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The Survivors: The Return of Boréal Design

AFTER SHUTTING ITS DOORS, BORÉAL DESIGN RETURNS AS AN INDUSTRY HEAVYWEIGHT

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Boréal Design was a well-respected, Canadian-based brand in the challenging longboat sea kayak market when it went into receivership in early 2012. Its wide-ranging lineup—including the aggressively rockered Vaag ocean playboat and unique, reverse hard-chine Greenland-style designs like the Baffin and the Ellesmere—had a loyal following among dedicated sea kayakers, particularly in eastern Canada and Scandinavia where the brand had a solid foothold and a promising future.

But, the company's bankruptcy halted production at Boréal's Quebec City manufacturing facility, put long-time employees out of work, shut down its local retail store, and froze the existing inventory before it shipped to dealers, jeopardizing not only the 2012 season but the very existence of the 21-year-old brand.

Marc Pelland, president of Kayak Distribution, heard that various bidders were stepping up to fight over Boréal's vital organs—manufacturers wanted the molds; industrial equipment dealers, the machinery; kayak dealers, the inventory.

"I'm not sure how that would have turned out, or if it would have still been Boréal Design as people understand it," muses Pelland. There were no other serious bidders to revive the company in its entirety. The remaining inventory might have been blown out in a sale. The factory and retail store would have remained shuttered.

Kayak Distribution stepped in to resuscitate the brand—a big leap for Pelland's company, which at the time only manufactured Riot and Azul Kayaks—outmaneuvering other bidders to buy Boréal intact.

"It's not like a whale came up and ate a minnow. We're a small company with a small staff. It was a huge chunk for us to take on," says Pelland. "The advantage is we have a much faster decision-making process than a large company."

Kayak Distribution's next move was to scramble to save the brand's 2012 season, shipping boat orders to dealers out of the existing inventory, rehiring employees and transitioning production to its own factories.

Pelland isn't sure what drove Boréal to bankruptcy, but suggests that the company was on a downward trajectory. "The products were very high quality but for many they were kind of overpriced. Retailers were going, 'Well, I love the product but it's too expensive for my market. People won't pay for it.' And this gap was growing so they had reached what they could do retail-wise."

Kayak Distribution positioned Boréal Design as a premium brand in its lineup, but at more attractive prices. Now all Boréal Design boats are built overseas—plastics at Kayak Distribution's own brand new factory near Shanghai, composites in Estonia—and pushed out through an extensive global distribution network. Kayak Distribution recently placed Boréal Design in a new market, Russia, and vastly stepped up distribution in Australia.

Last year, Kayak Distribution purchased all of Seaward Kayaks' thermoform molds and is quickly integrating those designs into its Riot and Boréal brands. Sales manager Mark Hall says Boréal will also release two new 17-footers for 2016. All this while maintaining two of its own Boutique Boréal Design retail stores back home in Quebec City and Montreal, employing some of the original staff to nurture sea kayaking's local roots.

By the year after next at the latest—five years after the brand threatened to disappear forever—Pelland estimates Boréal Design will be bigger in every way than it was in its pre-bankruptcy heyday.

"We stepped up and made a big bet on this company whose products we thought were great. We kept the boat afloat, worked like hell and transitioned it into a competitive company that we feel can be a global leader."



This article first appeared in the Fall 2015 issue of Adventure Kayak magazine as a part of our feature on survivors. For more great content, click [here](#) and subscribe to Adventure Kayak's print and digital editions, or click [here](#) to read the current issue.

CATEGORY: DEPARTMENTS

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