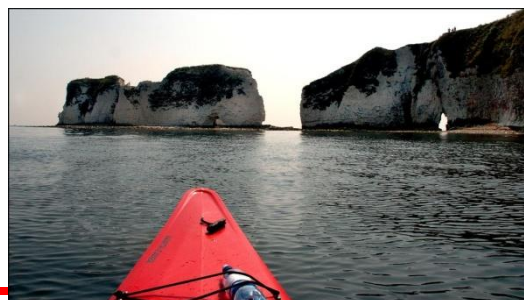
Please be aware that many tour boat owners make a living from taking tourists to look at seal colonies. The seals usually stay put when these boats approach, but often take to the water when canoeists are in the same area. In many instances, rather than disturbance, this can be attributed to the seals natural curiosity to approach and investigate canoes as they often do with divers.

Difficulties arise when the presence of canoeists cause the seals to leave their rocks and beaches, to be followed by tour boats with tourists who are disappointed at not seeing the seals hauled out on land and this in turn leaves the tour boat owners annoyed. You can assist by being aware of the areas where such tour boats operate and take extra care to avoid disturbing or as can be the case, attracting the seals interest.

### **Porpoises, Dolphins, Whales and Basking Sharks**

Many cetaceans (porpoises, dolphins and whales) and basking sharks etc can be seen from a canoe but it is important to be aware how you can be a danger to the animal, and how it can be a danger to you.

When approaching large animals - such as cetaceans and basking sharks, remember - a moving canoe outline can appear threatening when heading straight towards



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them. Always approach at an oblique angle. Move steadily and predictably, and do not go too close.

Never chase after a cetacean or basking shark. If they want to see you they will come over and check you out, but if they choose to swim away from you then respect their wish.

- **Porpoises** never show any interest in kayaks so you will just see them swim by without altering their course.
- **Dolphins** on the other hand are more inquisitive and will often come over towards you. The best advice if you are close to dolphins is to just stay still and watch, or maintain a straight course and they will follow if they are interested in you.
- There are various species of **whales** and they can also come close to you. Their colossal size is obvious when they are next to you, so avoid blocking their escape route, but otherwise stay still and let them do the moving.
- Avoid getting too close to a **basking shark** as it could easily capsize you if you get in front of it, or cause you serious injury if it lashed out with its powerful tail with you alongside it.

### Otters

Otters are commonly encountered along many coastlines. They should be observed from a distance that doesn't disturb their routine activities, such as fishing, resting and playing. Under no circumstances should they be pursued by canoe.

### Shingle Shores and Dunes

There are many varieties of birds nest on shingle beaches. Care should be taken not to disturb nesting birds on these sites. The eggs and chicks are very well camouflaged against the shingle and are easily trodden underfoot. Check before you plan your trip as to the nesting arrangements etc of the birds and mammals in the area you plan to canoe in.

Take care during stops not to damage vegetation on dunes, which is important for stabilising and helping them grow. Carry canoes/kayaks rather than dragging them, especially in dunes.



### Non-Native or Alien Species

The seas around many countries/continents can contain a number of non-native, or alien, species of plants and animals, some of which can cause problems due to their ability to out compete our native species.

Take care not to transfer alien species including seaweed between locations by cleaning your boat and checking inside the housing of retractable skegs.\*

### Estuaries

Many estuaries in the world play host to waders and waterfowl. Undisturbed feeding and resting may be vital to their survival, especially in severe weather. You can assist



by avoiding mudflats and sandbanks with large concentrations of birds.

### Rocky Outcrops and Marshes

Be aware that rocky outcrops and marshes often provide shelter and safety for wildlife. Otters use outcrops for their nest holts and seals haul out onto rocks exposed by the tide. A number of birds live in marsh areas and use reed beds for security from predators.

### On Land

When on land canoeists still need to be aware of their responsibilities towards wildlife. Do not leave behind any food scraps, as these attract scavenging animals and birds. Take out all your litter and if you take out some litter left by other people you will be leaving the coastline that bit cleaner than it was before your visit. Carry a trowel and bury your own waste (or take it back with you) and urinate well away from open water, rivers and nesting areas etc.

### Fires

Canoeists on multi-day trips will quite often have a fire on a beach as part of their overnight camping experience. Following a few simple guidelines should ensure that you don't cause any damage. (Check first to see if the local laws/by laws allow fires)

Fires below the high water mark are washed away by the next high tide, so this can be a good way of ensuring that your fire is cleared away and properly put out.

Before starting to build a fire assess the fire risk. Consider the wind direction and strength and think about the proximity of any dry forest or vegetation. If in doubt, don't have a fire.

Be careful on boulder beaches that there aren't any birds, such as storm petrels nesting under the boulders.

If you have a fire above the high water mark then use established fire rings or mound fires on sand or soil piled up to provide a protective base for your fire.

Make sure your fire is well burnt out and that there is no risk of it spreading before you go to your tents and check there is no trace whatsoever of your fire before leaving in the morning.



### Canoeing in Context

The impact that canoeing at sea has on the sea has to be seen in context. Compared to certain industries and other recreational activities, any disturbance from canoeing is minimal and most unlikely to have a significant or lasting impact on wildlife; but we should not be complacent. Canoe England is actively promoting the fact that all canoeists should strive to learn more about the sea, and develop skills and senses that ensure marine wildlife does not suffer from our visits. The breeding season for birds and common seals can coincide with the best conditions for canoeing, so it is important to be aware of the needs of wildlife.

### Seeking Further Wildlife Advice

If in doubt about carrying out any activity contact one of the nature conservation bodies in your desired route for advice regarding special areas, or species that may be at risk from your presence, or particular nesting and breeding times when you should be particularly vigilant.

**Follow these three principles and we can all ensure a sustainable coastal environment for us and future generations to enjoy.**

#### Be aware.

- Before you go wildlife watching learn as much as you can about the animals.
- Understand how your actions could affect wildlife and recognise the signs that animals make when they feel threatened.
- Be alert, observant and patient, and be sensitive to the interests of the wildlife you are watching.

#### Take responsibility for your own actions and those you are leading by

- Constantly assess wildlife, and if you see signs of disturbance move away quietly.
- Consider how much time you spend observing animals. The presence of people over long periods can be disturbing, however careful you may be.

#### Have respect for other people, other coastal users, wildlife and the environment.

- Respect the privacy and livelihoods of those who live by the sea.
- Leave the environment as you find it.

### Identification of Species

It is always interesting to get home from a trip and look up in a wildlife book the bird or mammal that you have seen. Most people who canoe at sea have a few wildlife books to help them with their identification queries.

#### Caring for the Marine environment Summary.

Your canoe is a traditional craft used throughout the world for exploring wilderness areas and quietly observing wildlife and flora. It causes no erosion, noise or pollution, and leaves no trace of its passing.

By following the simple steps below you can ensure your presence is not detrimental to the marine and equally the freshwater environment, to minimise and avoid accidentally disturbing wildlife and their habitats.



- Find out about the area before you go, noting its sensitive places and protected places, species and breeding seasons.
- Leave no trace of your visit and take your litter home with you.
- When clearing litter left by others, handle it with care.
- Leave the environment as you find it
- Keep noise to a minimum.

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- Do not “seal” launch or drag boats to avoid wearing away natural banks. Float your canoe for launching, lift out when landing and carry it to and from the water.
- Do not damage bank side vegetation when launching or landing.
- Where possible keep to any designated paths or launching points.
- On coastal waters take care on shingles beaches - they may be nesting grounds
- Avoid dragging canoes through sand dunes and associated areas . -
- Canoe a safe distance away from wildlife to avoid causing disturbance and stress – otters, seal colonies, rafts of wildfowl and sea birds, their nesting, shelter and feeding areas i.e. mudflats, marshes. Remember basking sharks, dolphins and whales can also be a danger to you.
- Constantly assess wildlife. If you see signs of disturbance move away quietly.
- Note Environment Agency information on measures on the spread of alien species in UK rivers and threat of disease to UK salmon stocks after using canoes and equipment overseas

Be the eyes and ears on the water. Report pollution, wildlife problems, damage, incidents etc to the relevant authorities.

There is a wealth of wildlife for you to see and enjoy throughout the British Isles and off our extensive coastline, but a lot of these animals are vulnerable to disturbance if not approached in a responsible way that respects their wild nature.

We share the waters we use for our recreation with a wide range of birds, fish and cetaceans but the presence of boats should not necessarily have to mean disturbance to the local wildlife. If craft are handled with sensitivity there can be minimal or zero disturbance.

Above all enjoy your canoeing and don't forget your camera!

We can help by report pollution, wildlife problems, damage, incidents etc to the relevant authorities

- Leave No Trace <http://www.lnt.org/>
- Natural England <http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/>
- Environment Agency [www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk)
- Greenblue <http://www.thegreenblue.org.uk/>
- Maine and Coast Guard Agency <http://www.mcga.gov.uk/>
- For Coastguard and other emergency services call 999
- RSPCA <http://www.rspca.org.uk/>
- RSPCA for wildlife and animals in distress – Telephone 0990 55 59 99 (24 hours)
- RSPB <http://www.rspb.org.uk/>

\*Alien species from canoeing in some waters could be transferred to inland waters etc. A fish parasite (Gyrodactylus Salaris) from Europe would have serious consequences for UK salmon

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stocks. It can survive in damp or wet conditions for 5 or 6 days on water recreation clothing and equipment – canoes, small boats, fishing tackle etc. It is particularly important all equipment used abroad is disinfected before re-use in the UK.

For details of this procedure and further information visit <http://www.canoe-england.org.uk/access-and-environment/environment/> and [www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk)

*With grateful thanks for the Scottish Canoe Association who assisted greatly in the development of this document. <http://www.canoescotland.org/>*

