



## paddling Safety Update, May 2020

In partnership with the National Park Service, New York State and many others, the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor has been working to make the NYS Canalway Water Trail a safe and enjoyable way for paddlers to experience New York's canals.

**This year more than ever before, safety is critically important-- both in terms of reducing the spread of the novel coronavirus and having a safe paddling experience on the water trail.** Please read these important updates:

- **The NYS Canal System is not fully operational.** Lock pump-outs and related construction work at eight locks ceased along the NYS Canal System in mid-March. Until this work is completed, other locks are returned to operation, and the canal is "watered-up," no boats will be able to pass through locks or travel from region to region or end-to-end.
- **Paddling on lakes, rivers, and some land-cut sections of the Canal System where water levels are adequate may be open to paddlers.** Getting on and off water safely, river currents, and dams are key factors that will determine which areas are safe to paddle. Please see additional safety concerns for paddling the Mohawk River on page 2.
- **Please scout areas you plan to paddle in advance.** Public and private facility owners may not be able to install floating docks or kayak launches in low water conditions and many boat ramps may be high and dry.
- **The NYS Water Trail Guidebook** was written for the Canal System operating under normal water levels and full operation. Some of the information may not be accurate until the canal is fully operational.
- **Check the Canal Corporation's Notice to Mariners for up-to-date information on canal conditions:** <http://www.canals.ny.gov/wwwapps/tas/notices/index.aspx>
- **Canals and COVID-19:** Please refer to current guidelines and recommendations from the State of New York and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Before you travel, check to see whether visitor centers, sites of interest, tours, and services are open.

Please contact Mona Caron, Program Manager with any questions or concerns at [mona\\_caron@partner.nps.gov](mailto:mona_caron@partner.nps.gov).



## Additional Precautions for Paddling a Free-Flowing Mohawk River

This year's delay in opening the NYS Canal System has created uncharted conditions with a free-flowing Mohawk River in warmer months for the first time in 100 years. What follows are serious safety concerns for paddlers.

- **Movable Dams-** Because of delays in opening the NYS Canal System, eight moveable dams that typically create navigation channels between Fort Plain and Schenectady remain raised in their winter positions. While they may look like bridges from a distance, these dams have concrete sills in the riverbed that have essentially the same hydraulic effect as low-head dams. Low dams are extremely dangerous because they can form recirculating eddies that are almost impossible to escape. Currents can be very strong and the true nature of the drop may not be apparent from boat level when approaching from upstream. Paddlers should not attempt to run the dams.
- **River Conditions and Currents-** The free-flowing river is running swiftly. Spring and summer storms may change water levels rapidly. Paddlers anticipating an out and back trip may encounter significant difficulties paddling upstream against currents.
- **Lock Chambers-** Locks are not currently operating. The chambers are 310 feet long and have approach walls that extend at least an equal length above and below. The bottom rungs of escape ladders on approach walls that are normally just below the navigation pool may be more than eight feet above the water in present conditions. Getting in or out of the water to portage around locks with low water levels is nearly impossible.
- **Portages-** Riverbanks on the side opposite from locks are typically steep and covered with large stone riprap. Until more on-the-ground information is available, portaging around locks and dams is not recommended. Paddlers should avoid locks and dams.
- **Launch Sites-** Getting on and off the water at present levels will likely be a challenge in many locations. With lowered water levels, hand-launching is possible at public boat ramps, but trailer launching is not. Concrete ramps were built for normal canal operation navigation pool levels and end above the winter waterline. Most drop-off abruptly into coarse stone riprap and/or mud.
- **Emergency Responses-** If paddlers get into trouble, emergency responders may not be able to launch rescue boats at those sites due to lowered water levels at launch sites.
- **Navigation Buoys-** Red and green navigation buoys are normally set in late April before the canal opens. No channel buoys or hazard markers have been installed this season.