

On Cold Water and Tragic Consequences – Ken Altfather

Today, November 19, 2008, the newspaper carried a sad story about a father and two sons whose car skidded into a pond with tragic consequences. We've had a cold spell here and for the past few days lows have been around 20 degrees and the highs about 30 and there are several inches of snow on the ground. As of this writing, one boy is okay, the other, a 3 years old, is still in the hospital and the father is dead. The article indicates that the father was a hero by breaking a window and getting his sons out of the car. While one son swam to safety, the father succumbed trying to get the 3 year old to shore. The 3 year old was retrieved floating in the pond and revived by emergency personnel. We don't know all the details, but it is safe to assume that cold water played a role in this.

Several weeks ago, I wanted to test a new kayak re-entry procedure that I've been working on. During the summer, I was too busy to mess with it, but now that business has slowed I had the time. Unfortunately, but also fortunately, the weather and the creek had gotten significantly colder.

On the day I tested the concept, the weather was a chilly 50 degrees, gray and windy and I'm guessing the water was also about 50 degrees. It was not pretty, yet what an excellent opportunity to test the concept in a somewhat stressful condition. And, to add to the test, I'd wear exactly what we advise against – jeans and a cotton t-shirt. No wet suit, no dry suit, not even a paddling jacket. I did however wear my pfd.

Now this is not an extreme example of cold water, but it was a useful exercise nonetheless. During the test, I was in and out of the water several times over a 15 minute period. At the end of the period, I was having difficulty doing tasks that I had rehearsed mentally many times. I'd say first stage hypothermia was setting in and after I got out, changed clothes and stood by a heater, it still took me an hour to quit shivering.

A week later on an even nastier day, I tried the technique again with a few changes, but this time I wore a neoprene wet suit top and bottom and a waterproof paddling jacket. Between the two immersions here's what I learned:

1. Don't panic. That first dunk can be a shock. Will yourself to focus on your tasks and control your breathing. Yes, it's bad, but you have no alternative but to focus on what you need to do to get out. One Spring, I was breaking in a new canoe racing partner and we capsized in a section of the Erie canal with vertical concrete walls. This guy was bigger and stronger than I, but he came up in shock, unable to catch his breath. Being that I had a long history of capsizing racing boats in all kinds of conditions, I came up thinking "oh crap swimming again". The only difference between us was simply our states of mind and once my partner settled down, he used his strength to get us out of the canal.
2. Jeans and cotton shirts offer no protection and I mean NO protection. They are instantly cold in the water and provide no help in the air when wet. Of course you already knew that, but there is nothing like a personal test to reinforce it.
3. Neoprene garments help a lot. Again, you knew this too, but it bears reinforcing. What a difference. On my second venture, which lasted around 5 minutes, I was not even beginning to get chilled. In fact, I'd go so far as to say I was comfortable for this relatively short period. The neoprene used for most paddling garments will slow your heat loss, but of course it won't stop it.

4. A paddling jacket also helps. After exiting the water from my second foray, the paddling jacket had kept my upper body and the neoprene wet-shirt dry with the exception of just around the waist and neckline. So, a good paddling jacket on top of a wet suit provides added protection. Here's another story, this time from a customer who I am happy to say told me this personally. This nice young man was paddling alone on Lake Oneida, in October many years ago, right down the middle of the lake (at least a mile off shore). A storm popped up and waves knocked him over. Having no roll, he exited the boat. Now get this - no PFD, no paddle float, no re-entry skills, no wet or dry suit and a mile of 50ish degree water. He tried swimming the boat to shore and was getting nowhere so he abandoned it and swam alone for over an hour. He attributes his life to two things: 1) he was a very good swimmer and 2) he was wearing a paddling jacket which kept him just warm enough to save himself. So, investing in a good paddling jacket pays big dividends (unlike the stock market these days).
5. And finally, although this doesn't come from my recent swims in the creek I'll throw it in as it bears on the subject. This observation comes from another personal experience with the same canoe racer I mentioned above. Several years (and many capsize) later we were training in Irondequoit Creek during a period of heavy snow melt. The water had to be freezing and this guy capsized in his solo canoe in the strong current. While the rest of us yelled at him to get out of the creek, he calmly swam around trying to retrieve his boat as we all got swept downstream. We finally convinced him to get out and he stood on the snow covered bank in a wet sweat suit bottom and top as we wrestled the canoe ashore. So here he is in wet cotton. But for some reason he's not already hypothermic. In fact, he seems perfectly comfortable. What's up with that? Well the difference is that we had all been working hard beating our way upstream and he had a lot of internal heat built up. It was this internal fire that kept him safe for a while. What's the lesson here a touring paddler who hasn't been hammering away for the last hour? Well it's sort of the opposite. If you are paddling and already cold, any subsequent dunking is going to turn ugly just that much faster. Perhaps a lot faster. So if you are paddling and you are cold, you should do something about it. Put on more clothing if you can, paddle harder to warm up and recognize the fact that your risk level has just gone up. This might mean cutting your outing short or taking a more conservative route. But doing nothing and not recognizing the added risk is just wrong.

Lastly let me finish by saying that if you plan to paddle in open water when water and air are cool or cold the best option is a dry suit with sufficient layering underneath. Our Rough Riders who are paddling this Fall and Winter have purchased these and already this season several are glad they were wearing them.