

# Canoeing and Kayaking for People With Disabilities



**Janet A. Zeller**  
**American Canoe Association**

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American Canoe Association

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# Contents

Preface v

Acknowledgments vii

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
	Who Has a Disability? 1 • Why Canoeing or Kayaking? 1 • References 3	
<b>2</b>	<b>General Guidelines</b>	<b>5</b>
	What to Say 5 • What to Do 6 • Risk Management 7	
<b>3</b>	<b>Legal Requirements: Accessibility of Facilities and Programs</b>	<b>9</b>
	Basic Legal Requirements 9 • Facility Access 10 • Evaluating Facilities 10 • Costs 12 • Accessibility at Launching and Landing Sites 12 • Mobility Device Security 13 • Safety Issues 13 • Program Access 13 • Integrated Setting 14 • Developing Essential Eligibility Criteria 15 • Accessible Information 18 • References 19	
<b>4</b>	<b>Instructor Checklists</b>	<b>21</b>
	Program Overview 21 • Medical Information Sheet 23 • Paddler's Interview 25 • Location 27 • Preprogram Scouting 28	
<b>5</b>	<b>Equipping the Paddler</b>	<b>31</b>
	Selecting Clothing 31 • Life Jackets or Personal Flotation Devices (PFDs) 34 • Selecting Canoes and Kayaks 36 • Selecting a Paddle 40 • Reference 42	
<b>6</b>	<b>Disabilities and Their Implications for Paddling and Instruction</b>	<b>45</b>
	Upper Limb (Arm and/or Hand) 46 • Upper-Limb Amputation 47 • Trunk 49 • General Impairment of the Leg(s) 50 • Lower Limb (Leg and/or Foot): People Using Wheelchairs 51 • Lower-Limb Amputa- tion 54 • Hearing Impairment 56 • Visual Impairment 58 • Lung Diseases 60 • Cognitive and Brain Function Impairment 61 • Post- traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) 63 • Side Effects of Medication 65	

<b>7</b>	<b>Adaptation Principles</b>	<b>67</b>
	Outfitting for Optimal Performance 69 • Five-Point Outfitting 69 • Stable Seating 70 • Mobility and Safety 74 • Skin Protection 74 • Wheelchair Seat Cushions and Paddling 75 • The Layering System 76 • Basic Tool Kit 79 • Building a Bulkhead 81	
<b>8</b>	<b>Adaptations Based on Functional Impairments</b>	<b>83</b>
	Upper Limb (Arm and Hand) 84 • Upper-Limb Amputation 89 • Trunk 91 • Lower Limb (Leg and Foot) 96 • Lower-Limb Amputation 98 • Low Vision or Blind 101 • Cognitive and Brain Function Impairment 102	
<b>9</b>	<b>Rescues</b>	<b>103</b>
	Self-Rescue 103 • Rescue Priorities 103 • Adaptations for Rolling 109 • Reference 110	
<b>10</b>	<b>Transfers and Carries</b>	<b>111</b>
	Transfers 111 • Carries 112 • Transfer and Carry Techniques 112 • Equipment 115	
<b>11</b>	<b>Paddling Trips</b>	<b>117</b>
	Ratio of Paddlers With and Without Disabilities 118 • Route Selection 118 • Taking Wheelchairs and Mobility Devices on Trips 118 • Wheelchairs and Mobility Devices on Portages 119 • Repair Kits 119 • Medications 119 • Personal Hygiene 119 • Interviewing a Potential Outfitter, Guide, or Organization Before Taking a Trip 121	
	Appendix A Resources 123	
	Appendix B Medical Information Sheet 126	
	Appendix C Paddler's Interview 129	
	Appendix D Skin: The Body's Biggest Organ System 131	
	Appendix E Spinal Column 133	
	Appendix F Universal River Signals 135	
	Glossary 137	
	Index 141	
	About the Author 145	
	About the Editor 147	
	About the Contributors 149	
	About the Organization 151	

# Preface

**Welcome!** By selecting this book, you have shown you are interested in opening the world of paddling to someone who has a disability. That person may be your student, a family member, a friend, or perhaps yourself after a disability has become part of your life.

This book is designed as a resource guide for paddling instructors, individuals who have disabilities, recreation program providers, and health care professionals who want to share the sport with people who have disabilities. The emphasis is on safety and integration with how-to guidance on adaptation development, techniques, equipment, and resources.

The goal of this guidebook is to increase integrated paddling opportunities for people who have disabilities. Together, all paddlers can experience the challenge, discovery, beauty, renewal, and freedom that paddling opportunities provide. In addition, through the shared experience of paddling, people with and without disabilities can get to know each other as individuals and move beyond the barriers of uncertainty and misunderstanding often created by disability.

Although this guidebook is packed with information, it is not a detailed guide to all aspects of paddling. It is intended to supplement the technical information found in the American Canoe Association's (ACA) endorsed manuals, instructional resources on the ACA Web site at [www.americancanoe.org](http://www.americancanoe.org), and the resources listed in appendix A.

Reading a manual should not be a substitute for paddling instruction or for instructor training for those who teach others. Instructor certification is evidence of paddling and rescue skills, experience teaching paddling, technical knowledge, and group management and safety awareness. When selecting an instructor, ask if candidates are certified and who granted the certification. Contact the ACA National Office for information about certified ACA instructors in your area and about those who have additional training working with paddlers who have disabilities through the completion of an Adaptive Paddling Workshop.

Adaptive paddling has evolved since the 1990 publication of *Canoeing and Kayaking for Persons with Physical Disabilities: An Instruction Manual* by Anne Webre and Janet Zeller. Although this revised guidebook covers the basics of adaptive paddling, it also conveys the knowledge and best practices developed in more recent years by instructors, paddlers, and recreation and health care providers. This knowledge will continue to grow through a continued sharing of information. We are always open to new ideas and welcome additional adaptations and techniques that have proven successful. What works for one paddler may be just the technique another paddler needs.

Please share what you have discovered with others by sending an e-mail about a new adaptation, technique, or tip you learned to Adaptive Paddling on the American Canoe Association Web site at [sei@americancanoe.org](mailto:sei@americancanoe.org). Also, you are invited to send your specific questions to the Web site, and experienced adaptive paddling instructors will respond to you.

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# Acknowledgments

Paddling is a gift to the spirit and a joy we pass on to others. This book is dedicated to all who work so hard to introduce others to the world of paddling. It is also written in recognition of those who have given so much to the development of adaptive paddling. Thanks to Annie Wortham Webre, who shared my belief in 1990 that until we could write down some instructions and get them into the hands of others, the premise that people who have disabilities can safely paddle would not be fully recognized. It is because of our book *Canoeing and Kayaking for Persons With Physical Disabilities* that adaptive paddling has grown in several countries.

Thanks to Colin Twitchell as well. He is the other pillar of adaptive paddling and the guru behind so much of the development in adaptive seating and paddlegrrips taking place in the market today. His dedication and hundreds of volunteer hours resulted in the principles, processes, and equipment design that moved the sport forward; now Scott LeBlanc is assuming that role in working with other adaptive equipment leaders. Annie and Colin also worked with me in developing the first Adaptive Paddling Workshop (APW) in 1990. The progress that has been made since that time would not have been possible without Annie and Colin's groundwork.

The American Canoe Association must also be recognized and thanked. From 1989 when I first presented to the ACA board of directors the need to integrate paddlers with disabilities into the sport, they embraced my vision and made a place at the ACA table for adaptive paddling. Over the years as the APWs have expanded across the country, the number of instructors committed to integrating all paddlers safely into the sport has grown. Thanks to the hundreds who have completed APWs and have gone on to spread the joy of paddling. The continuing growth of knowledge, training, and opportunities in adaptive paddling would not have been possible without the long-term commitment and hard work of the cadre of ACA Adaptive Paddling Workshops and adaptive paddling equipment instructors across the country. This book is dedicated to you all.

Good paddling!

Janet Zeller

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# Introduction

In 2008 one of every five people in the United States had a disability, making people with disabilities the largest minority in the country (National Organization on Disability, 2007). Given those high and increasing numbers, it's likely that disability affects your life in some way, either personally or through the life of a friend or family member.

## Who Has a Disability?

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the legal definition of disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of a person's major life activities, such as walking, seeing, hearing, breathing, thinking, or caring for one's self. According to the University of California at San Francisco's Disability Statistics Center, only 1.7 million people with disabilities, or 8 percent of this population, use wheelchairs, crutches, walkers, or other mobility devices. The vast majority of disabilities are not obvious.

In America we are an aging population. In 2008 the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that by 2030, more than 70 million Americans will be over 65. Disability often comes with aging, and the unavoidable truth is that if you live long enough, you will likely experience some level of disability. Despite the passage of years and the resulting changes in our bodies, many of us want to continue to recreate. Paddling is a low-impact sport, both on the body and on the environment, so it fits well into our changing lifestyles.

Whether disability has changed a person's life suddenly or activities have become more difficult gradually, the great news is that the person may still be able to paddle. Making paddling available to a person who has a disability requires information about safe adaptations and techniques along with integrated opportunities, in which paddlers who have disabilities are accepted without question. This guidebook is designed as a resource to make that paddling a reality.

## Why Canoeing or Kayaking?

Paddling provides many unique opportunities. Gliding freely across the surface of the water, experiencing wildlife, mastering new skills, exercising for good health, choosing one's own limits, and recreating with friends are some of the best reasons

for canoeing or kayaking. Paddlers can enjoy the experience from the first paddle stroke, and fulfillment is found at all skill levels.

The participant decides which type of paddling to pursue, with choices ranging from a quiet paddle on a calm lake to the challenge of a whitewater river, touring by sea kayak, or competition at special events. New challenges are always available. A person needs to be willing to accept instruction, be challenged, and adjust to new situations.

Canoeing and kayaking are activities that emphasize ability. Skill is determined by ability and attitude, whether or not the paddler has a disability. The freedom offered by paddling pushes aside the barriers presented by disabilities. A body that may be uncooperative on land becomes part of a sleek craft gliding through the water. Together, paddlers with and without disabilities can share all aspects of the sport. Water is the ultimate equalizer.

This guidebook contains unique information needed by instructors, paddlers, therapists, and recreation providers in order to open paddling to individuals who have disabilities. It also describes adaptations to manage the impact of paddlers' disabilities and to focus on their abilities.

The emphasis in instruction should always be on the ability of the paddler within the limits of the disability. This emphasis is not difficult to achieve with the right tools. This guidebook is a toolbox of information and suggestions to help the instructor and paddler work together effectively.

First, use the guidebook's basic tools to create the framework for effective instruction: the general guidelines, risk management, evaluation, the legal requirements, checklists, evaluation of students' abilities, the paddler's interview, and the possible implications for paddling of the disabilities involved. Then use the finishing tools including adaptations, additional techniques for rescues and rolls, equipment suggestions, and other tools as needed. The appendixes are the extra drawers in the toolbox with additional information and resources.



Water is the ultimate equalizer: five of these paddlers have a significant disability.

Photo courtesy of K. Schlicher.

Read and use the entire guidebook because each chapter offers a piece of the structure. Also, use this guidebook in conjunction with appropriate general canoeing, kayaking, or coastal kayaking instruction guides listed in the resources in appendix A and on the American Canoe Association Web site under Instruction.

That's it! In this book you have the tools to get started. Follow the guidelines. Use the information that fits the paddler's needs. Above all, work *with* the paddler. Together you can do it. The joy of paddling is waiting and you are the key!

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