
GEARLAB

Greenland Paddler

A Dichotomy of Paddles: East Meets West

By Christopher Crowhurst

Many people only think of the skinny Greenland 'stick' when they think of traditional kayak paddles. Reducing traditional paddling to just the Greenland qajaq and paddle is doing a disservice to the vast array of other cultures that developed their own versions of hunting waterborne human-powered craft, many of which came from the Arctic regions of North America.

If I had to guess I would say that the Aleuts with their distinctive Bardaika are the second most recognised lineage of traditional paddlers. It is interesting to note that their craft, with the bifurcated bow, are actually called iqyax̂ by the Unangan (Aleutians); the name Bardaika comes from Russia. It is perhaps no surprise that the usage of these names from both cultures became jumbled given the close proximity and the history of migration of people between both countries.

The Aleutian Islands are not just renowned for their beautiful iqyax̂, they are also the home of a terrific and powerful paddle design. The Aleuts used their kayaks to hunt, as well as transport goods, cargo and people considerable distances. Their long kayaks were built for speed and high performance. These flexible craft are capable of astonishing speeds. The Russian influence has been credited with converting them into multiple paddler kayaks; it was not unusual for them to carry three people while hunting. Their paddles were equally advanced; the closest modern paddle to the Aleutian paddle is perhaps the Wing blade, although the comparison quickly falls apart when compared in use. The iqyax̂ design is a high-sided craft with a deep cockpit; the paddle is correspondingly long to allow the blades to submerge. Unlike the Greenland paddle, the Aleutian paddle has a definite power face and is not symmetrical. The power face has a pronounced rib running along the centre. The rib provides stability during the power phase of the stroke; if the blade is used with the smooth face as the power face, there is a remarkable difference in its feel. Some kayak historians question if the rib is on the power face or not. My experience has been that the rib aids in stroke stability, so I believe it should be used as such.

I recently had the privilege of being sent two very different paddles to test: an Aleutian paddle from East Pole Paddles in Estonia and a Greenland paddle from GearLab in Taiwan. To be absolutely clear, I paid for neither and am not being compensated for writing about them, other than the fact that the paddles are now part of my growing collection I share with the local paddling community to promote their usage. (You can read more about my paddle collection on my website http://qajaqrolls.com)

It is worth noting the geography in the previous paragraph: an Aleutian paddle made in Estonia, and a Greenland paddle made in Taiwan. This is a sign of the times for traditional paddling. To some it is exciting to consider the growth in popularity of traditional paddling and the proliferation of interest globally in the construction and use of the traditional paddling equipment; to others it is disturbing that these paddles and their materials transit the globe rather than being made locally using locally sourced material and employing local craftspeople. Whatever your opinion, I ask that for a while you suspend judgement and consider instead what is unique and interesting about these two paddles.

East Pole Aleutian paddle

East Pole Paddles use Western Red Cedar for their paddles. The grain density of the cedar is lower than some used by other paddle makers, which creates a very light paddle. The lightness comes with a drawback however: softness. The cedar is soft and prone to damage. I felt compelled to bone the surface using a deer antler. This tends to create a layer of denser wood on the surface which protects it from the inevitable bumps and scrapes on the rocks.

I like to use longer, narrower Aleutian paddles than my more regular Greenland paddles. The paddle East Pole sent me was 89" long with a 3.5" maximum blade width and loom length of 22". I paddle with a lower cadence with an Aleutian paddle, a combined effect of the extra length and greater surface area of the blade. Each stroke feels powerful and, unlike when using a Greenland paddle, I tend not to worry about canting the paddle blade as the power

face rib 'sets' the blade angle as it slices through the water. I would love to understand the hydrodynamics of this blade. Whatever the science behind it, it is one powerful paddle. When I have spoken to Greenlanders about paddles they pooh-pooh the quest for lightweight, instead preferring the security of strength. A good Greenland paddle is considered to be one that you can do a pull up on without it breaking. Aleutian paddles have a thin loom and their long length makes them potentially vulnerable to breaks. I have seen many Aleutian paddles break when people over-muscle a Greenland Roll, especially a reverse sweep roll.

After having used the East Pole Aleutian paddle for a few trips I would consider it a good long-distance touring paddle; it is powerful, light and is comfortable to use all day. I do not recommend using it to practise rolling with, as its wood was chosen for a different purpose. Absolute strength was lowered to ensure the paddle would be very light to allow all-day paddling. There are stronger paddles available – Adanac Paddles in Canada make a great Aleutian paddle, for example – but correspondingly the denser wood comes with greater weight. Everything is, after all, a compromise.

GearLab Greenland paddle

I have previously used several different GearLab Greenland paddles (you can read about these previous experiences on my blog http://qajaqrolls.com). Each iteration has been an improvement both in design and construction. The Akiak, their latest product, continues this trend. The previous generation introduced the use of replaceable tips made of a more forgiving material than the carbon used in the rest of the paddle, much like the bone tips used by the Inuits of Greenland. This latest generation has improved the paddle in two significant ways. The most obvious change is the blade profile: the new blade design creates a sharper edge profile, which dramatically changes the feel of the paddle in the water. This is especially apparent when sculling; sculling rolls are substantially easier using this sharp design, a plus for anyone looking to advance their rolling skills. The sharp edges also made the paddle very smooth during the forward stroke as it canted easily and there was little discernible flutter.

The second change is internal. The entire paddle is now reinforced with a vertical plane of carbon spanning the centre between the two power faces. This has added greater absolute strength and considerable rigidity. Previous paddles from GearLab had been some of the most flexible, comparable to very light cedar. This new design is rigid, which is quite a change. I found that it increased my confidence in the paddle, but I did miss the forgiving nature to the flexible blade at times. GearLab paddles are available either shouldered or shoulder-less. The shouldered version provides a soft transition that allows you to index the blade and maintain a comfortable grip. My personal preference is for shoulder-less paddles, as I like the ability to seamlessly slide and extend the paddle during strokes and rolls. GearLab paddles have a distinctive circular narrow loom which feels small when you grasp it, yet due to the way you actually hold the paddle at the transition between the loom and the blade I have never found it too small for my hands. I look forward to seeing what GearLab do next; they seem to be constantly innovating.

Want a shot?

If you are ever in Minnesota and are interested in trying these or any of my paddle collection, please contact me through my website.

About the author

Christopher Crowhurst, an ex-pat Brit now living in Minnesota, USA is slightly obsessed with Greenland rolling. In 2010 he founded Qajaq Rolls, a philanthropic business that promotes the passing on of the traditional art of Greenland style kayak (qajaq) rolling. Christopher has developed video, diagrams and written instruction to help paddlers learn the traditional Greenland rolls. During 2010 he self-published Rolling with Sticks, a waterproof guide book of 25 Greenland-style rolls, and followed this up with a companion DVD. In 2011 he used the business to establish and fund a program of free rolling clinics, providing hands-on training for paddlers looking to develop their Greenland-style kayak rolls. You can contact Christopher through his website: http://qajaqrolls.com