



A "Narrow" Escape

There is sometimes a fine line between enjoyable recreation on the water and fatal decisions that lead us to tragedy.

The weather was excellent with clear skies and seasonally cool, only 75 degrees. The Susquehanna River's water temperatures reflected the weather with water temperatures in the low 60s. The heavy rains of the previous week had the river running higher than normal and in most places between 6 to 7 feet.

Deputy Waterways Conservation Officer Carl Books and I launched our patrol boat at the Fort Hunter boat access and headed upriver shortly after 1 p.m. We were on a dangerous section of the river known as the "Dauphin Narrows." In the Narrows the river's volume is squeezed between two mountains, making the water flow faster and run deeper. Depending on the river stage, this section is potentially a class 3 rapid for a distance of a half-mile. Waves, swirling pockets of deep water 15 to 20 feet deep, backwater, strainers, sweepers and jagged rocks litter this section.

Carl and I successfully traversed the Narrows' rapids in a channel on the river's east side. We continued to work our way upriver when we spotted something out of the ordinary. The object appeared to be a small runabout approximately a half-mile

upriver of the Narrows drifting partially submerged. Carl skillfully navigated our boat toward the swamped craft, or at least that's what we thought it was at the time.

When we were within 50 feet or so, we could see three people huddled on a loosely made wooden raft, shivering and very pale. Their raft was tied together with whatever they could find. They wore very little clothes and had no safety gear. The day's temperatures had worn on them. Their responses were slow and uncertain—an effect of hypothermia.

The three individuals, two males aged 21 and 19 and one female age 11, were all family. The family at first declined assistance and said they were going to meet some friends in Harrisburg. As our conversation progressed, I could tell they weren't familiar with the area, and that they were in real danger of never completing their trip. The bundled logs they floated on were a certain deathtrap in the rapidly approaching river narrows. Their well-intended trip was about to turn deadly because of poor preparation. Fortunately, this wasn't their fate.

We pulled the three people from their makeshift raft to our patrol boat only moments before entering the rapids, and we gave them dry clothes and blankets. The 11-year-old, who

we will call "Alyssa," was in the worst condition although she quickly improved once she received a blanket. I'm certain we prevented a tragedy simply by being in the right place at the right time. I shutter to think what would have become of "Alyssa" if we had started our patrol five minutes later. ☐

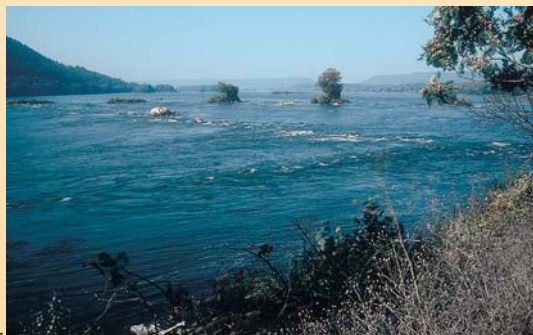


photo: Art Michaels

Susquehanna River, Dauphin Narrows

River Safety Tips

- Wear your life jacket.
- Expect to get wet. Even the best paddlers sometimes capsize or swamp their boats. Bring extra clothing in a waterproof bag.
- Be prepared to swim. If the water looks too hazardous to swim in, don't venture out.
- If you capsize, hold on to your boat, unless it presents a life-threatening situation. If floating in current, position yourself on the upstream side of the capsized boat.
- Scout ahead whenever possible. Know the stream.
- Be prepared for the weather. Get a forecast before you go.
- Wear wading shoes or tennis shoes with wool, polypropylene, pile or neoprene socks.
- Never take your boat near, or go over, a low-head dam.
- Portage (carry) your boat around any waterway section about which you feel uncertain.
- Never boat alone. Boating safety increases with numbers.
- Keep painter lines (ropes tied to the bow) and any other ropes coiled and secured.
- Never tie a rope to yourself or to another boater, especially a child.
- Kneel in a canoe to increase your stability before entering rougher water, like a rapid.
- If you collide with an obstruction, lean toward it. This will usually prevent your capsizing or flooding the boat.