



Rivers can be fluid pathways into unspoiled country. Features ranging from small ripples to demanding rapids challenge river runners of various skill levels. However, safe fun on the river demands respect for the challenges involved, preparation, and skill.

Injuries and fatalities, while rare, have occurred during river treks by Scouts, and there are lessons to be learned that can protect lives in the future.

Incident Review #1

A 14-year-old Scout drowned after becoming pinned under 3.5 feet of moving water when his canoe swamped broadside against a fallen tree blocking a river. Both the Scout and his buddy, who was swept clear, were wearing life jackets. Other participants had decided to carry their canoes around the obstructed area. Four leaders were unable to quickly free the youth, who was underwater for five to six minutes.

Key Points

- River hazards can be anticipated by consulting guide books, keeping a sharp lookout, and stopping to scout ahead.
- It's always a great idea to portage—carry your water craft on land—around features that may be beyond the skill levels of participants.

Incident Review #2

An 11-year-old Scout, riding in a canoe with an adult, drowned after a canoe capsized. That section of the river is normally rated as Class II, and the Scout was wearing a life jacket. However, the water flow was high and fast due to deeper than usual snowpack. The water was cold at 43 degrees. An attempted rescue with a throw line failed.

Key Points

- High water and cold temperatures increase the potential for hazards, and should be considered during trip planning.
- Cold-water shock and hypothermia can overcome even good swimmers wearing life jackets.
- Specialized insulating clothing, such as a wet suit or dry suit, is recommended whenever water temperature is less than 60 degrees.



“ When in doubt, get out and scout!”



Incident Review #3

Two leaders wearing life jackets were thrown from a guided raft while running a Class V river at high water. One of the leaders was caught in a hole and drowned. Scouts who were able to stay on the raft were not hurt.

Key Point

- Use of professional guides does not eliminate all risks.

Discussion Questions

- What risks are associated with paddling on moving water?
- How does Safety Afloat address float trips on moving water?
- What training is appropriate for unit leaders supervising river trips?
- What key factors should be considered in planning river float trips and establishing emergency response plans?
- How important is participant skill and knowledge in preventing boating incidents?
- How will you apply those lessons if your unit plans a river trip?

Resources

Safety Afloat awareness training at my.scouting.org

Aquatics Supervision, No. 34346—supports skills training for adults

Fieldbook, Boy Scouts of America, 5th edition, No. 34006

Canoeing, Kayaking, and Whitewater merit badge pamphlets

Reading the Rhythms of Rivers and Rapids DVD, No. 430-605

American Canoe Association Paddle Ready App,
www.americancanoe.org



“Whitewater trips are not amusement park rides.”