

SAFETY AND RISK IN OUTDOOR EDUCATION

by Chris Loynes and Peter Higgins

Introduction

Whenever safety is in the spotlight reactions can be extreme. After the Cairngorm tragedy in 1971 one LEA prescribed that no one would go over 1,000 feet above sea level without a Mountain Leadership Certificate. As a result one headteacher had to telephone the authority to ask if he could open his school that morning as it was built at 1,200 feet above sea level! We are a little wiser now even though one youth club was recently forced to stop canoeing on the canal out the back of the centre this year because no one was a senior instructor.

The current spotlight has come about largely through the occurrence of the Lyme Regis tragedy in which four young people were killed whilst canoeing as part of the programme of a school visit to an outdoor centre. As a result many organisations have been reviewing their safety policies and the Government have enacted legislation.

It is encouraging to see, therefore, two major documents published recently on this subject. 'Outdoor Education, Safety and Good Practice' (AHOEC et al, 1988) or Guidelines for Guidelines as it has become known, was produced by a panel representing all the national organisations in the field. The second is the revised Department of Education and Science booklet 'Safety in Outdoor Education' (DES, 1989). The booklets make two key statements. The first is that they acknowledge that Outdoor Education can be, by its nature, hazardous; there can be real risks involved. What's more, that part of the educative process may be the active engagement by the student with these real risks, appropriately supervised.

Secondly, both booklets go on to point out the diversity of activities and locations now used by outdoor educators. They emphasise the impossibility of prescriptive rules about staffing ratios, in such a dynamic field. Instead, they adopt an approach that requires leaders to develop their own guidelines in any given situation. Both booklets then go on to give some of the questions that should be asked. Central to all the questions is 'do you have a right to place students at risk?'

Hazard and Risk

These terms tend to be used interchangeably but in fact both have a specific meaning under law. The Health and Safety Executive define a 'hazard' as something with the potential to harm and 'risk' as the likelihood of realising that potential. There are a number of HSE publications which define these terms but perhaps the most accessible is and the most useful in helping us conduct our own brief risk assessments is 'Five Steps to Risk Assessment' (HSE, 1994). It also has the advantage of being a free publication!

When working in the outdoors we accept that there are hazards and associated risks; it is our responsibility to be aware of the hazards and assess the risks.

Are you working with risk?

Outdoor situations all contain risks, just like the laboratory or the walk to school. It is important to decide whether these risks are faced as a means to achieve something else or whether they are part of the educative process you are arranging. The Cairngorm tragedy happened to a party that deliberately set out to traverse the mountains in the prevailing weather conditions. The risk taking was intentional as part of the experience. In two recent enquiries, Lands End (Buckinghamshire County Council, 1985) and Altwood (Berkshire County Council, 1989), the risks were encountered because of the location visited but it was not intended as part of the programme. Whatever, both sets of risks need to be recognised and appropriately managed.

What hazards do we face?

After the Cairngorm tragedy and other such mountain incidents with youth groups, great emphasis was placed on obtaining the Mountain Leadership Certificate before leading groups in the hills. This raised the awareness of leaders in the nature of the hazards present in the mountain environment, gave them skills to cope and insisted on experience to develop sound judgment. It was an effective strategy in bringing down the number of incidents despite a continuing increase in the number of visits.

The MLC dealt effectively with one field of hazards, the environmental ones. However, it throws less emphasis on the second set, the human hazards. A risk is only encountered when the environmental hazards interact with the human ones and it is as important for a leader to be aware of the nature of these human hazards as it is to know about the environmental ones. This is emphasised by the Altwood enquiry which criticised the nature of the supervision of the group rather than their presence on the mountain.

It is easy to imagine some of the potential hazards amongst a group of students, their level of skill or knowledge, their physical fitness, their readiness to be there, their eagerness to be somewhere else, their willingness to follow instructions, etc. It is important to recognise that the leader may also represent a 'hazard'.

The enquiry into a recent American tragedy on Mount Hood (Williams, 1987) in which students and staff died of exposure during an attempt on the peak concluded that the judgment of the leader was impaired. He had made the ascent many times before and often turned back. On this occasion he didn't. It was concluded that, for some reason, he particularly wanted the students to achieve the summit and that this, together with his own physiological reaction to the cold, clouded his judgment. Perhaps, also familiarity leads to complacency in such situations.

So, human hazards include the students, leaders and, of course, other people at the site, over which one may have little control.

It will be interesting to see if an awareness of these dimensions of leadership appear in the various award schemes as methods for training people in such topics as group management or decision making become more widely known and accepted. The work of Phipps in the USA demonstrates that specific training can improve competence in decision making in the outdoors. The world wide research of Priest (1988) gives us a progressive model on which to base these possible developments.

One canoeing coach recently confided that, in his advanced assessments, he sets students progressively harder challenges not, as it would seem at first, to see how good they are on the water, but to see if they will recognise that, despite their competence as a paddler, there is a limit to what you can do until you know the group you are paddling with better. You are relying on their performance if things go wrong and you need to trust that they will deliver. So change is taking place. Group dynamics is being recognised as a necessary part of a leaders awareness. It will be interesting to see how the Basic Expedition Training Award (BETA) develops. Aimed at training leaders operating in open country it includes many of these 'soft' leadership skills in its syllabus.

What sort of risk is it?

Colin Mortlock (1981) has identified one way to classify risks that is helpful when selecting activities and venues for programmes. He recognises two types; objective and subjective.

Objective risks are those that are beyond management and involve the crossing of fingers! They include environmental hazards such as slopes in avalanche condition, human hazards such as activities where it is not possible to back up the consequences of a mistake such as some airborne activities; or levels of activity in which the participant does not have the skills to perform or the experience to make correct judgments. The freak wave involved at Lands End is in this class of hazard. They are not justifiable in educational situations and so the only way to manage them is to avoid them.

Subjective risks are those that can be managed by exercising skills or good judgment and are the arena of educational programmes. There is still a risk of harm but the participant has the ability to cope and back up safety systems can operate where a mistake might lead to serious harm eg a rope in climbing.

The distinction between objective and subjective hazards is not therefore absolute but depends on the condition of the environment or the ability of the participants' and their instructor. A freeze thaw cycle may stabilise a dangerous slope; a skills training programme may allow activities that were previously unsuitable; the development of new equipment might change the nature of the hazard (eg the development of kayak construction materials from lath and canvas to fibre glass and now plastic has changed the nature of white water canoeing considerably).

What are the big risks?

A way of examining safety stems from the work of Alan Hale in North America (1988). He has collected data from many outdoor programmes and publishes his findings each year. Many of his insights stand crossing the Atlantic.

It is not always the apparently big risks where the danger actually lies. Ask an insurance company what they consider to be risky from the list of outdoor activities and they might pick out climbing. It certainly seems to push premiums up! Yet statistics demonstrate that climbing is very safe because experience has taught us how to be safe in this situation. So what is the highest risk activity? - walking; at least in America. The serious accident rate to people walking caused by various slips and trips comes top of the list.

It is not just on the really high risk activities that Alan Hale is shedding light. Other factors come into play. For example, by far the majority of accidents occur just before lunch and supper. The inference is that energy levels are low and so concentration is affected. Yet the end of a session is often when students attempt the most demanding challenges. A most recent concern was that the majority of injuries to adults were wrongers to old accident sites. This indicates the possible value of collecting such information on medical forms before courses start. Alan's work is food for thought and it would be good to see his methods being tried out here.

With the amount of media attention and the strength of Government legislation following the Lyme Bay canoeing fatalities, the public (and even Outdoor Educators) could be forgiven for assuming that Outdoor Education presents virtually unjustifiable risks. Statistical evidence, however, tends to refute this. Under the supervision of qualified instructors fatalities are very rare. (For example, the Directors of Training of the BCU, RYA, BMC and BOF report that amongst students at an introductory level under the supervision of qualified instructors there have been a total of only 3 fatalities in the past 20 years (2 of these were from medical causes).

The accidents which have been so newsworthy Cairngorm (1971, 5 deaths); Lands End (1985, 4 deaths); Altwood Ski Trip (1988, 4 deaths); and Lyme Bay (1993, 4 deaths) were either informal activities for which no specific qualification exists or those responsible were unqualified. Even these, as tragic (and in certain cases avoidable) as they are need to be put into context with over 1200 children a year being killed on the roads in the UK.

Although there is an understandable tendency to focus on fatalities, remember that serious injury is also a possibility. Similarly, harm may not be physical - psychological damage may be serious and permanently debilitating. It is clearly our responsibility to guard against this.

How do I manage risks?

First, it is important to recognise that there are objective hazards you just don't want to mix with. They need to be avoided. This can be done initially in your selection of venue. It is also important to remember the human dimension and be selective about your participants.

The group composition and number can be taken into consideration alongside the hazards likely to be encountered. A small group and/or a high skill level may make the risk of an accident lower and therefore the activity may be acceptable. This may not be the case with a different group composition.

Rules can be established. The problem with rules is that you are dealing with dynamic situations, the outdoor environment and human behaviour, and so they may be ignored or circumstances may change. When they are made evidence suggests that positive framing makes a difference. For instance we wear a helmet when we go climbing to protect our head is more likely to produce the required response than 'you must wear a helmet when we go climbing'.

One apparent incongruity in the accident figures may help to support a positive approach to safety management whether dealing with groups that are deliberately risk taking or ones that are simply taking risks to be somewhere. Although self reliant groups often get lost they rarely have accidents. It seems that most accidents that happen to students occur when they are accompanied. This suggests that students are more likely to concentrate when the responsibility is theirs and that, when faced with a decision, they tend to err on the cautious side.

A possible strategy then, is for us all to take a positive attitude to risks. Rather than avoid them or simply make all the risky decisions ourselves it would be better to adopt an approach that briefs the students fully on the nature of their situation and gives them the skills and resources to manage them for themselves. This is, after all, how we all get to learn to cross the road.

How do I know what is prudent exposure to risk?

Prudent is what we, as professionals, are meant to be. Prudent behaviour in law is defined by what is considered to be good practice by the professional's peer group. In court, this is determined, in part, by case law and specialist witnesses. It might be relatively easy to establish when the matter under consideration is, for instance, the type of rope to use. It will not be so easy if you are debating whether the student had the competence to undertake a risk at the level of supervision you were offering.

It will always be the hardest decision to make. When is a student ready to make his or her own decisions in hazardous situations? I have sweated profusely watching from below whilst a student of mine has coolly made his first lead on rock. You may choose never to place yourself in quite that position but we are all there in degrees every time we lead a group outdoors.

A friend with a daughter at school recently reported that the outdoor education staff had sent a letter home stating that certain activities they would be doing, such as orienteering, would not be supervised! This is probably not quite what they meant. Rather, they perhaps meant to indicate that the students would not be directly accompanied. The letter then asked for parental consent for this unsupervised risk taking. The result was a very anxious student and even more wary parents. The risks incurred in driving a car are accepted by most because they are known and the activity valued. If we want risk taking in the outdoors to be acceptable when properly led we have a major communications job to undertake.

What is ethically acceptable as a level of risk to which to expose students and what is the appropriate level of supervision in those circumstances is the core of the debate on which we have now entered. It is a debate which should never be concluded. Because it seems healthy to air these matters continuously for our own profession's development but mainly because what is right should remain a constant debate between leader, student, employer and parent.

There is a relationship between the educational worth of an experience and the degree of risk entered into. The balance can only be found through careful deliberation and a decision made for each situation. One of the most influential factors is our individual development and many of our students and their parents would agree with us. Some will not, especially in the even of an accident.

Perhaps the last word should be left to Nick Halls, a lifelong Outdoor Educator who in a recent discussion with one of the authors pointed out that although many of our perceived educational outcomes may be both valuable and realisable, there is 'nothing more harmful to a child's education than death'!

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