

River signals

Whether you're paddling along a canal or running grade 5 rapids, communication is a crucial aspect for the safety of a group. A set of hand signals can help the group communicate when it is difficult to hear due to water noise or distance. Signals are commonly thought to be only needed by the trip leader however this is not true. As a member of a group, you will need to send and receive signals and it is important to understand them. In this article, I will discuss signals and their importance on the water for both trip leaders and members of a group. There is one important rule which you must always follow when paddling as part of a lead group;

No signal, No move!

If you are in a safe position waiting for a signal and you don't receive one, stay where you are. The reason for no signal being sent may be due to an incident or dangerous circumstances, it is important that the rest of the group remains safe. The trip leader will always find a way to get back to you or give you a signal.

There are 5 basic guidelines that all signals should comply to. These are;

1. Each member of the group is using the same set of signals with the same meaning
2. Each signal has one specific meaning
3. They are visually clear so that they can't be mistaken
4. They are practical and can be given easily I.E. with one hand
5. Signals are memorable and kept to a workable number

These guidelines should be complied with wherever possible as they ensure good communication. They have helped to create a number of common signals that are used on the river. They should be discussed in the river briefing before every trip. However whilst on a trip, it is your responsibility to know the set of signals being used. If you are unsure, don't be afraid to ask.

A few common signals are shown below however it should be noted that they are not universal and everyone has a slightly different interpretation of each signal.

Stop

Palm held upright, motionless

Meaning

Depending on the situation, it can mean:

- Go to the nearest safe eddy
- Hold your position



Eddy out

Hand moving in circle above head

Meaning

Get into a safe eddy where possible.
Also means get into the eddy I'm pointing towards



One down

One finger held upright

Meaning

One person to paddle the rapid. The next person should not set off until they are signalled to do so.



Everyone down

Fist raised with elbow bent – up and down motion

Meaning

Everyone follow the leader or paddle down to them.
Should be combined with prearranged running order.



Go that way

Arm extended in intended direction

Meaning

Move in direction indicated. Can be used to specify direction or the best line down a rapid.

Note: Always point away from the danger



Come to me

Hand tapping on head

Meaning

Come to my current position or follow me down. Usually combined with pointing to a specific person.

Note: All emergency services use this to mean “Are you ok?” and “I’m ok” and be used in this way when required.

