

Either Oar

When it comes to water sports, Davison Collins is, literally, a stand-up guy

By MATT J. SIMMONS

There's a newcomer in the wild and wavy world of water sports: stand-up paddle surfing, or SUP for short. Okay, it's not exactly new—SUP boasts a history that dates back to the early Polynesians—but if you're not addicted to kayaking, surfing or windsurfing, you've likely never heard of it. SUP has been around for awhile, in more recent years as the means to teach surfing, but it's quickly gaining popularity as a sport in its own right. It is just what its name suggests: you stand on a surfboard (usually a long, wide one) and paddle with what is essentially (or literally, in some cases) a modified kayak paddle. The benefits to the sport

are fitness, fun (catching the surf still applies) and mobility. SUP allows the paddler to travel around just as a kayaker might, only slower.

Davison Collins, a Vancouver Island native who now operates a non-profit conservation organization in Mexico, started out in the sport after 17 years kayaking, during three of which he competed at a professional level.

"I love paddling, but got a little bored sitting down all the time . . . in addition to a sore back," laughs Collins. "I was way into surfing, but wanted to travel on the water to find new, hidden breaks." He kitted out for SUP in January 2008, and by the summer decided to up the ante and attempt a multi-day SUP expedition. With virtually no information to draw from, Collins intended to paddle around Cape Scott at the northern tip of the island. The trip would see him leave Port Hardy and paddle to San Josef Bay, about 100 kilometres away.

He tested the equipment first on a shorter trip to Orcalab, a whale-research centre based in the Johnstone Strait. Collins knew what he'd need for the expedition from his experiences touring in a kayak, but instead of stowing everything away in a handy compartment as you would in a sea kayak, he had to affix everything to the top of the board with a system of straps held down with marine epoxy. He rightly took into account how the weight would affect his stance on the board—balance, of course, being fairly important to the sport—and brought with him a dry-bag backpack in case the worst should happen and he had to walk out.

Collins went to Orcalab not only to test the SUP equipment, but also to work on an article about the 2007 oil spill in Robson Bight Ecological Reserve. "A barge loaded with logging equipment, including a tanker and a hydraulic fluid container holding up to 19,000 litres of diesel fuel and hydraulic oil, listed and spilled its contents right into the reserve, which is some of the most critical habitat for the Northern Oca resident population there," he explains. "According to nautical regulations, that barge wasn't even supposed to be there, and now it looks like the perpetrators are going to get off with impunity, while the consequences to the whales

and the entire ecosystem are still in danger until that mess is cleaned up properly. I don't feel that enough has been done to mitigate the situation, and this was a way to try to attract more attention to the issue."

He spent a night at Orcalab discussing this ecological disaster and what should be done about it, and then left in the morning to paddle back to his starting point. Despite a few minor mishaps on the expedition—including, at one point, a broken paddle—Collins considered the trip a success.

Having navigated the Johnstone Strait, Collins headed for Cape Scott. The pioneering expedition around the cape took him four-and-a-half days and the most common response from passing boats was a concerned, "Are you okay?"

"I assume they thought that my boat had sunk and that I was on some sort of rescue craft or something," he laughs. "I had no one else's experience to draw from. I found nothing useful or even relevant on the web." But the expedition went well. His jerry-rigged setup stayed intact and he made progress. "Hellish headwinds and contrary tidal currents definitely slowed me down at points, but I did get on a very favourable down-winder once I rounded Cape Scott and was heading southwest toward Cape Russell." His penultimate day was his best, he says, describing a moment spent eating chocolate, drinking tea and watching the sun go down with the end in sight.

"There are no obvious pragmatic advantages to SUP touring versus sea-kayak touring," admits Collins. "You go half the speed as a sea kayak. But [you] have twice the challenge and fun, in my opinion. On the aesthetic side you see more wildlife than you do sitting in a kayak." He cites whales, bears, otters, dolphins and sea lions as some of the wildlife he encountered on the Cape Scott expedition. "As well, my back didn't hurt at the end of the trip."

Whether as the means to paddle the breaks or to follow a coastline on an expedition, stand-up paddling is the next big thing in the world of wet. **M**



Davison Collins in action on his SUP journey



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