

VHF Marine Radio Use and Etiquette

Jeff taught a great class. We started by reviewing types of VHF radios and their advantages and disadvantages. We then focused on the handheld radios that kayakers are likely to carry.

We started with the basics of calling someone. Channel 16 is the distress, hailing and calling channel. Once contact is made, arrange to switch to one of the non-commercial channels: 68, 69, 71, or 72. To call a boat you can see, identify it by description or name 3 times, then name yourself, then say "over" to indicate you are through talking:

- Katy Rose, Katy Rose, Katy Rose, this is Gray Kayak, over.

The called boat responds:

- Gray Kayak, this is Katy Rose, over.

The caller initiates the switch to another channel:

- Katy Rose, switch to channel 68, over.

The called boat confirms the switch:

- Gray Kayak, switching to 68, over.

Once on channel 68, Gray Kayak will initiate the call and the two boats will conduct their business. When finished, say "Out." (Not "over and out".)

We learned to listen to make sure the channel is clear before starting to talk. Pressing the "Push to Talk" (PTT) button, then taking a breath, and then starting to talk is a good way to make sure your first words aren't cut off by talking before the button is pushed. When you finish talking, release the PTT button; you can't hear anything while the button is pressed.

We discussed settings, controls, and features of handheld radios, and some of the features that people like with their own radios.

Why carry a VHF radio? Distress calls, communicating within a group on the water, contacting neighboring boats or shore-based businesses, listening to the traffic around you, hearing Coast Guard warnings, etc., etc. Most VHF radios today also pick up the weather channels, and most can be set to scan 16 and listen for weather alerts.

Travelling? The standard channels have different frequencies in the US, Canada, and internationally. There are also different restrictions outside of the US (for example, in Canada, you must have a license to use the radio in port.) Read your manual so you know how to change the country setting on your radio before you go.

VHF radios we can carry in our kayaks do have limitations. They're low power, only 5 or 6 watts max. Using the very high frequency radio band, transmissions are line of sight only, so the signal will only travel a few miles. Any radio is useless if we don't know how to use it (read the manual!), if it's left behind, if the batteries die, or if it's dropped in the water and sinks out of reach. Take a class, read a book, listen to others, and practice.

As the last part of the presentation, we worked through several scenarios of calling other boats or locks using FRS walkie talkies (since we can't use VHF radios on land) to simulate marine radios.