Rules of the Road

The following is based on “International Steering & Sailing Rules, Rule 18, et.al” and is presented here as a training and discussion concept. It is not a legal treatise and is not intended to be a substitute for professional training for large and small craft captains.

As a kayaker, there are various approaches to the “Rules of the Road” that all involve “staying out of the way” such as:

- Wallow in the Shallows
- The Big & Ugly Rule
- The Rule of Gross Tonnage

All of these are warnings for a paddle craft operator to stay out of the way of everything else. This is often considered enough for paddle craft but as a captain of a vessel and as a trip leader, understanding the rules and being able to understand what is going on around you may be critical for a safe and successful trip. In terms of “Right of Way”;

“Only New Reels Catch Fish So Purchase Some Worms Often”

(Only) Overtaken – Vessels being overtaken always have the right of way. Even if a sail boat is overtaking a power-driven vessel, the power-driven vessel has the right of way.

(New) Not under command – Vessels not under command (i.e. lost a rudder, etc…)

(Reels) Restricted in ability to maneuver – For example, a vessel engaged in towing with a tow that severely restricts maneuverability when displaying the appropriate lights and/or day shapes.

(Catch) Constrained by draft – Typically a vessel limited to certain areas because of depth of keel or draft. Some call this “constrained to channel”. Display of the appropriate lights and/or day shapes as required.

(Fish) Fishing – Must be engaged in fishing.

(So) Sailing – Must not be using motor, otherwise considered a power driven vessel. Right of way between two sailing vessels is basically, starboard tack has right of way, if two boats are on a starboard tack, then the leeward boat has the right of way.

(Purchase) Power driven vessel – Motor running means power driven vessel, with the exception of the above. When two power driven vessels are in a crossing situation, the vessel to starboard has the right of way (just like the rules at a four way stop sign).

(Some) Seaplane – Seaplanes need to stay out of the way of everybody.

(Worms) Wing in Ground Effect (WIG) craft – Airboats, hovercraft, other specialty ultra low flying craft. Hydrofoils?

[Often] Overtaking if you are overtaking, you must give way to everything else.

But, there are exceptions to the above, specifically Rules 9, 10, and 13.

Rule 9 is with regards to narrow channels…
Rule 10 is with regards to traffic separation schemes…
Rule 13 is with regards to overtaking…

Dogfish Rule: You are the captain of your vessel. You are required to do and TO HAVE DONE everything possible, as required and allowed by law, to avoid a collision.

Warning: Being out a “channel” does not mean you are “safe”! Gathering around an AtoN is dangerous if it blocks or “confuses” anyone else from recognizing it as an AtoN and may be illegal.