

Report Number: 99 0412

Vessel Name: Kayak

Key Events

1.1 On 4 January 2000, a group of six kayakers drove to the Nevis Crossing in Central Otago, arriving at 0130 hours NZDT. They camped with a view to kayaking down the river the following day. They had been looking at the flow levels of the river at its mouth over the previous days and felt comfortable with the river flow dropping.

1.2 On 5 January, at 1100 hours, five of the kayakers entered the river with the intention of paddling down to a "take out" point at the confluence of the Nevis and Kawarau rivers. The local name being the Citroen rapid on the Kawarau river. The least experienced kayaker drove the mini bus back towards the "pick up" point, which was approximately 15 kilometres away.

1.3 Having travelled approximately four kilometres, one of the kayakers capsized and his kayak was recovered without any difficulty. The party occasionally lifted their kayaks out of the river and carried them past rapids they deemed dangerous or, for some reason, they did not wish to kayak through. This is known as "portage" to the kayaking fraternity.

1.4 On coming to another rapid at 1315 hours or thereabouts, one of the kayakers drew into an eddy at the side of the river and climbed up onto a rock of almost two metres, to scout the river ahead. He saw no hazards and the obvious line through the rapid to him, was to follow the main flow of the river. He rated the rapid at a Class three or four (*see Key condition 2.8 for definition*) and upon discussing it with his fellow kayakers, they decided to carry on with him going first. He passed through the rapids and had no concerns, except the drop at the end of the rapid that turned out to be uneventful.

1.5 Mr Gunter Schuppan, had sighted the first kayaker going through the rapid and seeing a "thumbs up" sign from the first kayaker, who was resting in an eddy further downstream, Mr Schuppan proceeded through. He followed the same line, but as he came to the last fall he was a little more over to the true left of the river. This still looked good to the kayaker who was sitting downstream. He appeared to be intending to "boof" the ledge, but had lost all his momentum landing on the ledge. "Boof" being a kayaking term where the kayaker with a little speed lifts the weight off his legs of the kayak and slides over a rock endeavouring to fall parallel to the water surface below. Mr Schuppan, realising he had failed to do what he intended had smiled and tried to pull himself over the ledge with his left arm. He could not do so as the stern of his kayak was slowly turning with the current towards some large boulders on the left. His kayak slowly rose up, entering a "sieve" stern first. Mr Schuppan endeavoured to paddle out, but soon only 30 centimetres of the kayak was visible. It had all happened in less than five seconds. Mr Schuppan was not seen alive again.

1.6 His fellow kayakers, seeing the potentially dangerous situation develop, had begun to abandon their kayaks and go to Mr Schuppan's assistance. Mr Schuppan had bailed out or was sucked out as the kayakers found the cockpit empty when they arrived seconds later. They felt around in the water, realising that it was in fact a strong "sieve" or siphon and not just a small whirlpool. They looked downstream, seeing a paddle and hoping Mr Schuppan would appear, but knowing he was possibly down at the bottom of the "sieve", they tried to reach down to him to see if they could feel his lifejacket and pull him up. They pulled his kayak out and carried on probing. A throw bag was thrown in and it popped out on the other side.

1.7 It was 30 minutes later, after all hope for Mr Schuppan was lost, that the distraught kayakers gave up. They decided to walk out, eventually coming across a four wheel track that took them down to a rural road, where they were given a lift by a passing car. The alarm was raised at a farmhouse where the Cromwell Police organised an air search rescue operation.

1.8 The Police, the local White Water Rescue Team and eventually the Wellington Police Dive Squad worked together to recover Mr Schuppan's body from the exit hole of a "sieve" at 1520 hours on 8 January, more than three days later.

Key Conditions

2.1 The deceased was Gunter Schuppan, aged 22, of Germany. Mr Schuppan had arrived in New Zealand on 8 November 1999 with colleagues, to take part in the World Rodeo Kayak Championships at the Fuljames Rapid on the Waikato River, near Taupo. This was being held between 1 and 5 December 1999. Mr Schuppan was a member of the German National Team and was under sponsorship from the German Canoe Federation. Mr Schuppan was a competent kayaker with approximately ten years experience. He knew the risks of kayaking and he carried recognised safety equipment for the sport.

2.2 The World Rodeo Kayak Championship is held every two years, the previous one being held in Canada and the next one, after New Zealand, is due to be held in Spain. Competitors have four, 30 second intervals in a stretch of white water and are judged on their best performance and awarded points on their tactics and style whilst in the white water. There were approximately 330 international entrants at the recent event. With the close of the event in December, many of the kayakers remained in New Zealand to experience kayaking in rivers that appealed to them. One helicopter Pilot on the West Coast of the South Island reportedly stated he had carried over 300 kayakers and their kayaks this season to river "put ins" inaccessible by road. This is more than three times the number carried last year.

2.3 Mr Schuppan's kayak was a Canadian Necky Bliss 8, a small creek style kayak, of limited buoyancy although very manoeuvrable. It would have been more of a challenge than a kayak of greater buoyancy or volume that some kayakers prefer. The kayakers were all wearing buoyancy aids, helmets and full canopy skirts. They were equipped with throw bags and appeared to be very safety conscious and fully aware of the dangers of the sport. Mr Schuppan's buoyancy aid was of German manufacture with buoyancy of 70 Newtons and was designed for the wearer to be able to swim as required from time to time.

2.4 The National Institute of Water & Atmospheric Research (NIWA) have a flow monitoring station in the Nevis River, located just before the confluence of the Nevis and Kawarau rivers. The river flow was recorded at approximately 20 cumecs at 1200 hours on 5 January and had been slowly decreasing in the last 12 hours.

2.5 There is a White Water Guidebook for sale in New Zealand for kayakers and the Nevis River features in it. The party of kayakers had a copy of the book and had consulted it prior to kayaking the river. The guidebook refers to the geographical surroundings, i.e., the sections where portage is possible and which bank, also the gradient of the rapids and where, in the river's course, they were. The river is also rated according to the flows and at 20 cumecs, the river tends towards a class VI. A Class VI is

defined as "big water where a swim is potentially fatal. Most rapids will be extremely confused with no logical route through. Hazards will be frequent and extremely difficult to avoid". A "swim" is a euphemism for a capsize and its consequence.

2.6 The initial kayaker to pass through the rapid did notice a small whirlpool approximately three metres to his left and thought nothing of it as he had seen far worse and it did not appear to be a hazard to them on the route they had decided on.

2.7 The accompanying kayakers were Berne Sommer of Germany, Matthais Brustmann (Mr Schuppan's cousin) of Germany, Craig Kisker of the USA and Thomas Rogenmoser of Switzerland.

2.8 A Class III is defined as, *Waves up to approximately one metre. Fast current. The course of the river is passable but requires inspection because of boulders, holes and eddies. Class III is the limit for open boats and requires sound whitewater skills.* A Class IV is defined as, *Big, numerous waves. Very fast current. Careful inspection of the river's course is essential. Requires advanced to expert level of skill.*

Contributing Factors

3.1 Participating in a potentially hazardous water sport is one overall factor. The river conditions were acceptable to these experienced kayakers. The safety equipment and the quality and suitability of the kayak are all factors, that appear to have been within acceptable limits for the sport.

3.2 The buoyancy aid may have caused Mr Schuppan to become wedged in an exit hole from the "sieve".

3.3 The kayakers were not aware of the "sieve", far less the risk that it posed.

3.4 The buoyancy of Mr Schuppan's kayak was such that the far ends were of low volume and thus more prone to being momentarily submerged than the ends of a kayak having greater buoyancy at either end.

Cause

4.1 Strong water currents present at the fatal rapid drew Mr Schuppan and his kayak down a "sieve" of two to three metres depth. After he evacuated or was drawn from the kayak, Mr Schuppan was prevented from surfacing through the exit holes due to the substantial flow of water through the "sieve" he had entered.

Opinions & Recommendations

5.1 Mr Schuppan and many kayakers are aware of the risks, but those that participate in these water sports should all be made aware of the risks present. A copy of this report and other similar reports, should be sent to the Recreational Canoe Association and the New Zealand Free Style Kayaking Committee Incorporated Club, so that they can make those that are active in the sport fully aware of the risks they take.

5.2 Mr Graham Charles, the author of the New Zealand White Water Guidebook - 100 Great Kayak Runs - should be asked to include previous accidents and their locations in his guidebook.

