

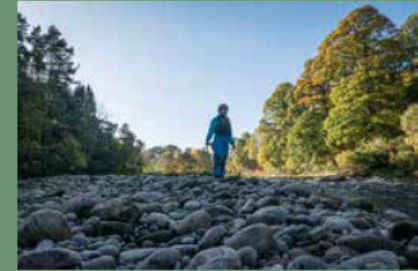
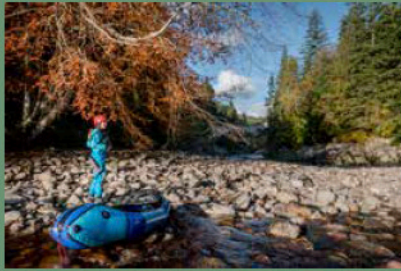
WICKED LEARNING

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PACKRAFTING IS MORE POPULAR THAN EVER, AND AS INTEREST GROWS SO DOES AWARENESS AROUND RIVER SAFETY. BUT WHAT GOES THROUGH YOUR MIND DURING A BOATING ACCIDENT, AND HOW DO YOU REBUILD YOUR CONFIDENCE AFTERWARDS? DAVID LINTERN REFLECTS ON HIS NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE.



Words & Photos: David Lintern



“ Drowning was going to be a very uncomfortable way to die ”

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It was cold and clear as we prepared the boats. The river was flanked on both sides by broadleaf trees decked out in full autumn psychedelia, a slow swaying festival of golds, reds, yellows, and browns drenched in bright sunshine, and all around us the calming pink surround sound of leaves rustling and water flowing. We couldn't quite believe our luck - the forecast could not have been more wrong. After that long and silent spring of lockdown, and the uncertain summer that followed, even something as normal as meeting a friend for a day out was rare and special. The day had already assumed the qualities of a dream.

Sandwiched between the Cairngorm mountains and the Moray Firth, the middle Findhorn is a well-known test piece for developing boaters in Scotland, featuring a mix of short, mid-grade rapids and gentle meanders. While the rapids can be serious, especially after rain, they are not sustained and there are plenty of places to get out and 'scout' ahead. It's not the sort of thing to try as a novice, but my boating partner Debra and I are not novices, and felt ready to give it a whirl.

Packrafts have changed the way I think about moving through the landscape, because bodies of water become thoroughfares rather than things in the way, but it's the yin and yang of river travel itself that has really changed who I am. Rivers are nature's arteries, the wildlife corridors of a little Britain bounded by roads and fields. Travelling on them is about balance, not just getting to places or seeing things you otherwise wouldn't. Once you enter the carrying stream, it's not just a safari of things out there that is of

concern: Rivers are alive, they reach inside, they tend towards the metaphorical.

Sometimes the current is strong and you are swept along, sometimes the water is slack or a headwind comes up from the north and you must paddle hard to make any progress at all. Sometimes there are obstacles in the water to be avoided... but those obstacles create eddies in their wake that can be used for rest or to gain momentum. The journey is the goal, the medium is the message - to accept the ebb and flow, to work with the force of life rather than against it. Rivers teach grace. They are serious, sensuous, seductive beings.

This is all well and good, but there's one more thing to understand about the river before we go on. We are not in charge. The river knows more ways to kill us than we know how to stay alive.

Hubris Strikes

Spirits were high that day. We played safe, took risks that were calculated and finished our run earlier than planned. Although we'd both paddled harder individual rapids in the past, I think we surprised ourselves a little by negotiating the entire stretch without drama. It had been the perfect afternoon in a perfect place, in great company and sublime conditions. Why wasn't that enough? I must admit, it was me who asked first. It's been so much fun; shouldn't we push on?

Coming out of the next big corner before a long,

“ Fear doesn't have to shut us down. It has much to teach us ”

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fast and straight stretch, I turned my head to check Debra's progress. In that briefest of moments, a tiny wave tipped the bow and, as in all the most cliched adventure films where 'stuff happens', time yawned to a standstill. It was a controlled exit, I remembered my white water training and held on to my boat and paddle. For the first few seconds I felt surprisingly calm. I then realised the water was flowing much too quickly for me to do anything except stay afloat and get carried along. This was concerning, because at the end of this long, straight section was a very large rapid called Randolph's Leap.

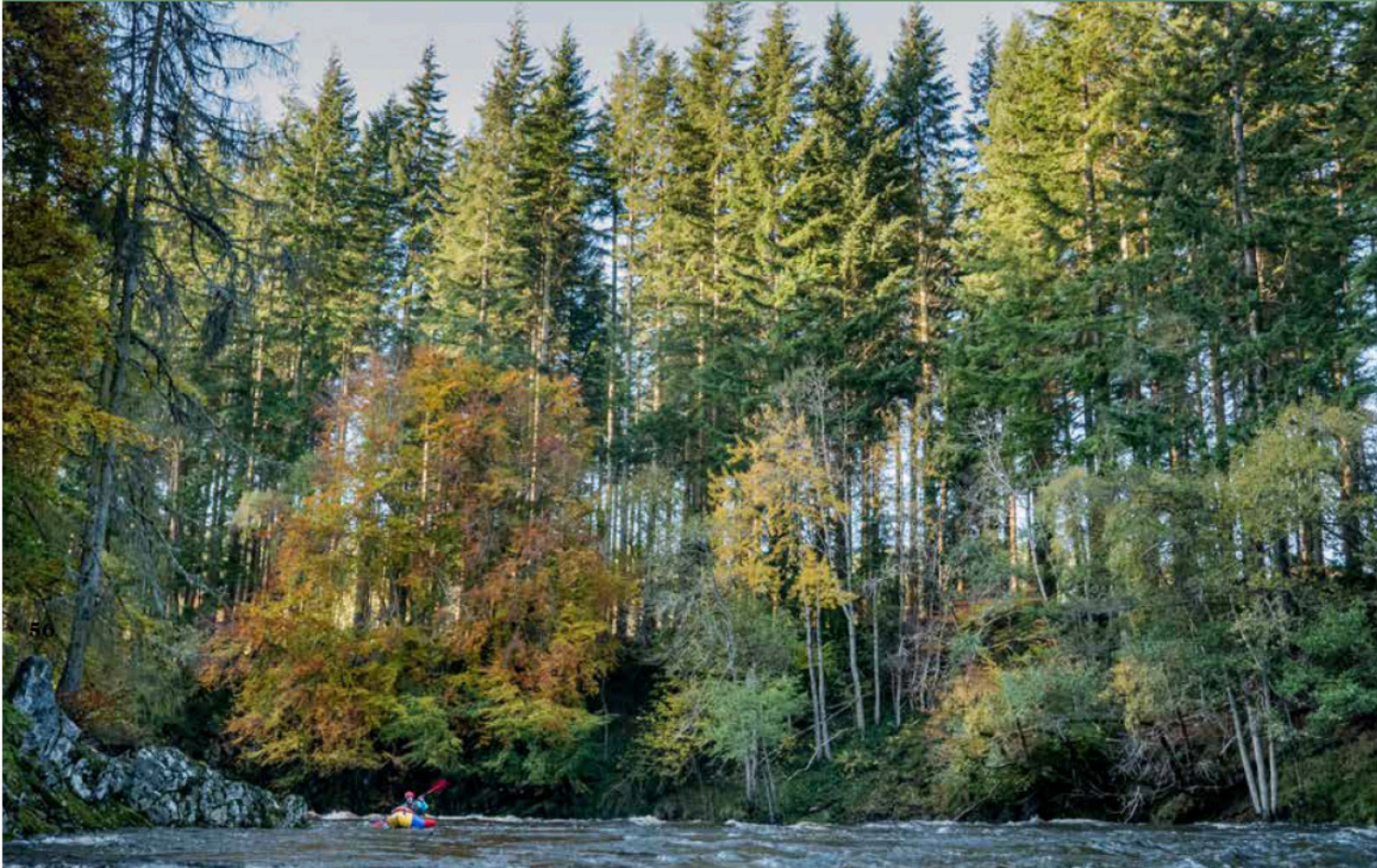
There had been a lot of rain in the days before and the river was still high. I tried to time my breaths in-between the standing waves that pushed me under, but it didn't always work. A 'hole' behind a boulder then tried to separate my helmet from my head. I could feel the cold now too, the waves pressing hard against my drysuit, leaching energy out. I got the boat right side up and the paddle inside, before making a very half-hearted attempt to get back in. I think I only tried once - I was already tiring. A bend approached along with the chance of an eddy, but I lacked the strength to break through to calmer water. I jettisoned my boat and saw Debra pull up on the bank, the only correct course of action left to her.

My thought then was that this was probably it, and that based on what had happened so far, drowning was going to be a very uncomfortable way to die. Soon, I would lose the last of my strength and then slowly choke, and I wouldn't be able to do a thing about it. There was also the small matter of that 'water

feature' downstream. All of this would involve much pain followed by large amounts of... nothing. Close up, death seemed pretty mundane. I felt detached from it all and wondered whether this was the shock and cold starting to take effect. My second thought was "You fraud, you can't die, you've got kids and a partner". I thought about Debra too, left carrying the experience. What a vainglorious adventure this was. And it was that second thought - about people I cared about, didn't want to let down or leave to grow up without me - that saved my life.

Another corner and more washing machine treatment, and I took stock. I could now see a small gap where the river narrowed, the flat water horizon line beyond which I dare not think about. Water slowed and gathered in front of the narrowing, some of it swilling out to the obvious egress on the right. With leaden arms and legs, I started to swim, hard, as though moving through treacle. Only metres from the Leap itself, I caught the eddy, grabbed for a fallen tree trunk, missed, then caught another, and dragged myself out, hyperventilating loudly.

Without that eddy, my corpse would likely be circling in a hole in Randy's rock gardens. Without basic training, I wouldn't have known to float feet first down the river to protect my head. And without a drysuit, I would have gone into shock minutes ago and be even weaker than I was. I looked around at the surreal sight of my boat calmly eddying around to join me, retrieved it, and rang Debra with shaking, frozen hands.



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The yin and yang of risk

I struggled to make sense of what happened for longer than I understood at first, and it took a year before I returned to the water. The river had not changed, but I had. It was still seductive, and I was still in love, but that strange romance was leavened with a renewed respect, even fear.

There's a term borrowed from cognitive psychologist Robin Hogarth to describe situations in which we cannot control all the variables – places like rivers or avalanche prone mountains – and where our decisions don't always lead to predictable outcomes.

Outdoor professionals call these places 'wicked learning environments'. Risk is built into the outdoors, an intrinsic part of the charm and the challenge, but the river does not care about the games we play. It is capricious, not 'kind'. It does not always behave as we expect, and the consequences of an incorrect prediction can be fatal.

Assumptions based on past experiences – also called human factors or Heuristics – affect our behaviour when doing things we love or are heavily invested in, and awareness of them can help us 'red flag' certain situations and consider our decisions more carefully. Things that can sway our thinking –

like peer pressure (be it gaining acceptance in a group, or assuming someone else has more knowledge than you), over commitment to a goal, positive past experiences in a similar situation, or an experience of something rare and therefore very precious – these are all unconscious behaviours that it pays to be more conscious of. The last two were absolutely at play for my friend and I after several months of lockdown.

Debra and I were due to run the Findhorn again recently, but instead chose to walk before we ran that particular river again. The minor rapids on our alternative helped me realise just how deeply my

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confidence had been shaken a year before, and understand the impact of that other wicked learning environment – the pandemic – in which a new scarcity of time, money, fitness and appetite for risk all play a very different role in our outdoors experiences than they did beforehand.

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It's worth saying out loud: If you are frightened or nervous of things that excited you before, then you are far from alone. Yet, fear doesn't have to shut us down. It has much to teach us.

So, in the spring, we'll rehearse our safety drills and do our practice runs elsewhere, and only then will we head back to the middle Findhorn. By then, perhaps we'll be worthy of it. We'll be kind to ourselves, because the river may not.

Get ship shape

Packrafting seems deceptively easy at first. On entry level water, it's lots of fun with seemingly little consequence. This invariably leads to a false sense of security as you progress to more challenging water. Be sure to check out our 'How To Stay Safe When Packrafting' guide on Mpora.com for more information on the fundamentals of packrafting safety, the equipment you'll need, the grading of rivers and the importance of whitewater training.

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