

# HISTORY

paddled 1400 miles from Brittany in France to Galicia in Spain using an unfeathered Eskimo-style paddle. The sea conditions were the worst he had encountered in over 20 years of paddling. He reported: "The paddle was truly a life-saver. The European pattern of blade would surely have broken. An important aspect of the paddle -- noticed particularly on a long journey -- was the relaxed ease of use and the almost total lack of damage to my hands and wrists. There was merely some callousing on the inside of my thumbs between the first and second joints."

There are other functional reasons why Arctic kayakers never used feathered paddles. One favorite trick of tired or incapacitated Greenland paddlers is to hold the paddle at right angles to the kayak and insert one blade tip under the deck straps forward of the cockpit. The paddle acts something like an outrigger, enabling the kayaker to relax and not have to balance the kayak himself. With a feathered paddle, the blade in the water would have a vertical orientation promoting, rather than preventing, a capsizing.

Another reason for unfeathered paddles has to do with windage. Whether paddling or resting while gliding along, each

feathered paddle blade is alternately positioned to suddenly and awkwardly catch a gust of wind as the blades are rotated. The unfeathered paddle provides a more uniform surface to the wind.

## Paddle Types

Arctic kayak paddles may be conveniently divided into two main types -- single-bladed and double-bladed. They can be further classified according to blade length, blade shape, blade symmetry and the use or non-use of bone tips, bone edging and drip rings.

The single-bladed paddles (always with symmetric blades) were found in use among the Koryak, Chukchi, Aleut, Kodiak, Bering Sea, Bering Strait and Mackenzie Delta peoples. Double-bladed paddles were used everywhere. Both symmetric and non-symmetric blades are found on doubles.

The wood most used in paddle-making was black spruce, a tree commonly found as driftwood on all Arctic beaches, and the last to occur before the treeline stops and tundra takes over.

The chart below shows the distribution of paddle types and their characteristics among peoples from Siberia to Greenland.

**Figure 1**  
**Kayak Paddle Type Distribution**

		Blade length			Blade shape		bone edge/tips	drip ring	Average Length (inches)	Average Length (cm)	Average Maximum Width (inches)	Average Maximum Width (cm)
		long	med.	shrt	sym.	non-sym.						
Koryak	single			X	X		X		16.5	41.9	4.75	12.1
	double	TYPE REPORTED			NO DATA AVAIL.							
Chukchi	single	X			X				65.8	167.0	3.9	10.0
	double			X		X			94.5	240.0	6.8	17.4
Aleut	single	X										
	double	X				X			96.1	244.4	3.7	9.4
Pacific Eskimo	single	X			X				60.7	154.3	4.5	11.5
	double	TYPE REPORTED			NO DATA AVAIL.							
Bering Sea	single	X			X				60.7	154.1	5.3	13.4
	double		X						101.7	258.2		
Bering Strait	single	X			X				59.8	152.0	5.6	14.2
	double		X	X		X			97.3	247.1	2.7	6.8
North Alaska	double			X		X	X		84.6	215.0	3.6	9.1
Mackenzie Eskimo	single	X			X							
	double	X			X			X	97.5	247.6	4.2	10.7
Copper Eskimo	double		X			X			94.5	240.0	6.3	16.0
Caribou Esk *	double	X			X			X	108.4	275.4	4.4	11.2
East Arctic	double	X			X		X	X	123.1	312.8	3.3	8.5
Polar Eskimo		X			X		X	X	114.3	290.2	3.0	7.6
Greenland	double	X			X		X	X	83.0	210.9	3.0	7.7

\*Caribou Eskimo includes Netsilik and Iglulik Eskimo paddle types