

Paddling with Dogs: Best Practices Guidelines

By Jennifer Berg CPDT-KA

Important considerations before you decide to bring your dog along:

Is it safe for your dog?

Consider your dog's capabilities and health. Balancing on a paddle craft requires strength and stamina, so be sure you are not asking too much of your dog.

Your dog will be at risk of drowning. A well-fitted dog life vest is essential for safety, and one with a handle on the top will make it easier to pull your dog on board if your dog requires help. Be sure to educate yourself on how to clear the airway and administer CPR on your dog.

Other risks may include toxins in the water (e.g. blue green algae or man-made pollutants); certain plants, creatures, or hazards in the water or along the shoreline. Dogs that bite at the water, fetch in the water, or drink excessive amounts of water are at risk from **water intoxication or salt water toxicity**.

One of the biggest safety concerns can be the weather, especially for dogs that are small, very young, very old, or in poor health. **Learn to recognize and treat dehydration, hyperthermia (heat stroke), hypothermia, and shock.**

If your dog is not trained enough to ride the paddle craft without being leashed, then your dog is not ready to come along. The leash can tangle in equipment, limbs, or objects in the water.

Is it safe for you and others?

Will the dog's size, weight, or behaviour be a safety concern?

Be sure the added weight of the dog does not exceed your craft's capacity, and the dog will not be in your way as you paddle. Paddling with a dog will require more skill, strength, and stamina to manage the added weight and wind resistance, especially if the conditions become difficult. A dog can take your attention away from watching for water hazards, weather changes, etc.

A dog moving around or jumping off the craft can cause sudden weight shifts, and one that does not come when called or is stranded may cause you to paddle into unsafe areas. If your dog requires corrections or management with a leash while on the paddle craft, then you should leave your dog at home because you will be busy managing your paddling equipment.

If you, others in your group, or your dog require rescue, these attempts may be hindered if the dog is fearful of or aggressive towards strangers.

A medium- to large-sized dog struggling to stay afloat can drown a person.

A dog's nails may pose a risk to damaging the craft (e.g. puncture) or tearing human skin if the dog becomes agitated or struggles to get into the craft.

Will it be pleasant for everyone?

Be certain your dog's behaviours do not adversely impact wildlife, the environment, or anyone's safety or enjoyment.

Bringing a dog with you may require you to end your trip early, delay your return, make frequent breaks or route changes, or paddle at a slower pace.

Not everyone likes dogs, especially dogs that bark, jump on people, splash, get in the way, mark (urinate) on objects, or defecate outside of an appropriate dog potty area.

Give other paddlers adequate distance from you and your dog, and stay clear of other crafts with unknown dogs in them. You want to avoid situations where your dog becomes overly active or tries to jump into another craft.

Ask yourself if you want the dog to come along more than the dog wants to.

Does the dog enjoy being around water, out in the elements, and staying in one spot for long periods of time?

Learn to recognize subtle canine stress signals (early signs of anxiety, stress, or discomfort)

Teach your dog to enjoy paddling with you BEFORE the trip. Get help from a reputable force-free dog trainer. It's important to avoid using coercion, corrections, or punishment in the training because this can create negative associations that will add to your dog's fear or dislike of the paddling experience.

Know the Laws Regarding Dogs

Dogs are prohibited in some areas to protect wildlife and shorelines.

Some jurisdictions have strict laws regarding off-leash dogs, barking, dog waste removal, and dog potty areas (especially near bodies of water).

Bring dog waste bags and be prepared to take all waste with you.

What to Bring on Board for Your Dog

DOG LEASH: For safety, etiquette, and to obey leash laws, keep the dog leashed when not on the water. When on the water, remove the leash and store it safely on the craft. A leash can become tangled in equipment and limbs (yours and the dog's) and snag on things in the water. If your dog requires a leash to be obedient on the paddle craft, then the dog is not ready to come along.

DOG LIFE VEST: Even if the dog knows how to swim, the dog should wear a dog life vest when on the water. As well as helping to keep a dog afloat, the vest provides some protection from the elements and something to grab onto if you need to help the dog back onto the craft.

WATER BOTTLE AND WATER DISH: Keep your dog hydrated to reduce your dog's desire to drink from the body of water. The water may be unsafe to drink, and the dog's attempt while floating on the craft might cause unmanageable weight shifts.

PET FIRST AID ITEMS: These items can be helpful to provide first aid to your dog while on the water or on the nearest shore. Store in waterproof container or dry bag.

- small roll of self-adherent cohesive wrap bandage (vet wrap). Avoid black coloured wrap since it may not grip well when wet
- small roll of gauze
- gauze pads
- clean small plastic bag to help keep a bandaged limb dry (e.g. a dog waste bag will work)
- small bottle of sterile saline solution to rinse debris from the eyes or a wound
- extra bottle of clean water (for cleaning wounds or to drink)
- disinfecting wipes (for your hands and/or for the wound)
- towel (to help regulate body temperature — to warm up or cool down)
- emergency information (address and phone number of nearest vet clinic, pet poison hotline)

PROTECTION FROM THE ELEMENTS:

Dogs can get sunburns on their noses and places where their fur is thin. Sunburn is more of a risk for dogs with light coloured coats, thin coats, or pink or light-coloured noses. Dog-safe sunscreen may be an option but there is some debate as to the safety of some ingredients. (Most sunscreen for humans contain ingredients that are harmful to dogs if they lick it or absorb it through their skin.) It might be a safer choice to use natural ingredients with a low SPF and apply often, rather than using a high SPF with questionable ingredients.

Dog visors/hats may provide some some dogs some relief from the sun on their heads/faces. A towel can help warm a dog, provide some shade, or when wet and placed on the dog's belly, can help cool a dog.

A dog life vest can provide protection from the sun, rain, and cold. Pay attention to the condition of your dog's paws. The shoreline may have sharp rocks, shells, broken glass. If you keep your dog on a leash when not on the water, you will be able to better control what substrate your dog walks on. Dog booties may be an option, but be sure they don't interfere with your dog's ability to swim, grip, or balance.