

Reading Water: Scan the Road Ahead

by Kent Ford

I remember my first day behind the wheel in drivers ed. Heading out the driveway of school, I had my eyes riveted on the hood of the car.

As the car ran up on the curb the instructor grabbed the wheel, screaming for me to look down the road. I got a lengthy lecture on scanning the road.

Learning to paddle whitewater can be a similar experience. Reading the road and reading the river actually have a lot in common.

The key to reading water is to lift your vision! don't just look at your bow. Look where you want to go and at what lies in between. What should you be looking for? Simply: easily visible rocks, water features created by rocks under the surface and hazards.

You can spot rocks above the surface pretty easily and maneuver to get around them. If you don't quite make the move and you find yourself floating sideways towards one, the proper reaction is to lean your body and boat aggressively towards the rock, even putting your hand or paddle on it.

The water buffeting off the rock forms a pillow which helps keep your boat off the rock. Learn to distinguish between round, friendly rocks and the more hazardous ones with a sharp upstream edge.

As you scan the rapid, look far downstream to determine the line of the current and where it ends. Does the main flow travel down one shore, then traverse to finish in a wave train on the other side? You see

rocks above the water deflecting the current. Figure out why the current was deflected; that's the key to reading the rapid.

Rocks just under the surface have the same effect. Most of the water flow moves to avoid the barely submerged rock, leaving some water to pour over the rock. The resulting water feature is either a hole or a wave, depending on how much water is pouring over. Little water flowing over creates a strong eddy below and a very flat hole, often called a hydraulic. More water generates a hole, a wave-like formation with a white frothy backwash. Study rapids from different points on shore to determine what each feature looks like from varied points of view.

Occasionally, you will not be able to see the water as it disappears over the edge of a drop. This "horizon line" indicates a bigger drop, one that you will probably want to scout from shore. Look for the biggest waves in the main flow of current. Generally, those will

guide you to a "clean" channel—and the most fun.

An instructor can help you learn to identify river hazards, like undercut rocks, or man-made obstructions like bridge pilings. Tree branches forming strainers, and against which a boat can be pinned by the full force of the river, are one of the most dangerous hazards in the sport. Scan for bouncing twigs and unexplained currents that might indicate a strainer. Learn to identify potential danger spots; then, concentrate your vision where you want to go, rather than fixating on what it is you want to avoid.

Learning to read water takes time and practice, so paddle within your ability and experience, and don't just follow the boat in front of you. Instead, explore easy and safer rapids by picking your own line.

Kent Ford is the technical producer of whitewater instruction videos, "Solo Playboating!" and "The Kayaker's Edger available from most whitewater shops and catalogs.

