

Makah Madness

by Jim Graeser, Chris Mitchell, and Dave Peebles

Jim Graeser:

Terrifying, testing, torturous, terrible-just a calm Sunday paddle. Yes, some of the tall tales you have heard whispered in the hallway are true-exaggerated perhaps-no the seas were not fifty feet-just the whales. A good example of a Sunday outing that could have proven to be a disaster. Jim Graeser, John Janney, Keith Kemplin, Chris Mitchell, Dave Peebles and Cary Worthen and associated wives, departed early Friday, 28 July, for a surfing weekend at Makah Bay just south of Cape Flattery on the Olympic Peninsula.

We arrived mid-afternoon Friday and proceeded to test the surf. Great Fun! Surf of 3 to 3 1/2 feet at about 30 to 40 feet separation. John provided the expert guidance-LEAN INTO THAT WAVE! NO! NO! NO! WHEN I SAY LEAN, I MEAN LEAN! After we finally took our instructions to heart, we stayed in our boats. MIRACULOUS. We played until tired, then ate, then had too much campfire-a great day.

Saturday, bright and shining, moderate wind from the NW, with a slack "scheduled" about 1230 hours. We five, John Janney and Vicky having chosen to go to the Makah Museum, departed the beach about 1100 and paddled through some magnificent rocks, into a breeze of a couple of knots, to arrive at the Cape about 1230 to 1300 hours. The swell was large and in the passage between a long reef protecting the North end of Makah Bay and a second more exposed reef a mile + to the north, uncomfortable with large swells confounded with severe reflected waves. Upon arrival at the Cape we set out to explore some of the rocky inlets with magnificent sea caves. A truly awesome experience. Carey, Chris and Dave chose at this time to head back to the barn and Keith and Jim to explore further around the Cape. The seas were large and confused but manageable until Jim chose the wrong path into a narrow inlet and after two "pole-offs" the bottom from the steep side of a large underwater rock, got rolled into the water. Got out, to the beach and ate lunch. Keith and I were concerned for the other three who had been observed earlier fighting a flood tide with severe seas breaking over a large rock in the passage between Tatoosh Island and the inlet. We were later to learn that Carey had been out of his boat and with an accomplished team effort assisted back into the boat. After the dump, the three had drifted perhaps a quarter mile north before stabilizing and having seen us in the inlet chose to join us. After a little exploring we reentered the rock garden. By this time the seas had grown and the passage was extremely concerning, with large swells and severe reflections. Paddle-paddle-brace-paddle-brace-brace; overall a little trying not to add very concerning.

With perhaps two hundred feet to go before the rocky peninsula would block the swell and we would depart the rock garden, JIM IS OVER and OUT! Keith, nearest to the scene slides alongside to provide assisted rescue and Chris returns into the mess to help. I must confess to concern but not fear-I have practiced and practiced assisted re-entry. Others talk about the magnitude of the seas, the proximity of the rocks, the breaking swells and the steepness of the "surf". I can only say that Keith and I with Chris now assisting had only one concern-get Jim in the boat, get the water out and get through the slot. Well, with great skill on the part of my assistants, I was in and most of the water out-but not enough. Re-entry into the slot with too much water proved to be unmanageable. By this time Carey, Dave and Chris were through the slot into relatively safe water. On seeing Jim out again Chris chose to reenter the rock garden to assist Keith. Keith and Jim chose to slide out of the action into a rocky inlet about the size of four station wagons. As I remember, I was swimming with my boat and Keith was backpaddling with me, my boat and the ocean in tow. The story of Chris's water entry I will leave to others who were witness, but Chris did swim into the cove with his boat in tow. The call to the Coast Guard and the travail outside

of the cove must be recounted by others. Out of the water and into some dry, fuzzy nylon expedition fleece, wool socks and wool watch cap under wet suit, booties, cap and rain gear-Jim was feeling better-warming up and the fatigue was ebbing. Here come the Coasties. To make this tome manageable-suffice to say, the CG came and talked at us with their hailer, as they couldn't get an inflatable into the cove. We waved affirmations-all is well-they go-we think of our imminent departure. The CG cutter returns to inform us a helicopter is on the way. We wave the helio off-he drops radio to assure that we are competent and have a plan-he finally departs- we paddle out into seas that have now reduced by an order of magnitude-and suddenly we're on the beach-all is well- have a beer and like magic-terror and fatigue.

Did we learn anything? Stand by folks, we have much more to share, but another time.

Chris Mitchell:

I have been asked/told/threatened with bodily injury/encouraged to recount from my perspective the events of the Cape Flattery death paddle, survival challenge, whale watch cruise, day trip. Having never paddled the open coast before, I was happy to be in as experienced a group as the one I found myself in and I think this led to a lack of my normal preparations for a day trip (i.e. extra clothes, food, first aid kit, survival gear, etc. . .)

It was a beautiful day and when the humpback whale surfaced on our port bow I forgot all about the swells. What a magical experience. After making it around the point I voiced disapproval at splitting the group, but no one seemed that concerned about it. The next hour or two has been recounted endlessly by all participants and I think accurately in Jim's report; however, I must add that I was scared to death. Although I have spent a fair amount of time practicing "self rescues," I haven't spent enough time doing assisted rescues. That will change! On the way back, within sight of Makah Bay beach, I was capsized by a small curl at the top of a large sea. I remember being upside down and thinking that no one, including myself, had enough energy left for a rescue, and somehow, after three months of endless rolling practice, I was able to roll up.

In reflecting, I think we were very lucky.

Dave Peebles:

Visualize yourself cruising well offshore, daring an occasional over-the-shoulder glance at monstrous swells that seem to blot out the sky, rushing down on your stern quarter; as they roll under you, you rocket up their plunging slopes, abruptly tilt over their razor-back ridgetops, then plunge precipitously into the next canyon. It's like riding an express elevator with a maniac at the controls. I doubt if any of us would have ventured into the big and growing swell outside Makah Bay that morning alone. Somehow, the presence of others suppressed each individual's normal discretionary instincts. Anyone venturing out with a group should give thought to this phenomenon of collective stupidity. Oddly, restoration of common sense wasn't triggered until Chris expressed his concerns about splitting up into two groups. Even then, I didn't fully comprehend our situation until Carey emphatically insisted that he would not go further, as he was already "at the edge."

When Carey, Chris, and I tried to return south against the flood current between the extensive reef inside Tatoosh Island and a big haystack rock, all the while buffeted by breaking seas from all sides, the conviction suddenly overcame me that sooner or later someone was destined to dump. The chaotic seas mandated almost continual bracing, leaving virtually nothing for forward progress. 999 bracing strokes might work perfectly, but someone would surely miss that thousandth brace and end up in the water. The first such victim turned out to be Carey. The assisted rescue went like clockwork, except for the awkwardness of pumping out with his spray skirt peeled back. Later, after we had regrouped on the second pocket beach and had decided to go out between the haystack rock and the cliff, I watched the others blast single file through a tumultuous wall of green and white water and vanish. My heart was in

my throat when my turn came. For all I knew, they had paddled into a black hole.

Down the coast a half mile or so we encountered the situation that led to Jim's disembarkation. We had chosen to thread through a slot between the mainland and a chain of rocks stretching seaward, on the assumption we would be fighting less current there than on the outside. Instead, we found seas hugely swollen up due to the shoaling bottom, and churned to a froth by the rock garden lurking just below. It was there that I had a paddling experience stranger than anything I could ever have imagined. Chris, Carey, and Keith had made it through the slot, while Jim and I brought up the rear. At that moment, I heard something monstrous roaring up over my shoulder. This beast first slammed me down on my right side; within an instant, back upright again; then instantly down on my left side; then upright again. I could only sit there stunned, intact but demoralized. The fates had snickered at my preposterous illusions about being in control. I had been a mere pinball in the Cosmic Video Arcade the whole time. Presumably the same sea that had batted me back and forth like a rag doll dumped Jim into the water. In my dazed state, I could do nothing but scream to the others. My voice, at least, was still in working order, even if my courage was shattered.

After Chris had escorted me through the slot to relative safety, and had returned to help Keith rescue Jim, I could see they were having difficulty. Imagine my alarm when all three were swept out of sight behind the rocky point. A few minutes later, Chris came shooting out, his paddle whirling like a windmill, and labored up the vertical face of a wave that, literally, appeared higher than his boat was long. When this wave exploded, Chris vanished. After the foam subsided, the Queen Charlotte wallowed half awash. I was relieved to see Chris pop to the surface swimming beside it.

"You know," I said to myself at that moment, "I think we're in some kind of trouble here," and scuttled off to find Carey and his VHF radio. Though I haven't finished processing this experience, I can't suppress some opinions:

1. Anyone feeling "at the edge" should announce this immediately and emphatically, and should make sure the group pays attention.
2. The group must listen to any paddler the instant he or she first voices serious concerns. By now, it should be obvious that machismo is as out of place in such situations as tap dancing at a funeral.
3. Assisted rescues do work, even in the Maytag™, in spite of opinions expressed in Sea Kayaker and elsewhere to the contrary. Everyone should practice rescues, and should work out a way to bail their boat with spray skirt in place. I have since cut a notch in my kayak's seat to accommodate the base of the pump when it's thrust down behind my PFD. Foot operated, deck mounted, and battery powered pumps all deserve another look.
4. Carey's VHF was--or could have been--a life saver. Even though Chris, Jim and Keith eventually rescued themselves, I have no doubt we made the right decision to call the Coast Guard, as we could not see them and had no way of knowing their condition. Others have suggested carrying two VHFs in case a group splits up; but we could not anticipate this happening, as it was utterly beyond our control. Should everyone carry a VHF? (CBs would be a cheaper alternative for intergroup communication, even though the C.G. does not routinely monitor CB channels).
5. Three or four hours of continually mainlining adrenaline will give you a two or three day hangover.