

Incident Report – 10th October, 2008

Near Miss – Entrapment/Pinning

Location – Murray River (Murray Gates)

Grade – III (IV at higher levels)

Level - 0.82 (low)

Trip type – Club trip

Summary

A group of twelve paddlers, eight experienced to varying degrees and four with little river experience, put onto the Murray River. Four of us had attended swiftwater rescue courses, we had safety equipment and a mix of river running and creek boats, all deemed acceptable on this river. We started on the river at about 10am and had plenty of food.

Only one of our party had previously paddled the river, and his memory of features proved to be unreliable! We had heard it was a challenging river and that with our less-experienced paddlers along we would be pressed for time getting it done with time to spare.

We chose to stay together as one one big group, with experienced leaders at the front and back. This proved to be a mistake, as will be discussed later.

Two potentially fatal incidents occurred on this trip:

Incident one

Three experienced paddlers ran a seemingly simple drop of about two metres before getting out of their boats to show the next paddler the line. The fourth paddler ran the drop on the line indicated but gave no “boof” stroke, resulting in their boat going nose down the drop into a vertical pin. The paddler stayed calm in her boat, water cascading over her head, forcing her forward but leaving her an air pocket. The paddlers onshore (one of whom had attended a rescue course) reacted quickly, going to either side of the drop on which the paddler was pinned. Using a throw rope and brute strength they were able to free the kayak from the pin.

Incident Two

Matt, one of the inexperienced paddlers on the trip, took a swim on a relatively easy rapid. Whilst he made it safely to shore he was shook up by, a) the swim, and b) the fact that he lost a new \$500 camera during the swim. This loss of focus contributed to the following incident:

Our group worked its way down the river, following the line of the paddlers ahead. Matt somehow lost the line through either a bad line from the person ahead or through lack of concentration, and took the wrong line through a rapid. He went into an undercut rock, exited his boat, and was sucked deeper underwater. Matt found himself in a situation where his leg was jammed, preventing him from reaching the surface, with the only option being to go down. He swam down into a sieve, and had to squeeze through rocks whilst underwater to get out.

This all happened incredibly quickly, and when a horrified Matt got himself out onto a rock there were still paddlers coming down the rapid. The seriousness of the situation was magnified by Matt, understandably badly shaken, pointing at the undercut rock and sieve, giving the impression to the following paddler that that was the correct line. Fortunately, the following paddler did not go where Matt pointed!

Discussion

1. On club trips leaders must be prepared to make the difficult call to tell people they cannot paddle a river if it is above their experience and skill level.
2. Group size should be limited to 6. Larger groups should be split. On this trip the line became like a game of Chinese Whispers – the leader set the correct line, but gradually the line changed as more people got it wrong, until the people at the back had no idea what the original line was.
3. Any paddler who has had a swim should be watched carefully through the following rapids, shepherded through perhaps, as there is an understandable loss of confidence and focus following a swim, especially in cold water.
4. There were too many (five) people on this trip at or above their limit. A more suitable ratio of inexperienced to experienced would be 1:4. In this case it was almost 1:2.
5. River signals should be reinforced always. In particular the “boof” signal and the protocol of pointing to the correct line NOT the danger. If a danger warrants pointing out, it should be accompanied by shaking of the head, arms crossed in an X, and an emphasis again on the correct line.
6. As many paddlers as possible should attend rescue courses, as it proved invaluable on this river.