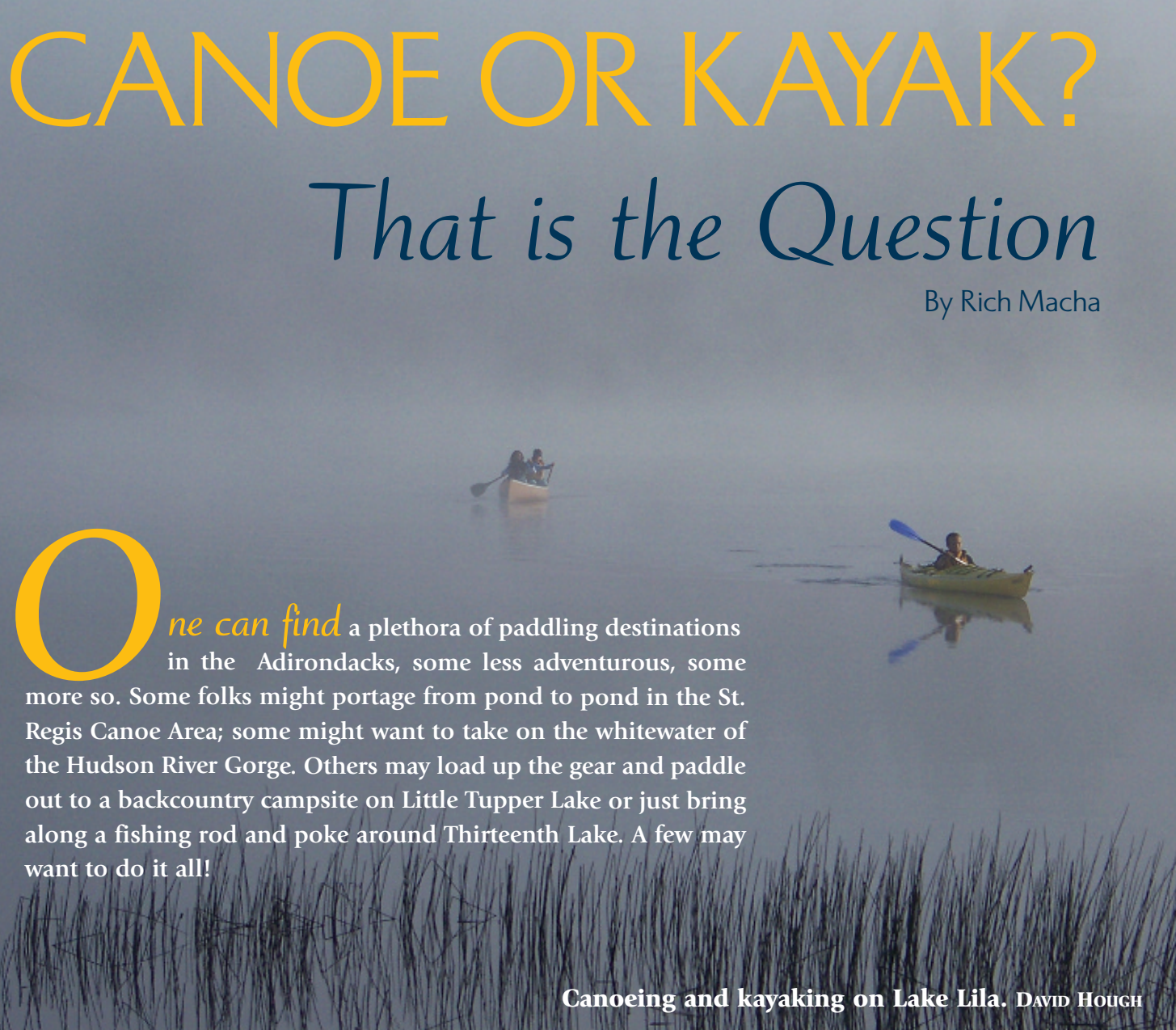


CANOE OR KAYAK?

That is the Question

By Rich Macha



One can find a plethora of paddling destinations in the Adirondacks, some less adventurous, some more so. Some folks might portage from pond to pond in the St. Regis Canoe Area; some might want to take on the whitewater of the Hudson River Gorge. Others may load up the gear and paddle out to a backcountry campsite on Little Tupper Lake or just bring along a fishing rod and poke around Thirteenth Lake. A few may want to do it all!

Canoeing and kayaking on Lake Lila. DAVID HOUGH

There are many models of canoes and kayaks to choose from, none of which is perfect for all types of paddling. I am lucky to own several canoes and kayaks and can use the one best suited to the task.

When buying your first kayak or canoe you should pick a model best suited to the type of paddling you plan to do the most of. Your choice may change as you gain experience and skill, so don't get hung up thinking that your first canoe or kayak will be your last. You might want to start with a general-purpose

canoe or kayak, then over time other needs and preferences might dictate a different choice.

There are many trade-offs in the paddling world. Weight vs. price—lighter boats cost more. Speed vs. stability—more stability, less glide. Tracking vs. maneuverability—if it is easy to keep it going straight, it is

hard to make it turn. Luckily, there are compromises that can make most paddlers happy.

Seaworthiness is a quality I regard highly in a kayak or canoe yet I don't often hear others giving much thought to how a certain vessel handles in waves. If you paddle much at all on larger lakes (Little Tupper, Stillwater, George, Cranberry) then inevitably at some point you will have to deal with wind and waves. Most boats handle fine in placid water; some handle well in rough conditions.

It is wise to acquire some paddling skills—take lessons, watch how-to videos, and read books. Many years of trial and error make for an experienced paddler, but less likely a skilled paddler. A good paddler in a lousy boat is better off than a lousy paddler in a good boat.

Another major choice is whether to go tandem or solo. A misconception I often hear is that canoes are tandems and kayaks are solos. There are solo and tandem canoes and there are solo and tandem kayaks. Tandems are usually bigger and heavier than solos, so if you go tandem make sure you have a regular partner with whom you have a good rapport. Two paddlers will generally go faster than one and an organized team can make for easier portages; one can carry the canoe and a small pack while the other totes a big pack and the paddles. Soloing offers more independence.

Design and construction are beyond the scope of this article. Try to find a good dealer who is willing to spend the time explaining this stuff to you. Here, I will discuss the relative merits of canoes and kayaks for primarily flat-water recreational paddling.

KAYAKS

KAYAKING HAS BECOME increasingly popular in the last decade and, at least in our neck of the woods, many more kayaks are being purchased than canoes. There are many reasons for this, one being that kayaks are often viewed as sexier than canoes. Basic entry-level kayaks made of polyethylene are relatively inexpensive; one can be out kayaking for under \$500. The double-bladed paddle makes it easier than single-bladed canoeing for folks to achieve a basic level of competence. Most paddlers can go faster when using a kayak paddle, and many people enjoy the feeling of being closer to the water.

A kayak's low seat lowers the cen-

Kayaks are often viewed as sexier than canoes.

ter of gravity, allowing for more initial stability in a narrower boat. Longer and narrower boats are faster than shorter and wider ones. A lower profile exposes less boat to the wind and one is less likely to be blown sideways. Kayaks equipped with skegs, or rudders, allow the paddler to stay on course in windy situations. Foot and thigh braces add more points of contact between boat and paddler, generating more efficient paddling and better boat control. Although not all kayakers use them, sprayskirts can keep splashes out of the boat as well as help keep the paddler drier in rain. Most higher-performance kayaks are rollable, making for swift recovery after a capsize if the paddler has taken the time to learn this skill.

Comfort may vary. Manufacturers are putting more effort into providing fancier seats with more adjustments, but a high seatback and thick padding do not guarantee the most comfort after a few hours of paddling. Note that most kayaks designed for performance and for going longer distances have low seatbacks. Before buying, it might be a good idea to rent your dream kayak and spend the day in it; many dealers will put the rental fee toward the purchase price if you decide to buy.

Back problems are a common complaint, as is legs falling asleep. The former may be helped by readjusting the seat and the latter by adding under-thigh support. People with existing conditions like bad backs, hips, or knees should try renting to see how kayaking might affect those parts. Bad knees and hips can make it harder to enter or exit the kayak. With a little help and determination most folks should be able to get by. There are always better and worse ways of doing things; get a skilled kayaker to show you the better ways.



River kayaking. RICH MACHA

CANOE S

ONE THING I LOVE about the canoe is its simplicity. There are few parts to break or malfunction. Most people will find getting in and out easier with a canoe than with a kayak. When going over beaver dams or negotiating obstructions I can easily step into another part of the canoe, whereas in a kayak I am limited to the cockpit area. A canoe is lighter than a comparably sized kayak, making for easier cartopping and portaging. Loading your stuff is also easier in a canoe and you also have greater access to your gear while on the water. Bulkier items fit better too. From the canoeist's higher position one gets a better view downstream and over stream banks.

For most people, it takes longer to reach a level of competence when learning to use a single-bladed paddle. A j-stroke just does not come naturally—how often do we see a paddler switching sides every two or three strokes? One will learn faster



Kneeling helps control a canoe. CARL HEILMAN II

A good paddler in a lousy boat is better off than a lousy paddler in a good boat.

in a solo canoe, but most of the canoes we see are tandems.

Some paddlers use double-bladed paddles to power their canoes, and often find themselves going faster. A double-bladed paddle is almost twice the weight of a single-bladed one and the arms may tire sooner from holding it up for a length of time. The single-bladed canoe paddle is often quieter.

One has the option of sitting or kneeling in a canoe and can switch back and forth for a change of position. Kneeling puts the canoeist in a better position to control the canoe, especially in less-than-perfect conditions when more points of contact between paddler and canoe are desirable. The kneeling position allows for better posture and is good for one's back, although the knees or ankles might suffer. Knee pads and some support under the ankles can help. For some reason, Americans seem to be predisposed to sitting. Sitting is not so good for the back and makes for fewer points of contact with the boat, resulting in discomfort and lack of control. Some folks add seatbacks, although most would be better off installing foot braces.

HYBRIDS

THE MOST COMMON HYBRIDS in our neck of the woods are pack canoes. I think of the pack canoe as being more of an undecked kayak, an OK-1 (open kayak for one paddler). These have the look and shape of a canoe, will most likely have a low kayak-style seat, and are paddled solo with a

double-bladed kayak-style paddle. This combines some of the advantages of both canoes and kayaks: simplicity, light weight, ease of paddling (less technical skill is required). Foot braces aid in comfort, stroke efficiency and boat control, although you will not experience the added control found in kayaks with thigh braces.

The most common pack canoes are in the 10- to 12-foot range, but we are beginning to see some longer ones on the market with greater speed, seaworthiness, and load-carrying capacity. Newer models are being offered with fancier seats following complaints of discomfort that came with the rudimentary seats often associated with the pack canoe. Without a deck they are wetter in the rain and in a downpour the paddler could be sitting in a puddle of water. Drips from the paddle tend to end up in your lap. Ease of entry and exit falls somewhere between a traditional canoe and a kayak.

MOST IMPORTANT, whatever gets you out on the water is good. What's right for me may not be right for you, but if you are like me you will need a small fleet to explore the variety of waterways available to us in upstate New York and especially in the Adirondacks. If you see me on Lake Champlain ("the Adirondack coast"), I'll be in a kayak. If you see me on the Oswegatchie River above High Falls, I'll be in a canoe. If you see me lounging in my comfy chair at a campsite on Lows Lake, I've brought my canoe. If you see me paddling on the Cedar Lakes, I may be in a pack canoe. If you see me cruising around Little Tupper Lake I could be in any of the above. See you on the water.



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