

Technique: Using A Skeg

Posted by [Duncan](#) | Aug 5, 2010 | [Other](#) | [2](#) |

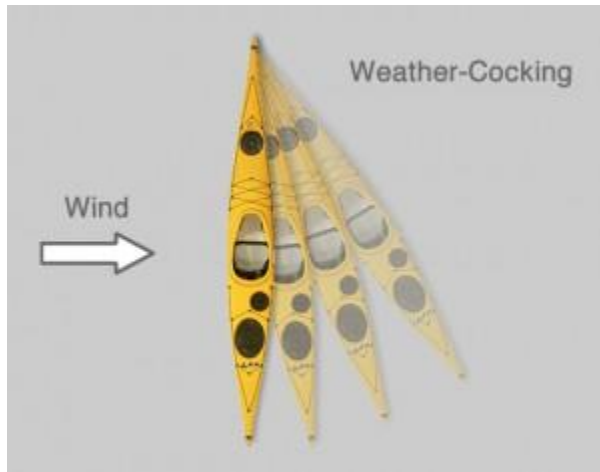
There is a superb line in Gordon Brown's excellent 'Sea Kayak' book ([reviewed here](#)) which reads:

Like most boys when they start to drive, the skeg control is often used as an on-off switch in the same way as the accelerator pedal

The implication being that uninitiated paddlers will use the skeg either fully retracted or fully deployed. The line in Gordon's book made me laugh as, although I was a relatively cautious driver in my youth, when it came to skeg control with my first Sea Kayak I would launch from the beach with the skeg up and as soon as I had enough depth lower it fully where it would remain until I landed back on shore with no real idea of what the skeg was doing.

To help other paddlers who may not yet be aware, this short article aims to explain why many sea kayaks are fitted with skegs and how best to use them.

Why Are Skegs Useful?



Weather Cocking - [Click To Enlarge](#)

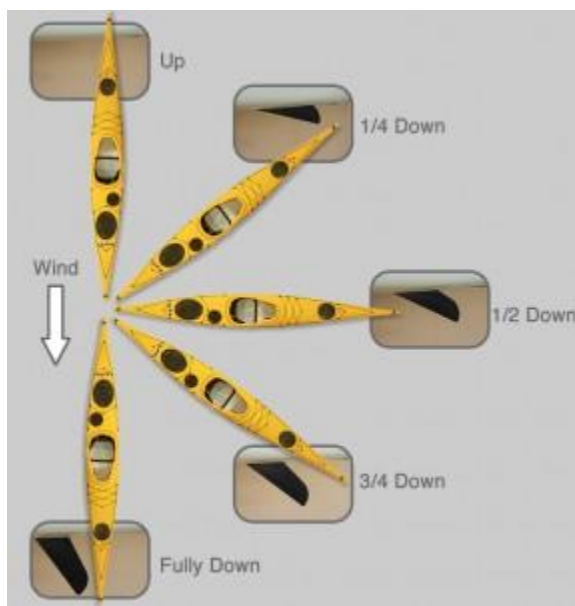
Have you ever noticed how a sea kayak will normally turn into the wind? This is called 'weather-cocking' and happens because the front of a sea kayak is to an extent 'anchored' from sideways movement by the bow cutting through the water.

In comparison, the stern of the sea kayak is relatively free to move and any form of sidewind will blow it 'downwind' (away from the wind) causing the kayak to turn into the wind.

In a sea kayak without a skeg there a number of ways we can combat this. Edging the sea kayak towards the wind and/or using an extended paddle grip (ie: holding your hands to one end of the paddle to create a larger lever) being the most popular. However, as a 4 month period I spent without a working skeg testifies, these methods can become tiring and in the case of the extended paddle grip make forward progress less effective.

In modern Sea Kayaks, designers have made use of the adjustable skeg. A single 'blade' fitted towards the rear of the kayak which can be lowered/raised to different levels. This Skeg provides extra resistance at the stern of the kayak to reduce the extent to which the stern can be blown downwind.

How To Use A Skeg



Skeg Positions - [Click To Enlarge](#)

As the introduction hopefully made clear, a skeg is not an all or nothing device.

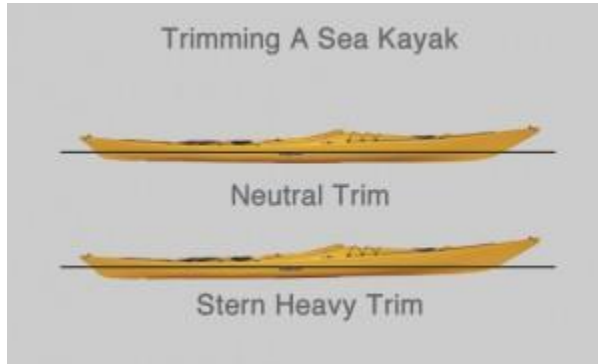
The key to effective skeg use is deploying the right amount of skeg for the wind conditions (direction and strength).

The attached diagram (click to enlarge) shows a general rule of thumb.

However, as every sea kayak exhibits different handling characteristics in windy conditions some patience and trial and error in your own sea kayak will allow you to decide:

- When to deploy the skeg and;
- How much skeg to deploy

Trimming The Sea Kayak To Assist the Skeg



Trimming Sea Kayak - Click To Enlarge

Trim refers to ‘balance’ of the sea kayak between the bow and stern. A neutral trim would mean an equal distribution of weight along the length of the kayak so the bow and stern were equally weighted.

You can increase the effectiveness of, or in lighter winds reduce the need for, the skeg by packing any weight towards the stern of the sea kayak. This anchors the stern slightly thus reducing it’s tendency to be blown down wind.

When To Raise the Skeg

Apart from the obvious answer of when you reach shallow water, you should also think about raising the skeg when you wish to perform tight turns and other more dynamic moves. Try spinning the sea kayak 360 degrees using sweep strokes with the skeg raised and then lowered to see the affect it has! However, bear in mind that the skeg can be used to assist turning. Want to turn into the wind, then raise the skeg, need to turn downwind, then lower the skeg to help you.

Summary

Hopefully this short article will help paddlers who are as uninitiated as I was into the most effective way to use their skeg. A word of warning however. The skeg is a mechanical part of your sea kayak and therefore prone to failure. Along with learning how to maintain and if required repair your skeg, it is worth considering and practicing the other techniques for avoiding weather cocking mentioned in the introduction to this article. This will make finishing a paddle with a broken skeg all the more comfortable and enjoyable!

Further reading

[Sea Kayak Handling](#) – Doug Cooper, Pesda Press

[Sea Kayak – A Manual For Intermediate And Advanced Sea Kayakers](#) – Gordon Brown, Pesda

Press

[Skeg Adjustment](#) – Justine Curgenvan (Canoe & Kayak Article)