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# PARQUE NACIONAL SUBMARINO LA CALETA RECOMMENDATIONS FOR KAYAK TOURISM AND TRAINING



April 2010

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## TECHNICAL REPORT

# PARQUE NACIONAL SUBMARINO LA CALETA

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR KAYAK TOURISM AND TRAINING

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Reef Check

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## 1.0 BACKGROUND

There has been considerable interest in kayaking at Parque Nacional Submarino La Caleta located 20 kilometers east of Santo Domingo. In October 2008, a US Forest Service team visited the park to assess the area's potential for kayak tourism (as the country's first marine park, it was fitting also to be the first to consider kayak tourism as a low-impact option for economic development). The team conducted a rapid assessment of the park's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, evaluated its potential as a kayak tourism destination based on 12 criteria, and provided recommendations for developing a kayak program, including the purchase of kayaks and conducting kayak training for local guides (Wylie and Bauer 2008). These recommendations are updated and expanded in this report.

Kayaking is a key element of the community-based tourism plan for the park, as part of the USAID-funded Dominican Sustainable Tourism Alliance (DSTA) innovative grant program (Wylie and Bauer 2009, 2010). In the community business plan, kayak rentals and guided tours will be offered through a locally-operated "Beach Club" (Silver 2009).

In June 2009, a US Forest Service team, assisted by staff from Solimar International, did a short exploratory paddle and photo shoot to obtain digital images for the development of advertising materials. This was done with kayaks rented from Boca Chicha and transported to the park. However, in early 2010, 10 plastic sit-on-top kayaks were purchased by Reef Check for use in the park.









## 2.0 PRELIMINARY KAYAK TRAINING

A short training session for local guides was conducted April 23, 2010 using the new kayaks. This supplemented multi-week guide training given by Solimar International as part of the DSTA program. Trainees included: Clara Ozuna Ruiz, Ambioris Garcia Lara, Ryner J. Jovel, and Miguel R Toribio. Also observing the training were Manuel Santelises (Mentor), Rosario Pichardo (Generent de Proyecto) and Ruben Torres (Reef Check DR Executive Director).

The 2-hour class covered basic strokes and maneuvers, general safety, and introduced simple self and assisted rescues for capsized recovery. Other than paddle signals, the class did not include any specifics on guiding groups.

Strokes taught included: 360 degree spin, reverse, emergency stop, stern rudder, lateral draw, and forward stroke. Techniques for providing stabilization in rough water were the low brace and rafting boats together. Paddle signals included “Come to Me” (vertical paddle), “Stop” (horizontal paddle over head), “Raft Up” (horizontal paddle waved up and down), and “Emergency” (vertical paddle waved side-to-side).

Of the four students, two were very strong and should have no trouble with more demanding training, one had good potential but will need more paddling practice, and one, who will be involved with the land-based portion of the kayak program and will not become a kayak guide, she merely wanted a better understanding of the sport.







### 3.0 EXPLORATORY TOUR

After the class, four experienced paddlers from the US Forest Service team and Reef Check explored the western portion of the park for about a mile. Conditions were calm at the start but were rough on the return leg. We passed a tiny sandy beach about halfway down, which would make a good emergency exit or rest stop. This is important because there are very few places along the rugged shore where it is possible to climb ashore. We then stopped to snorkel at the beach at Cueva del Golondrinas (Cave of the Swallows) at the western end of the park. This very attractive cove is an excellent pay-off for more experienced paddlers who make effort to paddle this far.

However, as our experience showed, with the current equipment this trip should only be attempted in very calm conditions. Even though winds were only around 15 mph as indicated by a few white caps, paddling back against the wind and waves was challenging even for experienced kayakers. The return trip took 40 minutes of hard paddling, made even more difficult by the waves reflecting off the rocky shore.







## 4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Training and Certification. All kayak guide candidates should first practice paddling in various conditions, using all the strokes and maneuvers presented in the initial training. A useful website showing basic kayaking in different languages is available at [www.kayakpaddling.net](http://www.kayakpaddling.net). (Although a Spanish language version is not included, on-line translations can be obtained.)

They should also become familiar with the entire park coastline, paying special attention to areas with dangerous features, as well as possible exits where clients can get off the water in an emergency.

After several months of practice, all candidates should attend two one-day courses to prepare them for the guide certification workshop. The first class, Introduction to Kayaking, will cover all strokes and maneuvers in calm water, equipment, safety hazards, and demonstration of simple rescues. This is the entry level of training recommended by the American Canoe Association.

This should be followed by Essentials of Kayak Touring teaching how to travel safely and efficiently in calm to moderately choppy water near shore, including the basics of tides and currents, safety equipment, and practicing additional rescues (especially towing). In order to get the most out of these courses, all candidates must be outfitted with proper clothing, equipment and especially good quality guide boats (see boat recommendations below).

As a part of the final preparatory class, candidates should be evaluated to ensure they have strong paddling skills. The American Canoe Association's Coastal Kayaking Level 2 skills standards would be appropriate for local conditions.

Candidates who have Level 2 skills would then be eligible for a 2-day intensive training as a Coastal Kayak Trip Leader (guide). However, certification is only granted for those who have the necessary skills and leadership abilities and pass a written examination.

2. Kayaks. The new 8' Spitfire kayaks are the smallest boats manufactured by the manufacturer, Emotion Kayaks. Because of the small size of these boats, they should only be used for short trips in very calm conditions. We do not recommend these boats be used for tours to Swallow Cave unless there is a contingency plan to return clients by power boat or by land if conditions deteriorate.

We also recommend that guides be provided with longer boats, 14 to 16 feet in length, which have greater stability and storage capacity, and can be used to tow an incapacitated swimmer or kayaker at least a mile in strong winds and high waves. A guide boat should have a water-tight storage compartment for safety equipment and supplies, adjustable foot pegs, thigh braces for stability, and a flexible seat back that does not interfere with a tow belt worn around the guide's waist. The current boats are totally inadequate for this task and should not be used by guides. Estimated cost for a good guide boat is USD \$900 - \$1,050 (see Figure 1 for examples).

3. Paddles. The current inexpensive paddles are poorly designed and will probably not stand up to hard use. In an emergency situation, they could break. The rubber hand grips are already slipping out of place and the highly cupped blades are awkward to use and tiring because of their design and weight. We recommend these be replaced by lighter sea kayak paddles with fiberglass shafts and durable plastic blades. At the very least, guides should have a high-quality paddle, as well as an extra light weight paddle for a client who loses theirs or is exhausted by paddling with the current, heavy paddle. Estimated costs are USD \$100 - \$250 for a good paddle.

4. Safety Planning and Equipment. A plan should be developed to respond to all possible emergency scenarios. Common problems include minor cuts and scrapes on the highly eroded limestone shoreline, jellyfish stings, sea urchin spines, paddling fatigue, and sea-sickness. (Due to the frequently rough sea conditions caused by waves reflecting off the cliff, sea-sickness may be a serious threat to kayakers at La Caleta.) More serious injuries may require evacuation at inaccessible sections of the coastline using specialized emergency equipment and personnel from the nearby highway medical station.



Figure 1. Examples of recommended guide boats. A, Ocean Trident 15'; B, Wilderness System Tarpon 16'; C, Perception Search 15' with optional rudder (rudder is not necessary). The 14.5' Grand Slam by Emotion Kayaks (not shown) is also another option.



The following equipment is recommended prior to offering kayak tours or rentals:

- Tow belts for towing tired kayakers (2 long tow lines)
- Cow tails (2 short tow systems)
- First-aid kit in waterproof dry bag
- Paddle floats (2)
- Walkie-talkie radios in waterproof pouches (4)
- Safety whistles for all life jackets
- Water shoes for guides

The short tow is important for the guide to clip onto the bow of a client's boat for a short distance, or to stabilize a client's boat for a contact tow. The tow belt with a longer rope is used for towing longer distance and in rougher water when you don't want the client's boat close to yours.

Radios are essential safety equipment for communicating with staff back at the beach in the case of an emergency. They are also useful for communicating between guides in the front and rear of a larger group. Units with rechargeable batteries are recommended to avoid waste and ensure the radios are always ready for use without having to search for fresh batteries.

Guides also need to have suitable foot ware in case they have to climb over rough limestone. Sandals are not adequate.

Paddle floats inflated and placed on the end of a paddle provide an "outrigger" support for injured or sea-sick paddlers who are being towed to safety.

Estimated costs for all of the above safety equipment except shoes is USD \$400.



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