

# THE SEA CANOEIST NEWSLETTER

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## USING A SKEG

At the Sea Kayak Forum last year during the discussion on the development of the various models of the Nordkapp Kayak, which was to eventually lead onto a discussion on the use of rudders, Paul Caffyn spoke about the use of skegs. Paul recounted an event during the very beginning of his Australian trip when the use of a skeg on his kayak put him into a very dangerous situation. This event was, he said, what finally drove him to use a rudder. Apparently Paul and his companion were running with the wind and waves, and were each using a skeg with a deep fin on the end of their kayaks. The conditions were getting boisterous and they needed to round up into the sheltered lee of a rocky island. Unfortunately as soon as they began to swing the kayak around broadside to the wind and waves, the wind would blow them off again and the skeg prevented them from using sweep strokes to push the stern around. They were therefore committed to continue running down-wind under very hairy conditions.

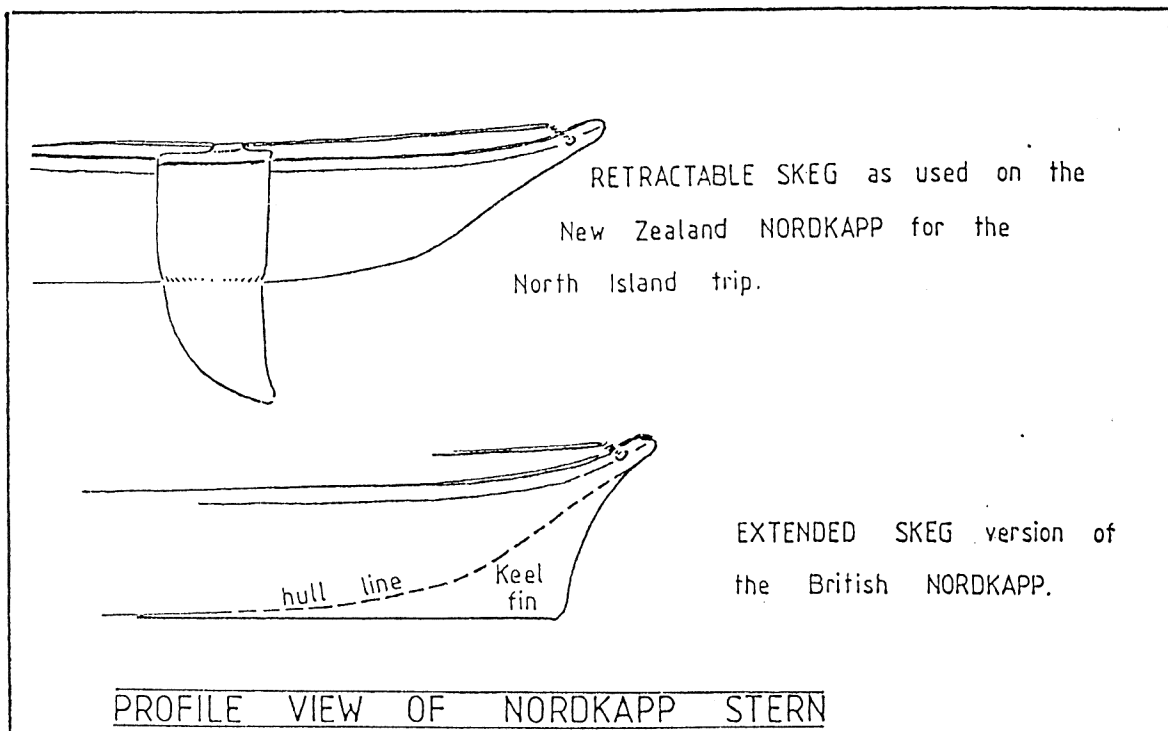
This event is somewhat similar to a situation some friends of mine found themselves in while paddling in the Marlborough Sounds in 1981. They were a small party of six kayakers, some of the party were very experienced, while others had done a great deal of river paddling but little on the sea, other members were relatively new to kayakers. It transpired later that the less experienced paddlers had loaded their kayakers without a great deal of care and had them stern-heavy, while others had taken more care. All the kayakers paddled by the less experienced had skeggs fitted. The party left under calm conditions but upon reaching an open stretch of water the wind was found to be gusting very strongly and right across the path of the kayakers. This cross wind immediately turned the stern-heavy kayakers down-wind, the greater windage forward and the skeggs at the stern making it difficult for the paddlers to get back on course. Worst of all, in order to try to keep on course the paddlers were trying to use sweep strokes on the downwind side yet the steep chop and wind gusts required a brace on the up-wind side. Some of the party, the more experienced with better balanced boats, without skeggs, or able to flick their skeg off, had no problem in swinging up-wind. The final result was that the party was split into two, with the less experienced group running down-wind to sit out the wind on an exposed coastal beach while the experienced group continued on as planned.

It is interesting to note that the Inuit ( alias Eskimos) built their open-water kayakers so that they had greater windage aft. It has been theorised that this was because the kayak was a hunting vessel and was needed to paddle up-wind towards their prey and with the greater windage aft this enabled the kayak to weather-vane into the wind. This also kept the boat on-course when the hunter put away his paddle and used his harpoon, or rifle. Interestingly enough, the Inuit hunter also fitted a small detachable skeg to keep the kayak on-course at this moment. It seems to me that the Inuit kayaker knew a thing or two about paddling in rough conditions and preferred his boat to weather-vane a little so that to maintain course, he needed sweep strokes on the up-wind side of his kayak and thus combine steering strokes with forward strokes, and to be able to lean into the wind while correcting his course. What you never want in rough conditions is a kayak that turns downwind - something that skeggs are great for!

Skeggs were 'invented' to give more directional stability to river and slalom kayaks when used on flat water or surf. The idea was to shift the pivot point of the kayak further aft and prevent the bow from wandering off-course, and to hold the kayak on course when catching a wave, that is, to avoid a broach in following seas. An experienced paddler can generally feel his boat beginning to wander off-course and can correct by quite subtle differences in paddle pressure while maintaining forward paddling speed and rhythm. This is fine on day trips but there is no doubt that on long trips the reduction in paddling efficiency can slow you down markedly, the more so for the less experienced paddler. A rudder overcomes all the disadvantages of the skeg, and allows all your paddling power to go into forward motion.

Skegs, to be safe, need to be either retractable, or able to be removed when required (and under rough conditions) or alternatively, should only be used when your course is downwind and with no likelihood that you will need to round-up onto a cross-wind course. Yet in this latter case, the gain from a skeg is not great. A retractable skeg requires control lines that are about as complicated as those required for a rudder. In the early days of skeg experimentation an attempt was made to rig the skeg with shock-cord. The thinking was that you could swivel around in your seat and push the skeg off with your paddle, the shock-cord would then pull the skeg up onto your back-deck and out of the way. The shock-cord also kept the skeg in place. The problem with this arrangement was that when you caught a wave the water pressure pushed the skeg off the stern of your kayak and then the skeg became a well aimed missile - crash-hats were essential! No doubt we could have experimented with limiting arrangements, however then the system was in danger of becoming highly complicated. If you are looking for a trouble-free life at sea you have to keep things simple; the well known KISS principle (Keep it simple, stupid!).

What I am arguing here, is that skeggs are not a great deal of value, and can be dangerous. They have their place, but most paddlers will agree that they are hardly worth their weight and bother. Their most useful function is to make a highly manoeuvrable kayak such as a river kayak or slalom kayak, more suited for open water. They should not be needed on a well designed sea kayak. Rudders, however, have become an almost essential item of equipment for the serious sea kayaker who paddles on rough water, or trips other than day trips.



The designer of the Nordkapp Kayak, Frank Goodman, designed the Nordkappom an original Greenland kayak. The Nordkapp was designed for expedition work and therefore there was a need for a more directionally stable boat than the original boat. The first design was known as the HS model (Hull Standard). Frank then brought out the modified hull that had a built-in skeg (MH or Modified Hull version). This built-in skeg had a mild effect and did not suffer from the problems outlined above as for skeggs. In New Zealand where sea conditions are difficult, paddlers such as the late Max Reynolds, and Paul Caffyn, experimented with skeggs and finally settled upon a removable skeg with a deep surf-board fin type shape - this was used by Paul on his North Island circumnavigation. An intermediate stage involving a hinged skeg was tried but found to lack strength.

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#### NEWSLETTER MATERIAL

I am at present a little short on accounts of trips, other than Fiordland. Readers who responded to the questionnaire last year requested that the newsletter carry accounts of trips along with notes for other paddlers who may like to try other coastal areas to those where they live. If you have a favourite coastal or estuary trip, how about letting us know the details. We need details such as tide times, best launching areas, good camp-sites, problem areas, and points of interest to visit or watch out for.

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#### SEA KAYAK FORUM

It appears that we will have a large group at the forum this year, reminder to those who have not let me know that you are coming, I need to know numbers so that I can cater for lunches. Anybody looking for transport, I can let you know who else from your area is coming and perhaps share transport costs. If you need to hire kayaks, you should attend to that soon as it has been a very busy season for the local kayak hire companies. I hope to start the forum off with a look at boats and equipment. A couple of manufacturers and retail equipment suppliers will be present. Participants have asked for another session on rescues, and for surf landings. I am not sure that we can oblige with heavy surf. Please remember that the forum is intended as a get-together with everybody teaching everybody else, not a straight instruction course, so come prepared to add your ideas to the general discussion.