



CLOVER SAFE

AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY



#46

CANOEING SAFETY

Clover Safe notes are intended primarily for 4-H volunteers and members nine years and older.

Information available from the United States Coast Guard indicates a total of 49 people died in canoeing accidents during 2005. Of this total, 40 of the deaths were due to drownings and Personal Flotation Devices (PFDs) were not worn in 37 (93%) of these cases.



*Photograph Courtesy of
the University of California
4-H Archives*

Canoeing Safety Precautions

- Prior to use, inspect the canoe for cracks, holes, broken seats, leaks, and other types of damage or disrepair. If the canoe fails your inspection, inform your group leader, parent, or guardian and remove it from use.
- California regulations require all canoes to have one Coast Guard approved PFD, such as a lifejacket, life preserver, or life vest, for each person aboard. Each 4-H volunteer or member shall wear a properly fitted PFD when canoeing.
- Anyone boarding a canoe shall be capable of swimming.
- Inexperienced canoeists shall be trained by an appropriately experienced instructor before taking a canoe out on their own.
- Always complete a Float Plan before departing on a canoe trip. Give the Float Plan to someone stationed onshore so they will know where you are going canoeing, who is going on the canoe trip, and when you are expected to return or complete the canoe route.
- If possible, be aware of the canoe route and anticipated water conditions, including stretches of white water, strong or swift currents, flooded or low water, or obstructed water where tree limbs, rocks, bridges, reefs, pilings, piers, docks jetties, or other objects pose as potential collision hazards.
- Know the canoe carrying capacity and stability limitations. Always carry a spare paddle.
- Wear personal protective equipment appropriate to the canoeing weather conditions: Jackets or windbreakers during cool weather and light clothing and a hat during warm weather. It is a good safety practice to wear sunscreen and sunglasses whenever you go out on the water.
- Bring and consume an adequate amount of drinking water for the weather conditions.
- Many California water bodies receive and carry runoff from mountain snow packs. Remember that there is a hypothermia hazard if you go overboard into these cold waters.
- Learn how to balance a canoe to prevent it from capsizing. Sit on the canoe seats or canoe bottom in the center of the craft to increase stability.
- Do not stand up and walk in a canoe. When moving into, within, or out of a canoe, bend your knees and crouch low, hold both sides of the canoe for balance, and walk along the canoe's centerline.
- Distribute people and gear evenly throughout the canoe so that it is trimmed properly.
- Always avoid or portage the canoe around dangerous waters (such as rapids) that are beyond your skill level and obstacles such as low-head dams or backrollers at the base of a dam.
- When possible, paddle the canoe bow directly into waves.
- Wear protective head gear when canoeing rapids or stretches of water with frequent boulders or rock outcrops.
- Maintain a safe distance from water intake or outlet structures and spillways.
- Do not panic if your canoe capsizes. Stay with the canoe and move the canoe to the shoreline. Once you are in shallow water, you can turn the canoe over and dump out the water and climb back in.
- Avoid canoeing on open expanses of water during thunderstorms and when winds are creating choppy waves. If weather conditions deteriorate, head for the shoreline.
- Always follow all laws and regulations for waterways and water bodies you are canoeing.
- If you are injured while canoeing, notify your group leader, parent, or guardian. Seek medical attention if the injury is serious.
- If you notice that a member of your canoeing group is missing, immediately notify your group leader, parent, or guardian.