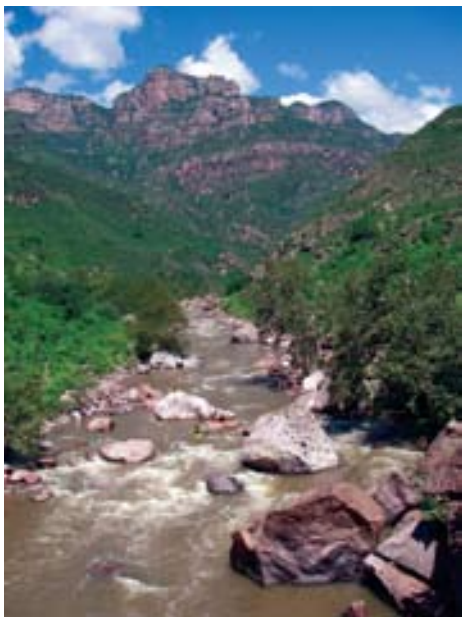


# INTERNATIONAL PADDLING



A view of the river by the village of Río Las Animas.

## MEXICO, PADDLING, AND DRUGS

REALIZE THAT DISCUSSING drugs like marijuana can be a “sticky” issue. Your response to the Río Huevachi images and article probably will lie somewhere on a continuum between two polar extremes. At one end there will be those thinking, “Dude—you must have had some awesome fiestas on that trip! I’d love to be able to get in there myself and sample some of the goods.” Alternatively, there will be others at the opposite extreme, thinking, “Great, that’s just what we need, paddlers promoting drug use.” Well, rather than take sides, as an author I’m just going to discuss the issue here, objectively.

Marijuana and other drugs have particular relevance to paddlers, especially international paddlers. That’s *not* because we are all users. It is because, as explorers in the wilderness, finding drug plants is not uncommon. On my Mexico journeys, I’ve stumbled upon plots of marijuana about two dozen times. Paddlers in other parts of the world will sometimes find themselves in similar situations. Just last weekend at the Kern River Festival (California), an organizer related to me how there was a plot of weed on the upper part of Brush Creek, where one of the event races was going to

be held. What should you do about such a discovery? There can be repercussions, and you should be informed before making any rash decisions.

Fear is a common response to finding illicit plants. You might think, “These guys don’t want anyone to know about their plants. If they find me here, they might shoot me.” Probably the best advice to you if you have fear is to act calmly, get out of that spot ASAP and just forget about it. Your fear might be exacerbated (justifiably) on either side of the opinion spectrum if you’re considering either (a) reporting the plants to the authorities or (b) trying to snag a little bit without anyone noticing. In either of those cases, you are likely to piss off the owners. If they realize a paddler was responsible, they might employ intimidation tactics to keep you and other paddlers away in the future. Regarding the plants on Brush Creek, somebody did report them, and the authorities removed the plants days before the race. In that case, however, I doubt paddlers will be harassed in the future, since whoever planted the weed will just select another place to plant.

Marijuana use has plenty of political and legal ramifications. Being caught with it in can land you in prison in most countries. Prohibition laws that have been in effect for over half a century are intended to protect society. Irresponsible and addictive use leads to increased accident rates, less general productivity, and family breakdown. All users who smoke face detrimental health effects. However, attitudes seem to be changing. Many believe responsible recreational use should be permitted. In the US during the past 40 years, there has been a marked increase in support of legalization, up from 12% of the US populace in 1970 to 44% in 2009 (according to Gallup polls; see [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com)). Although about a dozen states allow limited possession/use for medical purposes only, federal laws still prohibit possession and trafficking. Later this year, Californians will vote on an initiative bill

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that would legalize possession of up to 1 ounce of marijuana for all residents over age 21. The substance would be regulated and taxed similar to alcohol. Recent polls show an outright majority of Californians supporting the bill (56%), suggesting the measure will pass.

Although California may be at the forefront of states considering legalization of cannabis, it actually is trailing behind other countries. The Netherlands has long tolerated possession, use, and cultivation, with legal sale of small quantities in special "coffee shops." Other northern European countries (as well as India and Nepal) have tolerance codes for small quantities. Canada allows possession for medical use, similar to California. Mexico passed one of the boldest laws in April 2009 when it decriminalized the possession of small amounts of marijuana and other drugs, including cocaine, heroin, ecstasy and methamphetamine. Now, if caught with up to 5 grams of marijuana (about 10 joints), you cannot be arrested or prosecuted. This doesn't mean all police officers in Mexico will just let you go if you're caught – some will capitalize on your fear and attempt to extract a hefty *mordida* (bribe). The law is controversial. Many question the irony of decriminalizing the use of drugs

*The tight gorge of Río Huevachi was runnable in some places, but boulder-choked in others.*

(i.e., demand) while continuing to condemn and fight the supply.

Regardless of the laws, drug violence continues, especially in Mexico. In the news we hear things like: "Six Police Officers Killed in Ciudad Juárez; Police Chief Steps Down," "12 Bodies Found Near Tijuana School," "13 people found shot to death with hands tied behind their backs in Sinaloa." The war on drugs is in full force there, stepped up in the last two years since the current President, Felipe Calderón, took office. The drug cartels have responded with more violence against their enemies: other drug traffickers and government officials. There were over 12,000 drug-related deaths in Mexico in 2008 and 2009, with concentrations in border areas. Ciudad Juárez alone has had approximately 2000 such homicides each year, giving it the notorious honor of the "most dangerous city in the world." So, you might well ask, "Is it safe to travel in Mexico?" In my experience, having run nearly every river



in the country over the last 10 years (that's about 150 rivers and 7300 miles), I have never run into problems. The violence is targeted at others with involvement in the drug trade, and not at tourists. While you might think that tourism has severely declined due to the drug violence, in fact visits and spending by tourists actually increased in 2008 and 2009 compared to previous years (according to Mexico's Tourism Board).

As boaters, you should know that traveling and running rivers in Mexico generally will not put you in the crossfire of the drug war. However, if you go there (or anywhere) hoping to pilfer a secluded plot of *mota*, you'd better be prepared to deal with the *narcotraficantes* and their rage.

*For more information on Río Huevachi (additional photos, video, guidebook), see: [www.sierrarios.org](http://www.sierrarios.org), or contact [rocky@sierrarios.org](mailto:rocky@sierrarios.org).*

*Aaron Stabel in a hidden mota field on Río Huevachi.*

