

Title: Kayaks of Alaska

Author: Harvey Golden

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Review: Paul Caffyn

Over the years my interest in the historical development of skin boats has grown, how, why and where the first kayaks and umiaks were built in the Arctic and why so many different styles of kayaks evolved for different conditions from Siberia eastwards to East Greenland.

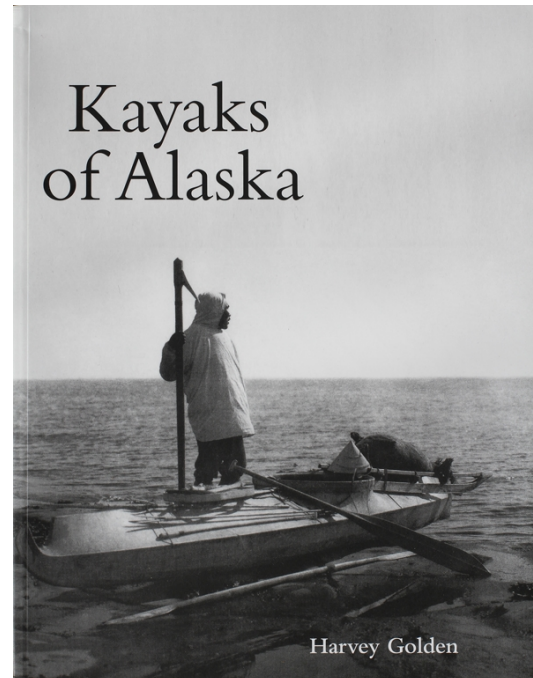
Perhaps I will start with brief descriptions of the earlier books devoted to skin boats. The very first authoritative work was published in 1964, *The Bark and Skin Boats of North America*, by Tappan Adney and Howard Chapelle. The bulk of the 241 page hardback is based on Adney's research into the building of bark canoes

however Chapelle wrote a chapter on Arctic skin boats, the umiak and the kayak. The book, which was reprinted in 1983, is well illustrated with historical photos and detailed paddlecraft surveys. An appendix on 'The Kayak Roll' was written by John Heath.

In 1986 three significant books were published; H.C. Petersen's *Skinboats of Greenland* and David Zimmerley's *Qayaq Kayaks of Siberia and Alaska*. Both these books are really well illustrated with photos of the old days of paddling and diagrams of the lines of the boats. George Dyson authored a history and development of the Aleut skin kayaks titled *Baidarka*. In three parts, the first covers the history of the Aleut baidarkas, the second voyages that George carried out on the coast of British Columbia and SE Alaska, and the third much about how to build the baidarkas with an aluminium frame and modern technology skin – also a beautifully illustrated book with historical black and white pictures and gorgeous colour.

In 2005 *Eastern Arctic Kayaks – History, Design, Technique* was published. A lovely landscape format hardback, it was written by two skin boat historians, John Heath and Eugene Arima. Part I is devoted to the kayaks of Greenland, while Part II describes the kayaks of eastern Arctic Canada.

Then in 2006 Harvey Golden self-published a ground-breaking book *Kayaks of Greenland - The History and Development of the Greenlandic Hunting Kayak 1600 – 2000*. Although not a book easily read in bed, the 580 page A4 size softcover title documents the broad diversity of Greenland kayaks, as well as their history, development, construction and how the various types relate to each other. For paddlers interested in the art and skill of building and paddling Greenland style kayaks,



this without doubt is the 'bible'. Harvey is not a dry non-paddling academic scholar – he has built and paddled 18 full size replicas, thus supplementing his understanding of how the kayaks were built and how they feel on the water (see review in *New Zealand Sea Canoeist* No. 130 page 15, September 2007).

Now nine years later Harvey has self published a colossal study on the history and development of skin kayaks in Alaska.

Part of the draw-card for me to undertake the kayak around the Alaskan coast in 1989 was to paddle through Bering Strait where the ancestral skin boats came across from Siberia over 10,000 years ago, and to experience local sea and weather conditions to understand very different skin kayak designs had evolved in different areas of Alaska.

Harvey's new book is a tad too big and heavy for me to take paddling, 2.25 kgs (5 pounds) but it would bend enough to load through an 8" hatch opening. But I am so impressed by the amount of research that has gone to create this scholarly work. It is hard to find a single page without photos, diagrams or kayak surveys. As with his earlier book, Harvey 'tank' tested many of the designs and used 17 full size replicas. He notes the book 'represents his on-going efforts to document the form and structure of these historical and cultural treasures'.

After an introductory chapter, Harvey introduces a new typology (family tree) with some groups I will have to re-learn. He uses *Unangan Kayaks* for what I (and George Dyson) have always termed Aleut baidarkas. Six chapters then describe the skin boats from various regions with heaps of historical photos and accurate surveys taken on museum kayaks.

Chapter 10 is devoted to kayak construction, the next to kayak equipment and the last to kayak paddles. An extensive bibliography and index complete this massive research undertaking.

Postage from the USA is a killer at US\$61.95, more than the cost of the book at \$59. Harvey advises a total price in US\$119 including p&p. He will accept a cheque in US\$, or he can take a PayPal payment to: harveydgolden@gmail.com. If you need help to source a copy, let me know. I brought in 10 copies of Harvey's early book and sold to Kiwi paddlers including just the cost of postage and the book.

I believe this is a pivotal work in understanding how skin boats evolved from the cradle of paddling (Bering Strait) and why such different kayaks evolved for different regions around Alaska. My only quibble is the photos would have stood out better from the pages with a 0.25mm border surround.