

## Strait ICom (mon) Sense

### Getting Started

In the summer of 2006 I was guiding a sea kayaking tour on Johnstone Strait. Our guests were mostly made up of a kayak club from Maine, the others in the group were sisters, who had kayaked a few times previously and were gung ho, for the group objectives. All -in-all, the group was relatively strong. Everyone was eager to stretch their abilities and paddle as much as possible. Our group of eight guests and two guides was camped at Fine Beach, which is about 6 nm from Boat Bay on the north side of the Strait. The final destination of our trip was Pig's Ranch a further 2 nm to the west.



Paddling route from Fine Beach to Pig's Ranch



Georgia Newsome of Coastal Bliss Adventures

### The Forecast Looks Normal

For those of you who are familiar with the conditions on Johnstone Strait, you will know that the summer mornings are typically glassy calm, and in the afternoon the thermal winds can reach up to 25 knots on a regular basis. On the morning in question, like all other mornings and afternoons, I had listened to the marine forecast on my handheld ICOM. As always there was a 'small craft warning!' which is nothing new for Johnstone Strait. The wind speed was predicted to be 35 knots, AGAIN! This had been the forecast for the past two days, and we had played things safe by making shorter day trips, rather than crossing the Strait while observing calm seas all day.

### Away We Go

This day the group was itching to put some distance behind them, and to cross the Strait. I, too, was finding the same little campsite a little restricting, so we made the decision to cross the Strait early, and to head for the site often referred to as 'Pigs Ranch'. On the Rand McNally Map for the region it is called 'Georgia Point' and 'Krista Cove'. This little claim to fame occurred after I guided a cartographer on this tour. In reaching this point, kayakers approaching from the East, pass Boat Bay, where the Park Rangers and researchers have a base which overlooks the section opposite 'Robson's Bight' (Michael Biggs Ecological Reserve). This is one of the best locations in the world to watch killer whales (Orca) rub on the pebbled beaches. The crux of this route is the section from Swain Point to Pig's Ranch, which is more exposed to westerly winds funnelling down the Strait.

### Orcas Make It Exciting

We had seen whales on our crossing and were in fine spirits; however, the sisters with lesser paddling experience were waning a little, and in need of a well earned break and some sustenance. We pulled up on the beach just below Boat Bay and ate a quick lunch. All was calm as we launched again and rounded Swain Point for the final 30 minute paddle to 'Pig's Ranch'. We passed below the observation lab on the cliff, known as 'Eagle Eye', waved, and paddled on to the next point. It was here that the wind hit us like a freight train.



Orcas in Johnstone Strait

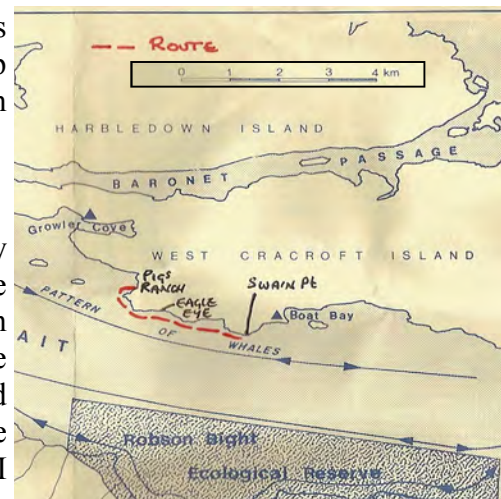
### Things Get Rough

The waves whipped up into two-ft chop. We had switched a few of the kayakers in the doubles around with the intention of creating a stronger team. One of these kayakers was having steering difficulties manoeuvring around the point into the wind, while the rest of the group were doing their best to maintain forward progress on the final 500 m of the stretch to 'Pig's Ranch'. I hand-signalled to the assistant guide telling her to stay with the double

kayak having difficulties. I led the rest of the group through the angry seas to the safety of the bay. Once there, I instructed the group to set up camp and to get warm and dry. Meanwhile, I looked for a vantage point from which I might be able to see how the trailing kayakers were managing.

### My ICOM Saves the Day

I was unable to radio the assistant guide directly because we carried only one ICOM radio for the group and I had it in my hand. Realizing that the group was probably in full view of the team at 'Eagle Eye', I switched on my ICOM, selected the channel that I knew they monitored, and radioed the observation crew on the cliff. They responded almost immediately and were able to inform me that the small group were still tucked in behind the point, unable to venture out into the wind and waves. When they asked if I wanted them to relay a message to the zodiac crew at Boat Bay for assistance, I confirmed that this would



Detailed View of the Paddle to Pig's Ranch  
 be the best way to ensure a safe passage to land and to reunite the group.



Sunset view from Pigs Ranch

This assistance was put into motion using the various ICOM devices that each of these groups have for communication in the marine environment. My handheld ICOM allowed me to communicate directly with the zodiac driver, as the wet and weary kayakers were brought to shore. Thankfully this situation worked out well, and no one suffered from the experience, beyond manageable wet and cold. The group who had managed to kayak their way to camp were invigorated by the experience.

### Ocean Reflections

Naturally as the lead guide, I reflected on the situation with the assistant guide to identify other decisions we could have employed to prevent, and deal with the situation. While there were a few different decisions we could have made prior to getting to the point of being caught in the wind, we both agreed that a second radio for direct communication between us would have been very useful, and in other locations and situations could mean the difference between a good and a bad outcome. We now have a policy that both guides carry ICOM radios, with spare batteries, and carry a marine radio licence (standard for kayak guides). It has also taught me that it is important for individual kayakers, who enjoy venturing out in more challenging conditions, to each carry an ICOM; to agree on a communication channel; to switch it on while kayaking; and to practice radio call procedures, so that when faced with a real emergency, the request for assistance is effective and comprehensible.

Coastal Bliss Adventure Ltd.  
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Georgia Newsome  
 Coastal Bliss Adventures Ltd.



[www.coastalbliss.ca](http://www.coastalbliss.ca)  
 Georgia Newsome  
 Gary Ward  
 Toll Free: 1-800-896-9525  
 Email: [coastalbliss@shaw.ca](mailto:coastalbliss@shaw.ca)