

Go Paddle Day Event Planning Guide

A practical guide to planning a fun, welcoming, and safety-conscious paddling event

What Is Go Paddle Day?

Go Paddle Day is a shared celebration of paddling across North America.

Whether someone is sea kayaking on the coast of British Columbia, canoeing on a river in Texas, paddleboarding at a local lake, or rafting with friends, we are all connected by the same thing: a love for time spent on the water.

Go Paddle Day exists to help more people experience paddlesports by making participation feel approachable, welcoming, and community-driven. The goal is simple: get more people on the water and create positive experiences that make them want to paddle again.

The strength of Go Paddle Day is that participation can take many forms. Some communities may host large public events with demos, vendors, and instruction. Others may organize a simple group paddle with friends or invite one new person to try paddling for the first time.

Both matter.

Go Paddle Day is not about building the biggest event possible. It is about creating meaningful opportunities for people to connect through paddling.

Start Simple and Build Over Time

One of the biggest mistakes organizers make is trying to do too much in year one.

Many of the best community events started with a small group of motivated people, a simple plan, and a desire to bring others together. Those events grew over time because people enjoyed them and wanted to come back.

Your first Go Paddle Day event does not need to be perfect or massive. It needs to feel welcoming, organized, and enjoyable.

A well-run paddle with 12 people is more valuable than a stressful oversized event that stretches volunteers too thin or leaves participants overwhelmed.

Start with the event you can confidently deliver well.

Choosing the Right Event Style

The best event style is the one that matches your current experience, volunteer support, equipment availability, and local paddling community.

Social paddles are the simplest and most accessible way to participate. These events work best when they are easy to understand, beginner friendly, relaxed, and built around manageable routes and calm conditions.

Beginner-focused events are designed to introduce new people to paddling. Choose calm water, shorter routes, and enough support on the water to help participants feel comfortable.

Community events or demo days may include multiple activities such as group paddles, demo stations, instruction, partner organizations, or shoreline gathering areas. These events require more planning and coordination but can create strong community visibility and energy.

If this is your first year organizing a public event, keep the format manageable and focus on doing a few things well.

Choosing the Right Location

The location is one of the most important decisions you will make.

A good venue makes the event easier to run, safer to manage, and more enjoyable for participants.

When choosing a location, think about the least experienced participant expected to attend.

Look for locations with:

- Easy launch and landing access
- Calm or predictable water conditions
- Clear route options
- Enough parking for participants
- Space for gathering and safety briefings
- Nearby washrooms if possible
- Cell coverage or reliable communication access
- Easy emergency access if needed

Avoid locations with heavy boat traffic, strong current, long exposed crossings, or difficult launch areas.

A comfortable venue creates a better experience for everyone.

Planning the Participant Experience

Good events feel organized because organizers think through the participant experience ahead of time.

Walk through the event from the perspective of a first-time attendee.

Ask yourself:

- Is the event easy to find?
- Is parking obvious?
- Will participants know what to bring?
- Is the check-in process simple?
- Will beginners understand what is happening?
- Is the pace manageable?
- Will people feel welcomed when they arrive?

For most Go Paddle Day events, shorter and simpler is usually better.

A 60 to 90 minute paddle followed by social time on shore is often more successful than a long or overly ambitious route.

Many organizers also find success by adding a simple social element before or after the paddle such as coffee, snacks, a BBQ, or a group photo.

Basic Planning Considerations

Even simple events benefit from some basic organization.

Before event day, confirm:

- Date and time
- Meeting location
- Route plan
- Expected participant numbers
- Whether registration is needed
- What equipment participants must bring
- Whether rentals or loaner gear are available
- Volunteer or leadership roles
- Weather backup plan
- How updates will be communicated

Helpful roles may include:

- Event Lead
- Safety Lead
- Lead Paddler
- Sweep Paddler
- Check-In Support

One person may cover multiple roles for smaller events.

Safety and Risk Management

Good safety planning should make the event feel organized and trustworthy.

The most important safety principle is matching the event to the ability level of the group.

If beginners are attending, the route, conditions, pace, and event structure should reflect beginner ability.

Before the event, review:

- Weather forecast
- Wind conditions
- Water temperature
- Storm risk
- River flow or current
- Tide conditions where relevant

If conditions are outside the ability of the group or the comfort level of the organizers, change the plan.

Every participant should have:

- A properly fitted PFD
- Appropriate paddle
- Suitable boat or board
- Drinking water
- Weather-appropriate clothing

For beginner or public events, organizers should also identify:

- A lead paddler
- A sweep paddler
- A communication plan
- An emergency access point
- Who would contact emergency services if needed

The Pre-Launch Safety Briefing

Before getting on the water, hold a short group briefing.

For most community events, five minutes is enough.

The briefing should cover:

- Route and expected duration
- Current weather and water conditions
- Staying together as a group
- Who is leading and sweeping
- What to do if someone needs help
- What happens if plans change
- Reminder that PFDs should be worn while on the water

The tone should feel calm, welcoming, and practical.

Event Day Tips

On event day, your goal is to create a smooth, welcoming, and enjoyable experience.

Arrive early enough that setup does not feel rushed.

Walk the site before participants arrive and recheck conditions.

If volunteers are helping, hold a short briefing so everyone understands:

- The event schedule
- Their responsibilities
- The safety plan
- How communication will work

Throughout the event:

- Keep the group together
- Maintain a manageable pace
- Check in with beginners regularly
- Stay flexible if conditions change
- Capture photos and group moments
- Celebrate participation

At the end of the event, thank participants, volunteers, and partners.

What Success Looks Like

Success is not measured only by attendance.

A successful event may look like:

- A first-time paddler gaining confidence
- A family discovering a new activity
- A community spending time together
- Participants asking when the next paddle is
- A simple event running smoothly and safely
- Organizers feeling excited to do it again next year

The goal of Go Paddle Day is not just to get people paddling once. The goal is to help grow long-term participation and stronger paddling communities.

Final Reminder

Go Paddle Day does not need to be complicated to be meaningful.

Start with the people, water, and resources you already have.

Keep the event manageable.

Make safe decisions.

Create a welcoming atmosphere.

Focus on helping people enjoy time on the water together.

That is how paddling communities grow.