

Adventure Aaron Carotta Q&A:

Aaron is an American Adventurer and television presenter. He started his career through his American TV series "Catch and Cook", and "Bucket Wish". At age 30, he was diagnosed with cancer, which made him leave his 9 to 5 job and travel the world. In 2016 he canoed solo from Three Forks, Montana to Stuart, Florida having never canoed prior.

Here is what Aaron had to say:

#1: What was the most difficult part about your paddle trip and how did you overcome the situation? *"For me, this question is like 'which country is your favorite?' Like having a taste for a certain cuisine, my country favorites, are similar based on the mood I was in. The paddle journey incorporated many difficult parts, but broken up into physical & mental. I personally felt I lacked mental toughness and was coming out of codependent lifestyle, that had recently dissolved. However, physically, the start of the journey, paddling thru The Gates of the Rockies, and portaging around the dams on foot with no assistance, was challenging. I broke the blood vessels in my hands near my thumbs. Slept in my kids tent in the Gates while getting altitude sickness. I am sure it was because I was so white knuckled with my grip and paddling thru the Gates had some moments I couldn't get around the corners --- like Devils Elbow. Not so much hard, but like a runner in a marathon, conditioned me to prep for the longevity of the entire journey. I say "conditioned" not only in a physical way, but mental. Trying not to look at the mile markers each mile, rather than get on with what I learned was called, River Time. Time that had no essence. I do remember coming out of the Rockies and paddling over the last bit of white water I would see for a state or two, looking back thinking, I am good here. I mean, it was the Gates of the Rockies, and I was from Florida, so ever since I got out of the car and in the canoe, I felt buried in them...coming out and looking back on it, was a great sense of accomplishment that I was able to use to get thru the next part. At that moment, I didn't know the mental challenge would be coming up next, in a very quiet way. The isolation of no cell service thru the Dakotas and capsizing as I entered North Dakota would leave me in isolation for 12 days. On day 22, I remember reflecting on the experts who told me after 21 days, you develop a habit and hoping the feeling of paddling for the next 80- days to the Gulf was going to be easier. I say*

80 days, because at that time, I knew nothing about miles and distances others had paddling it in, or what I had ahead of me, including the idea I may go from the Gulf to the Ocean for for a total of 233 days. Ignorance was bliss for me, and the only way I kept going. It was around Day 22 however, that no phone, isolation, and capsized with limited gear, I tried to quit. I walked about 5 miles from the river to a small town and grabbed a hotel that I couldn't even pay for. I called a few friends-- thanks to the hotel lobby and asked for them to come get me. One friend paid for the hotel, another sent me a 50 dollar prepaid phone card, and the rest said they would call me back. By that time it was a few days later and I was already back in the water. I guess, not really having a way out, was the way I got thru it. Tough love and learning curve, but that is the way I was raised and it worked. Around day 40, I overcame what I learned was called, getting stuck in a hole. I won't bore you with what many paddlers already knew. But let's just say, motion sickness from being stuck in the tent with a sandstorm and banging tent back & forth for what felt like 3 days made me nauseous. Nautious to the point that if I needed life lighted out of there, I wouldn't have had a way to get help bc there was no service on my phone, nor any civilization in sight. Looking back on it, winds and sand storms in Lake Oahu really couldn't have ended my life, but for reasons that could have been prevented with proper gear and preparation. All things I learned later. Ironically, I ended up catching a fish each day, from a lure that was snagged off a branch. I simply tied it to some old fishing line and onto the middle of my canoe bar, where I would basically troll by paddling in the wind, mainly to stay straight or barely make it 1 mile per hour, when the winds would let up. I did finally confirm the habit was now a way of life as I entered Mobridge near Day 44 and met a man named Ghost Rider and the marina owner, Mike with his adopted sons and staff Connie, that my purpose of bringing awareness to the adoption organization I was highlighting, came full circle. All of these understandings, were a way of helping get thru it. After that the state of Missouri and the final stretch of 200 miles, really pushed my endurance levels. I was low on food every day, down about 70 lbs and living off the cans of Chef Boyardee, but conversations with local river angels, media, and social media followers, kicked in. It provided a support system, that my minimalist and novice approach, needed confirmation on. It was my first meeting with Robin Kalthoff, who introduced me on the phone to yourself and the Missouri River Paddle page, that allowed me to understand, I wasn't alone. On day 88 after entering the Mississippi, I did have a scare. For the first time my mind and the time

alone began to get lost. I declared that I would go or the Atlantic Ocean and decided to change course. Going upstream 60 miles in the Ohio, with the hopes of reaching the Tombigbee River, I officially lost my mind. My purpose for 80 plus days was changing and while avoiding the barges going upstream and the flying asian carp, it was all too much to muscle thru the elements of going upstream for a new route, I wasn't sure had been done. I checked into a hotel and found myself staring at the walls, unable to focus or even watch tv. Again, trying to toss in the towel, my friends didn't really pick up the phone. It was as if they knew if they waited a few days and I still felt the same, they would then help. So...of course, I got back in the next day later and I turned around and went back down. From there, it became the gear issue of taking an open top canoe, with my gear in trash bags, and a broken seat, into the confused seas of the Gulf of Mexico. I went thru three tents, mainly because of zipper issues. The route in a open top canoe, wasn't ideal to say the least, and the tides were confused with the current, so paddling in the intracoastal or crossing mobile bay, or even camping on the public beaches of Biloxi, weren't ideal like the Mississippi and Missouri. I often was in no current or one that was contingent on the wind, all of which I couldn't figure out and just had to keep paddling. Paying attention to the signs nature gave me like a flat seas to go 7 miles off shore to reach the west end of Dauphin Island and avoid the notorious crossing of 3 miles in mobile bay, was a gift, yet the craziest thing I have ever done and wouldn't do again, or at least would take a very calculated reason. None of which I was doing at the time because I was really on another universe mentally by this point. My experience and skill set after 200 days was growing but still being tested and my final test, that nearly ended it all, was near panama city and perdio pass. I was joined by a cameraman in a kayak, Austin Graham on my final 45 days who I had met by first meeting his river angel mom, Donna in Louisiana. We were trying to make the crossing we had been weathered bound for 3-5 days. I was still playing by the rules of Guinness and in jeopardy of staying beyond the allotted days in one spot, we pressed on. I picked a line in some gnarly current that make a pot of boiling water and a piece of penne pasta look safe. I incorrectly hugged the sea wall bc I figured a capsized would allow me to swim to safety, not realizing the back waves from the backwake was making the wave and current twice as bubbly. Luckily and by the grace of the man upstairs, I paddled thru it. Moments of achievement thru these tough times, often left me immediately making camp. The problem with this was that I then would realizing planning the

next day and knowing that the camp spot I would take for granted that day might be underwater the next morning with the tides, was a harder lesson I soon realized too. Waking up in a waterbed for a tent bc the tide came in, was a reality, twice. Once at two am near Hermann and the other on an alligator bed in the Big Bend. All hard, but all something in respective turn from the start of the journey. Something the route played well too, by the time I reached the Atlantic Ocean, step by step and state by state, was a test to all I learned and a way to implement each lesson learned or ones I needed to! So that's the long answer but if I had to sum it all up, I would simply say, myself and the best way to fix it, was getting in tune with who I was too."

#2 What do you feel was the most important thing that you planned for on your trip that you actually benefited from?

"This is a difficult question for me bc I didn't plan anything aside from the initial route. I know this is wrong and not recommended, but for me the sense of wonder and wow factor, worked in my favor. It ironically fueled me to continue, which works for me and I understand others are fueled by plans. The only plan I really had was that I was going to paddle to the gulf bc it had water and no obstructions that would prevent myself and the canoe from reaching it. I had a tent and a way to get there, everything else would be no different than the current situation I was in financially. The only difference was that I was in a canoe on the water rather than land. So I guess, not planning was how I benefited, bc ignorance was truly bliss."

#3 What was the 5-most important pieces of gear you carried on the trip?

Explain. *"My paddle, my phone, my battery packs, my tent, and water. All were in trash bags, but my battery packs allowed me to keep my phone charged. My phone was my source of music, social media support, gps, and rescue when I had service. My tent was shelter and the water was a necessity for obvious reasons. My paddle was the only way to keep going. All else would lead to remaining survival needs, like food and resupply options."*

#4 Prior to your trip, what was your weakest asset or least skilled or qualified trait for the trip and how do you overcome this?

"Aside from no experience in a canoe or camping, it was being Codependent. I had been relying on things and others in a way that was not healthy or a way that wouldn't be a sustainable future."

Learning to accept things from others but not rely on them was the way to overcome it. Simply learning to say 'Thank you' instead of fishing for a reason not to accept it. Panhandling wasn't an option, but saying thank you and giving a thank you letter when able, was. Having enough to support myself on my own, was the goal and rule, anything else, was river chance as I learned and more so, the becoming the purpose of my trip. Dollar Store not General Dollar was the cheapest for thank you cards. Literally 6 packs for 1 dollar. “

#5 What was the least important item(s) that you brought and discovered there was never a need for? *“Ha! That is hard to remember, because I am such a minimalist that after the first day, I made sure I only had what I needed. But that said, someone gave me a tree hammock, and I didn't care for it. Mainly bc my size and slant it created. I started with very little, and was given things, that I ended up never using like Pots and Pans, I never cooked with anything other than an open fire usually heating up cans of spaghetti if I ever ate hot food. Rarely did I eat anything hot, however, I picked up a machete at a walmart that was too dull to do anything except cook fish on the fire with.”*

#6: What was the biggest surprise of the journey? Something you did not anticipate. *“Being able to camp and live in the canoe and on the river for so long, away from everyone. There are so many places I would go back and camp for a night or two, that no one would ever know or see. It's just amazing that so many people tend to be in the cities yet right across the river, there wasn't a person in sight. Free.....literally.”*

#7 What kind of boat did you paddle and what were its good qualities and also the things you did not like about it?

“Ha Ha Ha Norm. This is a funny question because when I got to Big Muddy Mikes at the end of the Missouri, he asked me the same question, and I couldn't answer it because I didn't know. Turned out it was a 16 foot, Old Town, the one that weighs 57 pounds I think. It was a two person but didn't have any seats and was donated to me. It was light which made it ideal to carry around all the damms. Unfortunately for the first 12 days, I sat in the back seat, not knowing any better. Jim and Martha later told me at their BLM campsite they hosted of 20 years, that it would be easier in the other seat and go backwards. Of course, they were right.

Now the paddle, was awesome, I thought! I mean, I hadn't really seen any paddles before and this one was bulletproof. I even liked it so much, I used the twine I started with, to tie it from the shaft to the center bar in the canoe. I realized how novice of an idea this was, but I didn't know. Robin Connie Karloff introduced me to what other paddles looked like, which I later agreed would certainly be much lighter. Funny note about the twine, while I was in Mobridge, the tide came up overnight and my canoe and paddle ended up down river about 10 feet. The only thing that kept it all from disappearing, was the fact the paddle was tied to the twine, which buried in the sand and held it as an anchor. The paddle got bent and still is, but ironically worked well for the remaining 200 days. If I had a wish list, I would revise the boat with about 8 other characteristics. I actually would share those here, but working with a Canoe company now about possibly designing on model first. Sleeping in the canoe would be the biggest change I would make, I did it twice, once in the water in Lake Pontchartrain and another on what we called alligator mash in the big bend.

#8: How did you plan your meals/food? Did this system work good for you and what would you change regarding this?

"I didn't have a plan and I have since met others who do. I love the idea and ways they do it, packaged, dehydrated, and weekly sorted. I lost 82 lbs bc I spent more energy than I could intake in calories. I lived day to day based on the latest resupply and money I had. Along my trip, money from pending sales and liquidations prior to my trip came in at various times. That usually meant if I would be drinking red wine for the week, or stuck with water. "

#9 What was your system for obtaining drinking water and what were the benefits as well as the disadvantages you had dealing with water? *"None. I simply carried 5 gallons with me. I don't really remember running out or low. But I don't drink alot of water. Its def not a good thing, but for this survival period, I was good. I also had great weather and didn't have to many days I was sweating it out. There were only 1 or two weeks of high heat and water source was great. I do remember coming out of Ft Peck, making the wrong turn left then going back and turning right, only to camp. The next day or two I had to hit a town for water near a town I think that started with the word 'Wolf'. The shore line was full of paraphernalia and the town was poor. I walked to a convenient store and was told*

I was a river white man by some native indians who become very friendly to me. They even asked me if I wanted a women but I insisted to a few different ones, I was only in need of jugs full of water :)

#10: If you were going to give advice for someone planning the same journey what do you feel would be best advice and things to consider that you now know about this journey? *“Great question. I would say that this is one they need to ask them self first, then any question they have, I would answer. The reason I say this is because, everyone has a different way of doing things. I often remember hearing things about Big Bend and how horrible and impossible it would be, only to find out it was the easiest, bc it was 1 foot of debt per 1 mile off shore. This wasn't the case for Dauphin Island, which if I knew I probably wouldn't have done. If indeed you are planning the same journey for the same route, the best advice I can give is understand your dealing with Mother Nature and the Universe. If you can accept that your going to be a small part of that by letting go of your pride and ego, you will open the door to whatever your particular journey and the universe wants to bring you harmony with. It is a beautiful thing that will change your life forever. Your true journey will be one you can use after its over to help your life, which essentially is what it may be about.”*

#11: What would you do differently now that you're finished? *“Aside from learning and adapting to the things that were hard. I would have prepared myself for the 'Re-Entry' part of my life now. Its a real thing and with the support of those in the paddle community I met, just now got thru it to answer these questions. It took me almost 11 months for my mind and body to slow down and actually focus. Ironically the canoe wasn't fast, it was the idea of doing the same thing over and over for 12-16 hours a day, everyday for that length of time, that the mind and body isn't used too. The upside is that whatever your dealing with before the journey, you will be strong enough when your done to properly handle it. I didn't have a end plan including how or what I would do with the canoe. If you have the option and funds to plan your end game out, do that before you start or at least half way down, just don't give yourself a reason or way to not finish. Most importantly thought, for those reasons, I will be doing it all again. Doin it all again, so I can notice the things I was too overloaded with adrenaline to miss the first time and not complete enough to properly have the end game capitalized when I*

am done, as well. Ideally, that will include helping others if needed as well, by guiding them down the entire Missouri.” Aaron Carotta

