



A vertically raised paddle or raised straight arm indicates the signal to “Go” or “Proceed.”

## Getting the Message Across

A review of paddle and hand signals for kayakers

**Y**ou’re exhausted and for every meter paddled you lose another to the group ahead of you. You blow the whistle to bring attention and when the paddler in front of you turns to look back at you, you raise the paddle horizontally over your head. Your companion makes the same signal in return and you know you’ve been understood. The group stops to let you catch up.

It is not hard to get beyond voice range of your fellow paddlers; it only takes some wind or waves for effective talking or shouting distances to be shortened dramatically. We communicate primarily through our voices, and it is easy to forget that there are other ways of communicating. Sure, there are technical devices that could be used to talk to your buddies over some distance, like VHF or mobile phones, but physical signals are among the most reliable methods in some circumstances.

In the scenario above, it may only take a blast of a whistle to get the attention of the group, and a paddle raised overhead tells them what you need for them to do. If you hadn’t raised the paddle it would most likely have worked anyway, but the raised horizontal paddle makes it clear to the group that they need to stop. It leaves no room for misunderstanding. I had an experience once where a misunderstanding of something I’d shouted to a partner over the noise of the wind and waves was the beginning of the problems that arose. What I said and what he heard were very different messages. With a simple paddle signal we could have avoided trouble.

When at sea, we need to eliminate the risk for miscommunication, and the way to do this is to speak the same language and speak it clearly, whether it is by voice, a visual signal, VHF transmission or some other means.

## WHEN SIGNALS MAY NOT WORK

Signaling with the paddle or hands requires visual contact between the communicating parties. If you have come out of voice or whistle range and can't see your buddies, you will definitely have to rely on other techniques for communication. Anytime you realize that you've exceeded the range of your available communications, everyone in the group should understand and react, without requiring a signal, to the need to regroup or, if that's not possible, proceed to an agreed-upon rendezvous location. Raising a paddle overhead on flat water is not a hard thing for most of us, but what about doing it in rougher conditions? If the sea is so demanding that you have to brace to stay upright it can be very challenging to make any signals with the paddle, especially the ones over your head. Signaling is easier if you set your kayak with the stern or bow into the waves. You'll feel more stable than you would taking the waves on the beam. Rafting up with a nearby partner will also provide stability. Equivalent hand/arm signals can be used while you keep one hand on the paddle for bracing, one blade in the water, the other across the deck.

Signaling can be very effective as a basic communication technique, but there are situations where it just doesn't work. In big swells, you will sometimes find it hard to maintain visual contact with the rest of the group. If you are at the bottom of a swell and your partner is at the bottom of another swell, it will take being only some meters apart to be invisible to each other. Your travel as a group has to adapt to whatever means of communication can be used effectively.

## SOUND TO BRING ATTENTION

Paddle or hand signals are often preceded by blowing the whistle or shouting. These audible signals can be used initially to get attention, especially from the paddlers who don't have you in their field of vision. Even if the group members frequently turn their heads to check on paddlers behind them, you may want to draw attention proactively rather than wait for them to check on you.

If you're lagging behind the rest of the group, regardless of the reason, one of the most effective ways to initiate contact is to blow your whistle. It can be heard for long distances even in mild wind and waves. There are a few different signals in use: one short whistle blast for "Stop,"

two short blasts for "Gather" and an almost universally understood continuous blast for "Emergency."

In practice, however, it is often the case that whistle blasts are difficult to count. To keep things simple, a whistle blast, no matter how it is done, means, "Stop, let's get closer so we can talk. Something needs to be communicated."

Relying on audible signals has a downside though: sound travels poorly in wind. When paddling in a strong headwind, you should pay special attention to those downwind of you and reduce the distance to keep within earshot. If you happen to be downwind of your partners, don't hesitate to shout or whistle to get their attention well before they get out of audible range. Anyone who is on the water in whatever vessel should be in the regular and frequent habit of scanning the water in all directions, and paddlers in a group should make adjustments to the distance between companions to suit the conditions.

## VISUAL COMMUNICATION

When coming out of voice range we may use visual communication. We are not talking about an entire sign language here, but a limited set of defined signals that can be used. In the '90s, the Tsunami Rangers—an adventurous California-based group of rock-garden kayakers—developed an extensive set of signals to be used in extreme situations. They served well in a noisy environment at close range. For cruising in a group, most of us will not have the need for that extensive a vocabulary. But we do need a common set of basic signals that everyone can understand, interpret and use. The Tsunami Rangers' set [[www.gasp-kayak.net/signals.html](http://www.gasp-kayak.net/signals.html)] can then be added if the need arises. The signals described here are not the only basic signals, but they are among the most commonly used and understood. Even so, it is essential to review the signals before launching, to make sure everybody speaks the same paddle language.

## PADDLE SIGNALS

For every signal mentioned here, the flat of the paddle blade should be facing the ones you're communicating with for greater visibility. The signals can be given either sitting in the kayak or standing on shore. Bear in mind that you need to lift your paddle from the water to use it to signal, making it challenging to signal in rough seas if you need to brace to keep

upright. Arm signals are an alternative that allow you to brace for stability by resting the inboard end of the paddle on your deck and the outboard blade flat on the water.

The most important and commonly used signals are commands for "Stop/Go," "Emergency," "Direction," "Gather," "Back-paddle" and "OK." Some are universal and have a heritage from whitewater paddling, rafting and SCUBA diving.

### "STOP"



A horizontal paddle raised over the head indicates the "Stop" signal. The alternative arm signal is an upright hand at the end of an outstretched arm.

If made by a guide or someone in front who is leading a group, this means, "Stop where you are and don't paddle up to me." When in current, the paddlers may need to paddle to keep the present position. If made by someone behind the main group, this sign means, "Stop and wait until I come up to you."

### "GO" OR "PROCEED"



A vertically raised paddle or raised straight arm indicates the "Go" signal.

If made by a guide or someone in front leading a group, this means, "move forward or proceed on your course." If made by someone behind, the signal means, "You can start to paddle and I will follow." Pumping the paddle straight up and down can indicate urgency or paddle faster.

## DIRECTIONS—“RIGHT” OR “LEFT”



A raised paddle angled to one side indicates a proposed paddling direction. If there is an obstacle or hazard you want to avoid, you should not point at it with the paddle, as it may be confused with directional signals, making the following paddlers hit the obstacle rather than avoid it. Always point toward the direction of safe travel. The alternate hand signal is an arm extended and angled in the appropriate direction.

The signal means “Go this way.” For going to the right, raise the right blade of the paddle toward the intended paddling direction. For going to the left, raise the left blade of the paddle towards the intended paddling direction. Pumping the paddle along its length can indicate urgency or the need to speed up.

## “BACK PADDLE”



A paddle held horizontally with each end alternatively moved up and down indicates “back up.” The alternative arm signal is an upright hand with your arm fully extended horizontally from your chest and your palm facing your partner.

This is used to provide guidance in the surf zone or in directing to back away from obstacles.

## “OK?” AND “OK!”



A hand pointing to or patting the top of your head is the signal asking or indicating OK.

This OK sign is borrowed from SCUBA diving. A hand pointing to your head forming an “O” with the arm is used both for questioning and answering. To make the signal to ask, “Are you OK?” and answer the same way to say “I’m OK!” No answer means not OK, so assume assistance is needed. You can turn your head from side to side to indicate no, you’re not OK. This gesture may not be easy to discern at a distance, but the lack of the OK hand signal will also convey the message.

## “GATHER” OR “HELP”



Raising a paddle vertically above your head and waving the upper blade side-to-side indicates “Gather up,” or “Come here.” The speed of the waving action indicates the urgency of the situation. Continuous vigorous waving signals an emergency. Use your whistle at the same time to get the attention of anyone within earshot. A long, continuous whistle blast is a distress signal. This sign is universal when used with a raised hand, and if raised with a paddle the visibility increases.

[Editor’s note: holding the arms outstretched and waving them up and down is a distress signal listed in the *Navigational Rules of the Road* and should be used when you need to resort to an arm signal to get the attention of other vessels or aircraft. See <http://www.navcen.uscg.gov/?pageName=navRulesContent#37>]

## ACKNOWLEDGING A SIGNAL

When you’ve seen a signal intended for you, acknowledge it by repeating the signal. If, for example, the lead paddler in the group gives the signal to “Go to the right” by pointing his paddle in that direction, acknowledge this by repeating the signal, pointing in the same direction. Your understanding of the signal can also be acknowledged by following the instruction you’ve received, but this is only effective when there is a visible change in what you’re doing. For a help signal, you need not reply to the signaler if you can immediately come to assist. If there are others in the group, you may have to relay the signal with a whistle blast and the paddle signal you’ve received.

As with most backcountry communication, for every signal you receive, you should repeat it so it is passed on to the rest of the group. They may be behind and miss it the first time it’s given.

## CONCLUSION

Every means of communication has some limitations. It is essential to keep your group well within the limits of whatever communications systems the group has. Those limits will change as your circumstances change. On a calm day, voices or whistles will carry some distance over water. As soon as the wind kicks up that distance shrinks. Paddle and arm signals will work when the water isn’t so rough as to preclude using them or seeing them. VHF radios are limited to line of sight, so rounding a headland or an island can cut off communications. Communicating effectively requires that everyone in the group keep track of the others in the group and maintain a distance conducive to signaling. Anyone who strays from beyond the reach of signaling should immediately rejoin the group. It is the responsibility of each paddler in a group to stay within range of communication. That obligation should be made clear prior to launching. Having a variety of communication methods in your toolbox may increase your chances of coordinating with your paddling partners when voice alone can’t get the message across. **SK**

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