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**viewpoint** BY OMAR NELSON

# No Major Hazards?

Tubing brings its own kind of danger

**Y**es, tubing can be a delightful way to “while away a couple hours watching the riverbanks pass by,” and the Summer Guide article “Take It To the River” June 2 did a good job of sharing the joys of tubing and the basic logistics, but by glossing over the hazards it made tubing seem a no-brainer. Being on moving water always presents hazards. To have a safe and fun float, tubers must be aware of these potential water hazards, as well as the limitations of tubes as watercraft.

In my 20-plus years of boating local rivers in canoes and rafts, I have seen some safe and sane tubers but many more through ignorance, inexperience or intoxication were disasters waiting to happen, and they often did. I have rescued tubers who got caught in wood on the water and nearly drowned. I’ve seen people (mostly young men) so drunk that they couldn’t stay on their tubes and thought it very funny. By August each year the wood in the water (called “strainers” because water flows through them but solid things like people do not) is littered with cheap inflatables and tubes. Amazingly enough, most of the people who were on these things survived.

Reporter Camilla Mortensen says there are “no major hazards” on the Clearwater run. I taught river canoeing on that stretch because it contains all the hazards one is likely to encounter on a river: strainers, powerful eddy lines, rocks, strong currents, confusing braided channels, class I/II rapids, and cold water. Yes, to an experienced Class III boater the hazards may not seem major, but they are real and will get any floater in trouble if ignored.

At Clearwater Landing the eddy lines can be strong enough to flip tubes. Just below the landing, where the channels braid there is a bend to the left. On the outside of this bend, large amounts of woody debris have built up and this is where the current is pushing you. This is a major hazard. All along this run are rocks and riffles that can flip or shred a tube. Once on this stretch a canoe in my class hit a rock and tipped over. After rescuing the paddlers we set out to find their canoe. It had finally run into a strainer about a half mile downstream. (Note: It could be an ugly walk along the blackberry covered banks to find your tube or a way back to civilization.)

And remember that tubes are not very maneuverable. If you get close to an obstacle it’s hard to get away from it. You must be looking and thinking ahead to stay out of trouble. And since you have to be thinking, alcohol should not be your “beverage of choice.”

The advice about tying on your belongings is good. Your PFD should be securely tied to your body. It can’t help keep you afloat if it’s tied on to the tube or left at home. Yes, I know the law doesn’t require you to have a PFD on a single tube and doesn’t require you to wear one, but it makes sense to increase your chances of staying afloat and getting back home to be able to do it again. You should also wear shoes or sandals that fasten (not flip-flops) to protect your feet from rocks and also the broken glass that others have deposited in the river.

I’m not trying to discourage tubing. Like I said at the beginning, it can be a fun and safe way to enjoy the river, but please be aware of the risks and do all you can to minimize them.

See you on the water.

P.S. Since the shuttles are short, consider using a bicycle for your second vehicle.

*Omar Nelson has been involved with the City of Eugene’s River House Outdoor Program for more than 20 years. He has worked as a raft and canoe guide and instructor. He is speaking for himself, not the city or any city program.*




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