

KAYAKING & CANOEING ENJOYING A SURGE

By Tim Fulton

There's hardly room to dip your paddle on Kerr's Reach these days. Where rowing once ruled, an increasing number are now using the long stretches of the Avon for sports such as kayaking, canoeing and Dragon boating.

According to Arawa Canoe Club president Shane Thrower, the annual Speight's Coast to Coast has reinvigorated paddle sports in the region. "We used to have two or three people at training on a Thursday nights ... now we have 23 or 24," he says. "The Coast to Coast has just ballooned the interest." Ironically, gut-busting Coast to Coast-like kayaking is not the focus of most clubs. "There is definitely a competitive side to the sport but our main focus is just to get out there and have a good time," Mr Thrower says. If the surge of interest in paddling in Australia is any guide, people seem to enjoy the wide range of paddling classes within kayaking and the excellent aerobic workout it provides.

Kayaking can also appeal to those who dislike parks, pools and gyms or are looking for a way to recover from injuries at their own pace. "We have all sorts of people taking part," Mr Thrower says, "everyone from people paddling on the weekends to multi-sporters." Kayakers and canoeists train on the Avon, the Estuary, the Waimakariri or the Hurunui rivers. There are five clubs in Christchurch, each catering for slightly different classes of paddlecraft. With Arawa, Whitewater, Touring, University and Waimea all serving the region, support for the sport seems strong.

This reflects the range of kayaks and canoes now available on the market. Gone are the days when paddling meant either a traditional family canoe or racing for Olympic medals. Recreational kayaks, for instance, are sturdy, hard to tip over and relatively cheap. They can be slow to get going, however, and suit faster water.

THERE'S HARDLY ROOM TO DIP A PADDLE

For those who want an adrenaline surge, racing kayaks are one of the best options. They are only really suitable for calm water, however. Then there is the popular sea kayak. Most suitable for adventure expeditions, the sea kayak is a reasonable weight (from 20 kg's), is comfortable and stable.

They will handle waves but are not particularly manoeuvrable. They are ideal for day trips but won't set speed records. In the competitive classes there are also long distance racing kayaks, sprint kayaks and the Dragon boats. The costs of kayaking may seem prohibitive but clubs provide kayaks and facilities for those starting out in the sport. Clubs also provide instruction in righting a kayak and can also tell you which type of kayak or canoe will suit your ability. This can be particularly useful for kayakers who tend to let their ambition run ahead of their ability. "If you are looking at getting into the sport, clubs are an ideal starting point", Mr Thrower says.

For the more experienced, there is, of course, the froth and spray of white-water kayaking. Sit-on kayaks are for those who have always wanted to paddle white-water but not die in the process. They seem an attractive buy and come with lots of comfort and stability but can be heavy and difficult to get on and off the roof rack.

Then there are whitewater kayaks - strictly for the terminally ill or the experienced.

With an increasing number of people entering the sport, there are a number of local competitions in the pipeline. The Arawa club, for instance, is holding its annual Fitzgerald to Ferryhead race tomorrow.

The Opawa to Kerr's reach Autumn Series begins on April 19 and builds toward the aptly named 'Brass Monkeys' series in July. Budding kayakers should get plenty of hours practice - and then some proper instruction - before taking on open water or rapids. Any canoe/kayak shop can put you in touch with a local club or instructor.

