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Skills

River Signals

William McGinnis



On the river, where distance and the roar of rapids can make it impossible to hear, hand and whistle signals can be useful for everything from coordinating groups of boats to aiding in fast, effective responses to life threatening emergencies. In the course of my 38 years of river running, I've adopted a "language" of hand and whistle signals. Some of these signals were already universal--coming as a byproduct of sign language--and we've tried to make them as intuitive as possible. Like any language, this one is ever evolving.

By facilitating clear communication in situations where it would otherwise be impossible, a widely used language of hand and whistle signals can enhance cooperation and goodwill within and between boating groups, and help make all of our river journeys safer, smoother and more fun.

Whistle Signals

Single, long blast: Pay attention to me for more signals, possible emergency. Three blasts or three long blasts followed by three short bursts: SOS, Mayday, universal distress signal.

Help/Emergency

While giving three long blasts on your whistle, wave a paddle, life jacket, helmet or hand over your head in a big arc from side to side. If you don't have a whistle, use the visual signal alone. Help-emergency-assist the signaler as quickly as possible.

Hand Signals

Stop

Hand up, palm toward receiver in halt position-- alternating with pointing toward best stopping place: Stop where indicated.

Are You OK?

With arm forming an O, repeatedly lift and tap finger tips on top to head or helmet: are you OK?

I'm OK

Form an O with one arm with fingers touching top of head or helmet.

Long Distance OK

Form an O over head with both arms: OK. Same as smaller OK, but easier to see at a distance.

Group Modes of Operation

Are You Ready?

With a questioning look, sender holds thumb up and points at receiver with index finger.

We're Ready

With fingers folded, hold thumb straight up: We're in good shape. Also, we're ready to go.

One Minute

Single, vertical forefinger: Wait one minute or get ready to go very soon

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