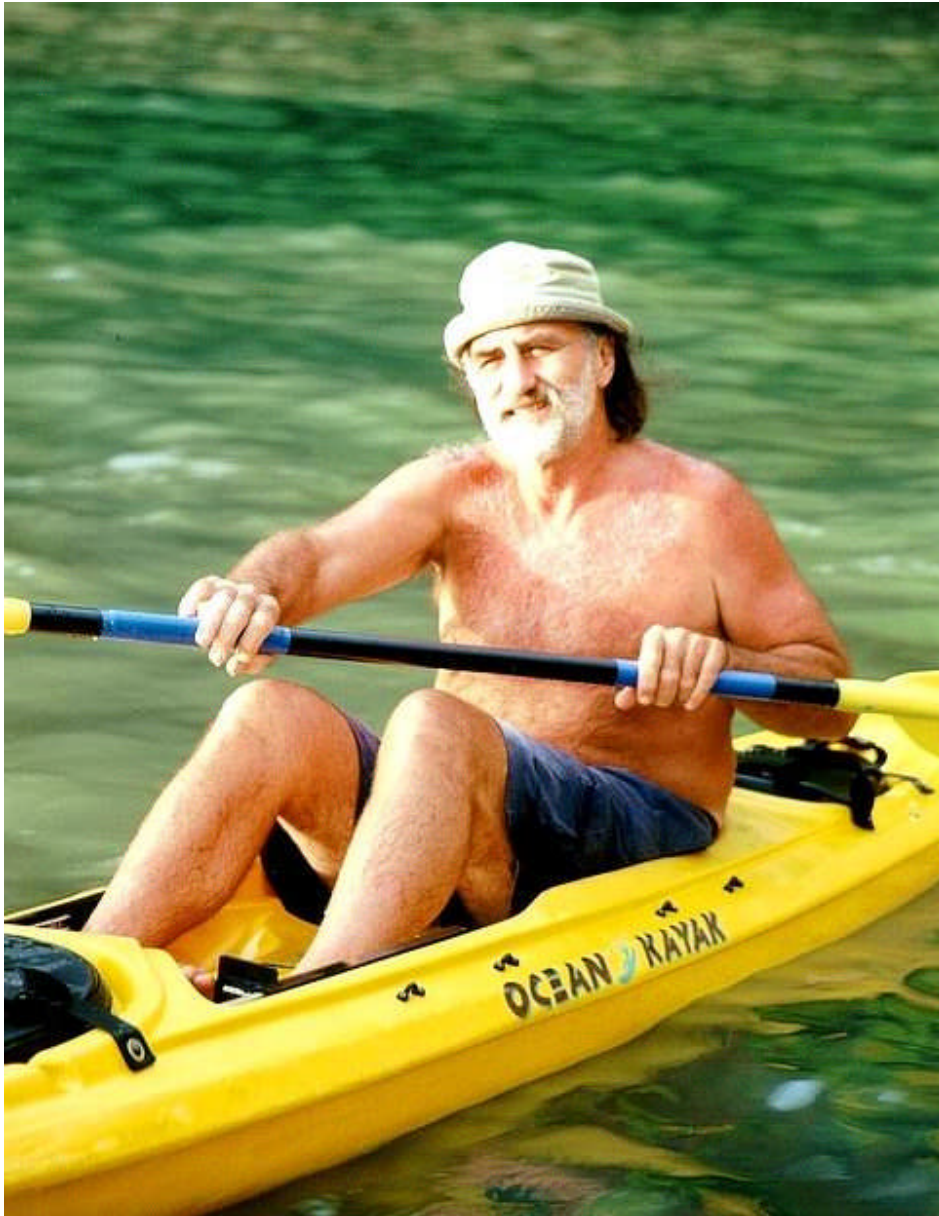


*Sea Kayaking, Thailand*

This short profile appeared in the November/December 1998 issue of *Paddler* under the title, "Sea Kayaking with John "Caveman" Gray."

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**Caveman atop one of Sea Canoe's distinctive yellow kayaks.**

## John “Caveman” Gray: Crusader on a Kayak

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The lanky, gray-ponytailed gringo stood out in the sea of suits, evening dresses and hair-do's in a fancy ballroom of the Bangkok's super-luxe Shangri-La Hotel. He appeared to be an old hippie who never got around to leaving Southeast Asia. Perhaps he knew someone who knew someone else who got him into the high-toned cocktail party. The man wasn't paying a lot of attention to the officials droning their welcoming speeches. He was speaking loudly enough to border on rudeness to his own small audience of rapt listeners. In truth, his words were more important than the officialese being intoned into the microphones.

I soon learned that he was John Gray, a commanding figure in contemporary Southeast Asia. His height, his passion and even his outfit – resembling a karate *gi* but of gray Thai silk instead of white cotton – created a presence. It is appropriate that he dresses up in a warrior uniform of sorts, for the man is a fighter. His usual chariot is a yellow sit-on-top kayak, his lance is a paddle and his enemy is anyone who threatens the region's coastal ecosystem.

In a heartbeat, Gray will rail against short-sighted and corrupt officials, against bad long-term choices made by desperate villagers, against hit-man logging tactics, against push-net fishing boats that deplete local marine life, against shrimp farms that flush toxic effluents into the sea and against stupid development of all sorts. He is messianic in his belief in stroke-by-stroke tourism, and a modest “industry” to support it, as the salvation of his adopted region—and perhaps the world. “Southeast Asia is where we will win or lose the planet,” he maintains. “I'm committed to making sure it's all still here in a hundred years.”

He grew up with Sierra Club blood coursing through his veins and remains an idealistic savior of mangroves, an advocate of sustainable village economies and an eco-tourism pioneer. After moving to Hawaii in 1983, he began sea kayaking as an alternative to the high-impact tourism which afflicted America's 50<sup>th</sup> state, but it was too late there. So Gray moved on to Thailand, settling in 1989 on sun-blessed Phuket. There, paddling amid the karst islands that rise like primordial stone sculptures from Phang Nga Bay, he discovered water-filled caves and fissures in the limestone that are navigable by canoe—and earned himself the nickname “Caveman.” The light went on, and he started Sea Canoe with four boats and \$128. Now, SeaCanoe's yellow kayaks ply the waters not only of Thailand but also the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos and the South Pacific, and a paddling school specializing in warm-water, tropical kayaking has just been established too.

From the beginning, Caveman trained locals—many of them displaced fishermen—to become guides through karst islands, coastal mangrove channels and deep canyons carved by tidal rivers. Sea Canoe teaches them about respectful, responsible travel in the finest Western sense, while drawing on their knowledge of the sea coast and their culinary skills for their trips “A canoe across the water leaves no trace” is one of several Sea Canoe slogans. Once an operation is in place, Sea Canoe turns ownership over to local people. Especially in this time of regional economic turmoil, solid and responsible eco-tourism is essential.

From a traveler's viewpoint, Sea Canoe is all about immersion both into

spectacular waterscapes and into the culture of the people who live in Southeast Asia. Most Sea Canoe trips are at least three days. The company reluctantly offers day trips from such popular tourist locales as Phuket and Krabi, but Caveman doesn't especially like them. "They're a mess. No one has time for anything. We do them to maintain a presence because we've now got imitators, but I don't recommend a day trip," he says forthrightly.

On longer trips, such as through the scattered islands of Thailand and Vietnam, travel between venues is on a big escort boat. "We don't do big open water crossings," says Sea Canoe's second-in-command Dave Williams. "They're boring and tiring. If someone wants to knock out 50 kilometers a day, we'll rent them a Sea Lion. On our trips, we'll put the strongest guides with experienced paddlers who want to go for more distance and speed, but essentially, we're never in a hurry. Warm water paddling is a pleasure for most people, and we want them to enjoy the culture too."

Caveman, of course, was as much in his element with crystal chandeliers over his head as he is with benign waters beneath his feet. After all, the man who established Sea Canoe is often called upon address groups that meet in posh hotels, and the awards heaped upon the environmentally forward-looking company he founded tend to be handed out in fancy ballrooms.—*Claire Walter*

*Sea Canoe's website is [www.seacanoen.net](http://www.seacanoen.net).*

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