

The East Greenland kayak

Notes created in 1933 by Australian polar explorer John Rymill FRGS

'The East Greenland kayak consists of a wooden frame covered with seal skin, usually of the Crested or Bearded Seal. It requires great skill and long experience to make a kayak frame. The young men seldom build their own, usually getting help or leaving it entirely in the hands of an old and experienced hunter. If the curves are not just right the skins will be cut by young ice, or if the proportions are slightly wrong it will be a bad boat in a rough sea.

Each kayak must be made to fit its owner for when one is in a kayak, it must be part of one, neither moving independently of the other. If this were not so it would be quite impossible to right the kayak again after it had been capsized, which is quite an easy thing to do, either with the paddle, harpoon thrower, or hand alone.

When the kayak frame is finished the women cover it with seal skin, sewing it with sinew thread and using a waterproof stitch. This is done by passing a needle through only half the thickness of the skin at each stitch, therefore when the thread is pulled tight there will be no stitching visible on the outside of the skin. When the women have finished the covering, the whole kayak is given several coats of blubber to preserve the skins and fill up any small holes left in the seams.

We will describe the kayak gear, beginning from the bow. First comes the screen. This screen is made of white material and may be seen rolled up and lying under the tray holding the harpoon line. When the screen is rigged on the frame for hunting, it looks remarkably like a small piece of shifting ice when seen from some distance in front of the kayak and is used to hide behind when stalking a seal.

Behind the screen frame comes the tray for holding the harpoon line. Under the tray will be seen a sealskin rifle bag. Between the tray and the cockpit is a selection of small wooden objects which are used for plugging holes in dead seals to prevent the blood escaping. One of them is longer than the rest. This is forced between the skin and the blubber of the seal and the hole thus formed is filled with air and when plugged causes the seal to float when being towed behind the kayak. Near these pegs is a piece of wood lashed under the sealskin bands which go over the kayak deck.

When fishing and shooting or getting in and out of the kayak, one end of the paddle is placed under this piece of wood in such a manner that it will hold the paddle at right angles to the kayak, thus giving the effect of an outrigger. Lying along the right side of the kayak is the harpoon, in such a position that it can quickly be picked up in the right hand. The end of the harpoon consists of a narwhal ivory shaft about 18 inches long attached to the main wooden shaft by short sealskin thongs.

Behind the cockpit is a bladder float made from the skin of a young fjord seal. This bladder is attached to the harpoon line, which is coiled up in the tray. On the other end of the line is the harpoon head, which lies in the centre of the tray. When the kayak is rigged for hunting the harpoon line lies along the harpoon shaft, and the head, which has a small hole between the barbs, is placed on the ivory end of the harpoon. The line is then pulled tight and attached to a bone peg about half way down the shaft by means of a toggle, any slack line is then taken up and pulled in the tray. When the end is given a strong pull sideways it becomes detached from the wooden shaft, thereby slackening the harpoon line and freeing the head.

When the harpoon is thrown the hunter immediately throws the bladder overboard. After the line has run out of the tray which is a matter of a few seconds, the harpooned seal has no connection with the kayak.

One of the dangers of this method of hunting is the possibility of the line being badly coiled and catching as it runs out of the tray, or else getting caught on part of the deck cargo, in which case the harpooned seal would over turn the kayak as it pulled on the line.

The hunter usually carries a knife on the deck pushed under the two thongs which hold down the back support of the tray. If he is over turned he can cut the line while upside down in the water and then right himself in the usual way.

Behind the cockpit and to the right of the bladder is the paddle. This is made as short and narrow as possible with a protective covering of whalebone or narwhal ivory along both edges and at the ends of the blades, which are very thick. This construction is necessary as the paddle is often used as a pole when pushing about among icefloes. The bone edges are necessary when breaking through young ice, for without their protection the paddle would be cut and splintered in a few days.

To the left of the bladder is the lance. This is used for killing wounded seals and is thrown with the same throwing stick as the harpoon. Unlike the harpoon however it has no barb on the end. When the lance strikes a wounded seal, the end becomes detached, and as the thongs holding the end are fastened in the centre of the shaft, it will float at right angles to the head, and thus the drag on the shaft will pull out the head of the lance as the seal swims through the water. The lance can then be picked up and used again. This should be unnecessary with a fjord seal, but when hunting larger seal or narwhal it is sometimes necessary to throw the lance several times before hitting a vital spot.

Seals must be the staple food for anybody proposing to live off the country in South East Greenland. To procure seals in these waters it is essential to become an efficient kayak hunter.

During the summer months if seals are killed while in the water they will sink at once. To prevent them sinking and so being lost, the Eskimo has evolved a method of harpooning them with the harpoon head attached to the bladder float. This cannot be done from a boat as the seals are too shy to come within harpoon range; so the kayak must be used with it protecting screen.

When hiding behind this screen it is possible for a good hunter to approach within a few yards of a seal. The seal can then be shot and harpooned while it is sinking, or if the hunter is expert enough it may be only harpooned.'

- John Rymill FRGS

Member: British Arctic Air Route expedition 1930-31 (East Greenland)

Member: British Arctic Air Route Expedition 1932 (East Greenland).

- Became leader following Watkins' disappearance.

Leader: British Graham Land expedition 1934-37 (Antarctic peninsula)

From the original information board positioned beside Gino's second (black) kayak, itself located in the corridor opposite the Great Map Room at the Royal Geographical Society, London.

Copied (by hand) by Earl de Blonville in 1977