

The Greenland Paddle

Why the shape?

The Greenland Inuit have developed the current shape- probably over the last five hundred years; for a safe, efficient and adaptive means of propulsion.

The paddle is characterised by its ability to be gripped comfortably anywhere in its length without changing the grip. That's the main reason the blades are narrow.

Thus it is possible to apply a wide range of paddling, bracing and rolling techniques, effortlessly moving from one to the other and using the full length of the paddle when necessary (when a wave breaks unexpectedly for example).

You can't do this with a European paddle- the blade gets in the way.

Could I use a Greenland Paddle successfully?

Almost certainly, so long as the correct technique is applied.

Furthermore the paddles themselves will assist with technique if held correctly, by their motion through the water.

It should be possible to get the hang of it in the first session. Technique is discussed in more detail overleaf.

Advantages

- Centuries old proven design
- Adaptable, whole paddle can be used for strokes when needed
- Safe- Easy to roll with, scull with, for "bombproof" rolling
- Safe- Easy to locate hands correctly, yet can be gripped comfortably anywhere, even when capsized
- Safe- Paddle acts as an outrigger to steady or re-enter kayak
- Easy on the wrist- no feathering
- Easy to grip, even with gloves- non slip oiled finish
- Efficient paddling, narrow blades power through partial foil action- and don't catch the wind
- Adaptable, completely symmetrical- can be used whichever way you pick them up
- Great for surfing, foil gives lift for control. Use full length of paddle for powerful stern rudder
- Designed for the individual- built more specifically round body measurements and usage than a European paddle
- Simple design, can be locally built from nearby, ecologically compatible materials.

Disadvantages

- Not really a racing paddle- they don't have the power of wings, and are comparable in this respect with a conventional recreational paddle.
- They won't work properly without the correct technique, which is easily learned.

Choosing a paddle

Dimensions

The Greenlanders determined length from anthropological features and intended use. One arm span plus wrist to elbow is a good length for recreational use.

Otherwise try going one to two centimetres longer than your conventional sea going paddle or a length over which you can comfortably rest the top of your palm.

The width of the blade is that which can be comfortably gripped with the base of forefinger and thumb pulled apart from each other

The length of the loom is the width of the shoulders or the measurement between the hands when hanging down unfettered.

This is quite narrow, but not as much as first apparent as only the thumb and forefinger grip the loom (loosely), with the rest of the fingers and palm over the shoulder at the inside end of the blade.

The thickness of the loom is determined by the space inside the thumb and forefinger.

The paddle is gripped with forefinger and thumb on the loom and the palm and remaining fingers on the shoulder at the end of the blade.

Construction

Paddles can be made as light as required through careful selection of materials.

Personal experience is that weight is not of major importance with Greenland paddles which do not require a high arm action in the set up and catch phase. The lower action is much less tiring on the arms.

Furthermore a heavier paddle makes a better stabiliser when used with deck toggles.

Construction is of any wood which is strong and light enough such as Western Red Cedar or Douglas fir. Doubts concerning strength can be addressed through lamination. The commonly applied standard is that the paddle should take your weight when supported near the ends. Hardwood cladding on the blade edges will make any greenland paddle last much longer.

Finish

Greenland paddles are traditionally oiled, and then sanded down with fine wet & dry paper or steel wool, then wetted and the raised grain cut down through repetition of the process until unaffected by water (generally about four cycles).

This way you end up with a secure grip and a beautiful finish which brings out the full natural colour of the wood.

Technique

What is common to all variations of technique is the angle at which the paddle blade enters the water, which is slightly below the vertical so that the blade naturally wants to dive when powered.

This is something which the paddler doesn't need to worry about as holding the loom correctly (see top of previous column) automatically sets this angle up.

The paddle can be held naturally or with a sliding stroke in which the upper hand is held on the blade above the loom and the lower hand remaining on the loom. The upper hand can be just a little way up or right at the top of the blade, depending on how deep and powerful a stroke is desired.

This is especially useful when paddling into a strong wind and less of the paddle is thus exposed. The hands slide from one side to the other on each stroke- hence the name.

Paddling Style

The paddle is gripped with forefinger and thumb on the loom and the palm and remaining fingers on the shoulder at the end of the blade.

As well as enabling it to dive; this results in the blade going in almost edgeways, rather than inclined towards the vertical as in the case of a conventional blade. The blade is also drawn further back than normal as the foil action remains efficient throughout.

After entry the upper hand comes up to about shoulder height as the blade in the water moves down of its own accord.

Correct grip and entry have already been mentioned. The other thing common to all strokes is the importance of trunk rotation: the arms are used to position the blade in the water only.

All power is applied from twisting the trunk and shoulders and not from moving the arms. Without this the narrow grip will result in an inefficient stroke.

This style looks very much like conventional paddling with good rotation, without the high entry of conventional blades and an exit further back.

The blade is put in comfortably- not too far forward, and drawn a long way back, again through rotation.

Exit is in a similar manner to a conventional stroke but further back.