

## **Susquehanna: Source to Sea**

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My dining room table strained under 75 pounds' worth of Ramen noodles, cocoa mix, root beer barrels, butter, chocolate chips, bagels, brownies, and a six pack of Busch, among other foodstuffs. Totalling 134,000 calories, all bagged and arranged in neat piles, the rations would provide two men 3,700 calories a day for eighteen days. This was the duration that I estimated it would take me and my paddling partner, Steve, to travel the 460-mile Susquehanna River. The selection of food would have made a good dentist's or dietitian's hair stand on end, but it was a solid cold weather paddling diet that included carbohydrates for energy, fats for warmth, and sugars for reward.

Down the hallway, PFD's, carbon fiber paddles, sleeping bags, and sleeping pads – two of each – were piled among dry bags, fuel canisters, rubber boots, and a shelter. Clearly not as neat as the piles of rations, we knew that by bedtime this gear would be packed and ready for an early departure the next morning. Across town at my friend's house were our boats, which were two sleek, 17-foot, 27-pound Hornbeck solo canoes. After a hearty going away dinner, I lay in bed imagining what paddling nearly 500 miles would be like. My longest canoe trip prior to the Susquehanna was one-tenth that distance. The Susquehanna expedition was my first step toward canoeing the five longest rivers in the Northeast, each with a different partner. If successful on this maiden voyage, I planned to then slip down the Connecticut, Delaware, Penobscot, and Hudson rivers, another 1,500 miles of paddling.

November 10, 2010, dawned clear. The inch of snow that fell two days earlier had melted into our river, chilling it to 46 degrees. We put in near Cooperstown, New York, and paddled toward Chesapeake Bay. Mile by mile the river widened, we got our paddling arms, and we lightened our enormous duffel bag of food. And mile by mile, something increasingly amazed us. It wasn't the bald eagles that watched us, the deer that forded and swam the river in front of us, or the warm, sunny weather that we were lucky to have. It was the garbage. The enormity of it all was impressive, the diversity ingenious. Over here a coal car, next to a bowling ball, next to a printer, next to a shopping cart, next to a raincoat. Over there a tractor tire, next to a fifty-gallon drum, next to an automobile, next to a suitcase, next to a stuffed

animal. Past the trash we fell into our routine, which was getting up at dawn, paddling until lunch, paddling until dusk, setting up camp, eating, and then sleeping under the stars. The simplicity and freedom were welcome, and when looking above the shoreline trash, the woods were often pretty, even in their dull fall colors.

As days went by, mountains were reduced to hills, and wide expanses replaced oxbows until it appeared on November 26. It was Chesapeake Bay. After running under 128 bridges, completing 15 portages, and avoiding 12 dams across three states, we were greeted by double-crested cormorants and the smell of saltwater in Perryville, Maryland. Steve and I pulled into a take-out and tested our sea legs. The journey down river number one was complete.