

Do I need to? Can I do it?

These are the questions we should always be asking ourselves before we venture out on any sea kayaking expedition. Most sea kayaking incidents occur because people make poor judgements and decisions; mostly overestimating their ability to cope with the prevailing conditions.

Over the last few years I have been analysing fifty incidents which have occurred in New Zealand between 1992 and 2005 with funding from Water Safety NZ and KASK. The analysis was based on data collected by Paul Caffyn over that time, often from media reports. In recent years information has also been collected from sources such as eye witnesses, expert local sea kayakers, police reports, met service reports and coastguards. The analysis looks at date, location, age, gender and nationality of people involved, equipment used, weather and sea conditions, illness and injury, safety and signalling devices used and causal factors. The severity of incidents was rated using an internationally recognised severity rating scale. I received assistance from key people especially Cathye Haddock, Paulo Chaplow and John Kirk Anderson.

In this study I discovered some interesting information which will help us understand the contributing factors which can lead to serious incidents. It was apparent that these incidents were complex events involving many variables. It appeared that young men have more incidents, often in rough, windy offshore conditions.

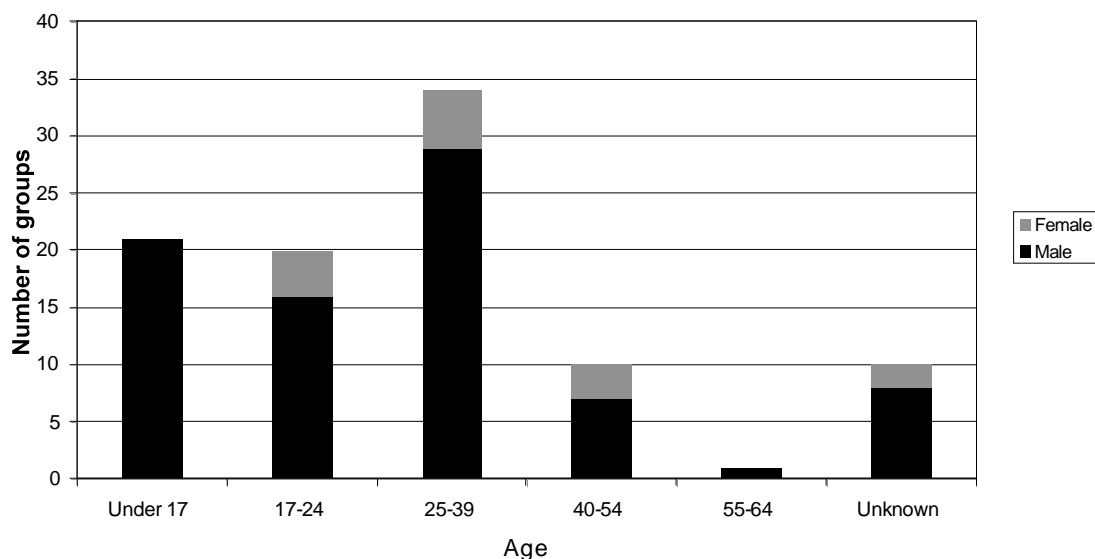


Figure 1 shows the age and gender of people involved in the incidents.

There were many causal factors identified but it is apparent that human actions such as poor judgement and poor decision-making were the most common causes of these incidents.

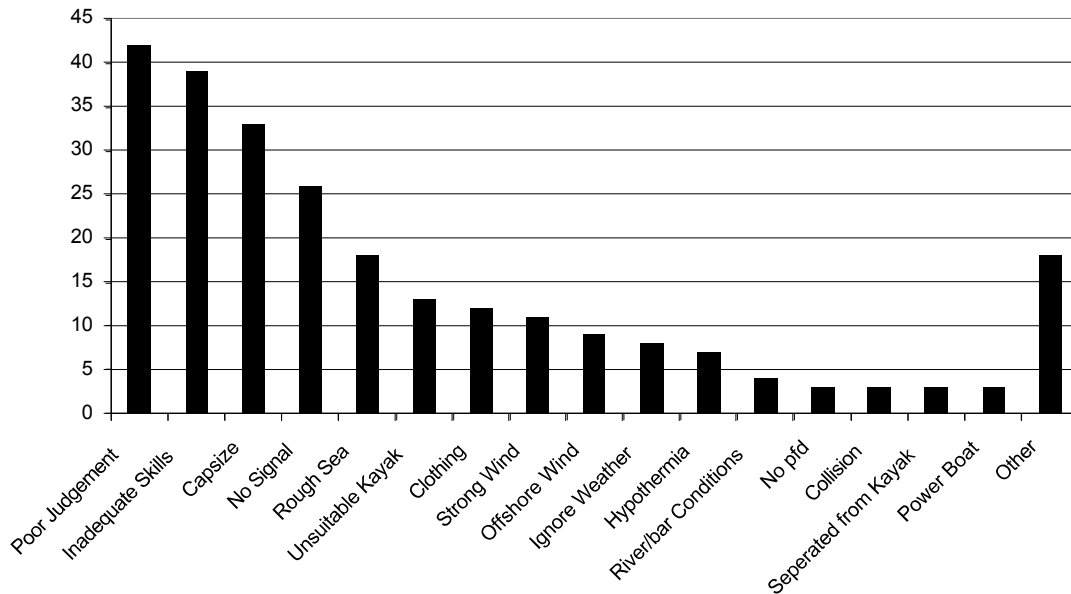


Figure 2 shows the number of incidents where each causal factor was present

Hypothermia and sprains were the most common reported injuries.

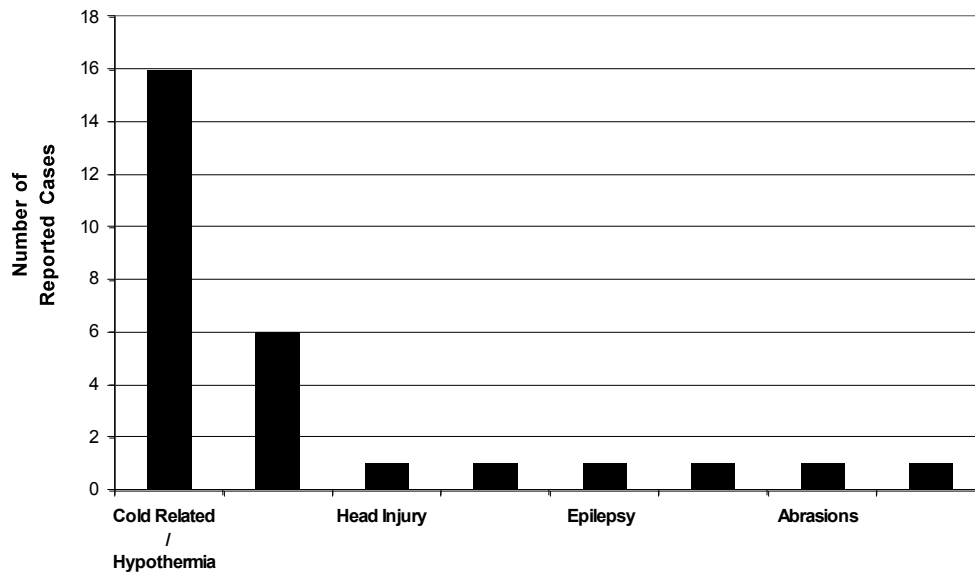


Figure 3 shows the number of reported cases of illness and injury
The severity of incidents appears to be increasing with time.

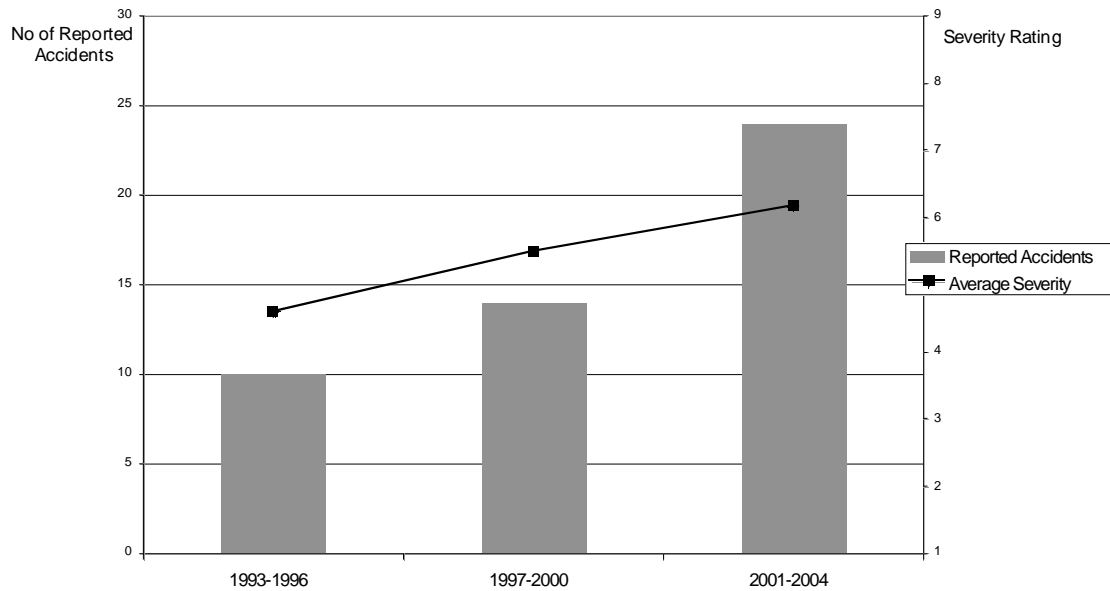


Figure 4 shows the number of incidents and their average severity scale rating.

Collisions with powered vessels often had fatal outcomes. Of particular interest is that staying with the kayak after capsizing seems to increase the chances of surviving an incident without suffering serious harm or loss.

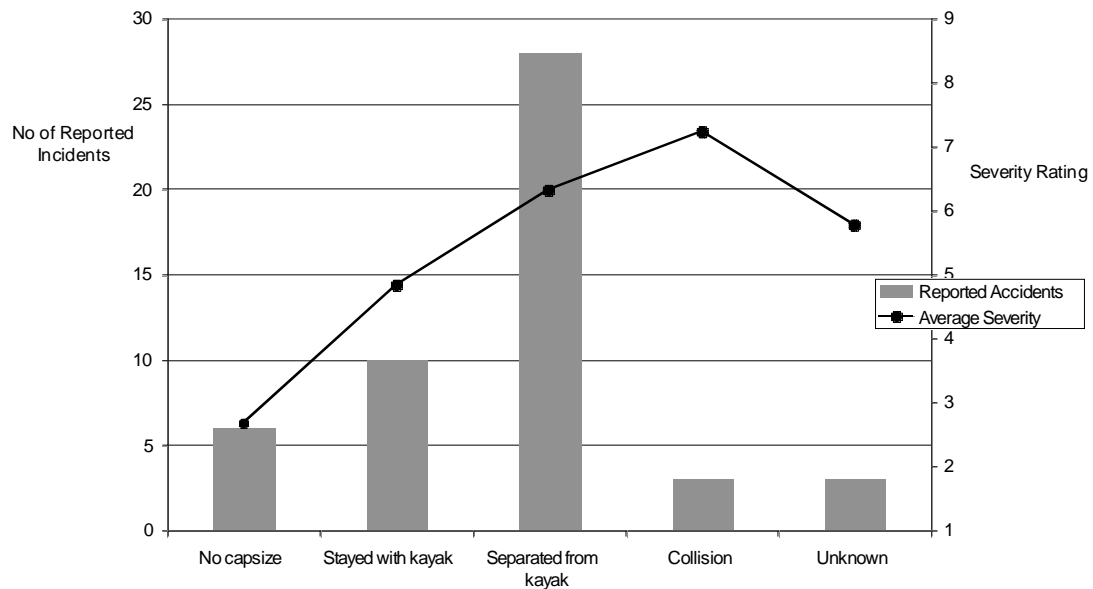


Figure 5 shows the relationship between average severity rating and various outcomes including whether the kayaker remained with the kayak after capsizing.

The research raised many questions and highlighted the need for further research for even greater understanding of sea kayaking incidents.

Some of the lessons learnt from the research:

1. Personal attitudes and behaviour. It is clear that our behaviour and attitude towards safe sea kayaking is crucial to reduce sea kayaking incidents. Older people and children are particularly vulnerable. This is not something that we can easily learn without some sea kayaking experience and guidance in the company of experienced sea kayakers. Joining a sea kayak club, attending kayak skills training and reading some of the excellent sea kayaking publications helps tremendously. And join KASK!
2. Skills. Never venture out in conditions for which you are unfit and lack the skills to cope; particularly if you cannot confidently self rescue. It is essential to practice rescue skills in wind and rough water (in controlled conditions of course!) Be self sufficient.

3. Injury. Always wear clothes which will keep you warm if you get cold and wet. Prepare for immersion even on summer days. Ensure your kayaking equipment is suitable for the conditions, comfortable and set up to fit your body. Acquire knowledge of first aid and have a high degree of respect for the dangers of hypothermia.
4. Rescue. Every kayaker should carry safety equipment which must include a reliable form of signalling equipment. Seriously consider a VHF Marine radio as a minimum requirement and an EPIRB as a life saver on off shore trips.
5. Capsize. Do not leave your kayak if you capsize. Always wear a PFD.
6. Stay well clear of powered vessels and do not expect them to see you.

Recommended reading:

1. Outdoor Safety. Risk Management for Outdoor Leaders. Haddock, C. 1993. NZ Mountain Safety Council.
2. A Manual for Sea Kayaking in New Zealand. 4th Edition 2006. KASK.

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