

VOYAGEUR CANOE

RIDGE NOTES



WOLF RIDGESM
ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING CENTER

Due to the vagary in our weather ALWAYS check in with your liaison at dinner before canoeing to ensure conditions are suitable for canoeing.

I. Introduction

Greet the students as they enter the classroom or meeting area. Explain that they will be canoeing in the Voyageur canoe on Wolf Lake. Facts and details about the voyageur canoe and voyageur history will be shared.

II. Travel to Voyageur Canoe Dock

Give your students a chance to get drinks and use the bathroom before heading down to Wolf Lake. Stop at the life jacket and canoe paddle station.

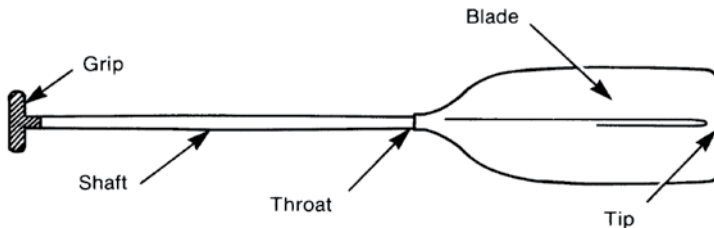
A. Life Jackets/Personal Floatation Devices (PFDs)

Demonstrate proper donning and fit of the PFD. It should be snug around the trunk and the shoulders of the vest should not be able to rise above your head. All persons should be checked for proper fit of their PFD.

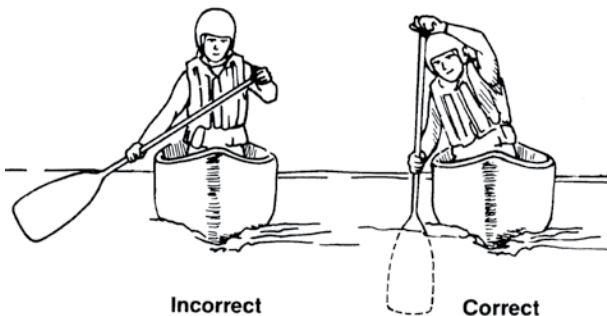
Life jackets MUST be worn at all times while in the canoe!

B. Paddles

Have students select a paddle that fits them. The grip should come to about their chin or nose. Ask them to rest the blade on their foot, not on the gravel or between the cracks of the dock, so it doesn't get damaged. To hold a paddle correctly, one hand should be over the grip and the other at the throat.



Paddle blade should be placed all the way into the water to get the most energy out of the stroke.



III. Canoe Wolf Lake

Load the canoe one by one, with an adult in the bow (very front) and another adult in the stern (back). The adult in the stern will be in charge of steering.

Voyageur Canoe Information

- Canoes were “almost as much a part of voyageurs as the clothes.”
- Canoes were perfected by Algonquin tribes of the eastern woodlands.
- Used for the day’s transportation, the night’s shelter, and the centerpiece of pride and conversation.
- Crafted from the bark of birch trees.
- Capable of carrying thousands of pounds of crew and freight.
- Birch bark rots slowly (if at all) and is tolerant of frost and heat.
- Only an axe, crooked knife, square and awl, plus some spruce roots and pitch (spruce gum) were required to build canoes that lasted several seasons.
- The large freight canoes that traveled on Lake Superior from Montreal to Grand Portage were about thirty-six feet long and five feet wide, paddled by a dozen men and capable of carrying over 8000 pounds of cargo.
- The smaller north canoes were twenty-four feet long and four feet wide, required half the crew, yet could still hold a ton of freight.
- The standard stroking cadence of 45 strokes per minute could drive a canoe at nearly 6 knots.
- Crews of the boats were expected to push themselves to a superhuman 60 strokes a minute.
- Despite their impressive capacities, the vessels were so frail that the canoes were never dragged ashore.

Voyageur Information

- The voyageurs were the truck drivers of the fur trade. Their trucks were birch bark canoes; the roads the interconnecting web of lakes and rivers in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Canada.
- Typically of French-Canadian heritage.
- There were also men from many nationalities and races.
- Most were short (under 5’6”), stocky, carefree, hardworking, religious (Catholic), and rowdy.
- They paddled every day from before dawn until past dark on two meals of a thick soup made of peas or cornmeal, pemmican and grease, called rababoo.
- They received breaks of 10 minutes each hour to rest and smoke a pipe.
- They portaged packs weighing 90 pounds (two or more a time).
- Generally illiterate, lower class, not first born (no inheritance), yet with fierce pride, they served the fur companies year after year until injury forced them out or they accumulated a small amount of money to go into another kind of business usually farming.

Fur Trade Era Information

It was business...big business. It was called the Fur Trade Era, and it lasted for almost 200 years (1660-1840). Fortunes were made, a continent explored, and legends begun. It was a logical endeavor; the New World had beavers, the Old World had gentlemen who wore gentlemen's hats made of the luxurious interlocking beaver felt. Daring explorers had scouted water routes stretching from the Atlantic into beaver country, and nearly to the Arctic and Pacific Oceans. Native Americans were willing to trap and trade. Businessmen had formed their fur trading companies. All that had to be solved was the trick of transporting furs and trade goods thousands of wilderness miles between wintering posts in Canada and the seaport of Montreal. The voyageurs would solve that problem.

Concluding Thoughts

To the Europeans, the fur trade was a business venture, a chance to develop commerce in the wilderness. The entrepreneurs, living in European capitals or Montreal, were not connected with the land. They were concerned mostly with financial gain from the land and resources, ignoring the issue of sustainability of the resource (beavers).

Voyageurs provided the transportation, with little hope for advancement or long-term gain, but with a fulfilling way of life for the present. They depended upon the land and the company for a living, accepting exploitation yet living simply, but they had little influence on the policies of the fur trade.

To the Native Americans, trading was an exchange of gifts and cultures that brought honor to both parties. They had a long history of living close to nature, and did not know at first the changes that would be brought to their environment and their traditional ways. Not only was there a change in the lifestyle of the Native Americans, but the land and its ecology were changed. The beavers were nearly wiped out. Explorers and voyageurs themselves gave way to settlers. New ways of life were introduced, including helpful technologies and conflicting beliefs. Lives and cultures evolved and continue to do so.

IV. Return to Wolf Ridge

Paddle the voyageur canoe back to the dock. Unload the canoe one by one in a safe manner. Attach the canoe back to the dock.

Neatly return life jackets and paddles to the station before returning to Wolf Ridge.