

Controversial Issues in Adventure Education

A Critical Examination

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Should There Be Rescue Free Wilderness Areas?

YES

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INTRODUCTION

Rescue free wilderness areas are crucial to the very existence of the concept of adventure. Adventure is a state of mind as well as a state of being and it is imperative for the future of humanity that future generations are able to explore and adventure in the manner in which past generations have had the privilege.

The issue of whether there should be rescue free wilderness areas is wide-ranging. It entails elements which encompass philosophical arguments pertaining to the type of wilderness experience users desire and how we define adventure versus sport. It impacts the type of decisions land use managers are making regarding the provision of search and rescue services, health care cost decision making, the impact of commercially generated technology on the adventure experience and how readily wilderness users receive it, as well as issues that surround intergenerational equity and society's desire to protect the right of future generations of wilderness users to experience adventure.

What is wilderness? Is it an area so wild that it limits those who can enter? Is the wilderness definition relative and elastic depending upon the need for rescue? Within the political boundaries, wilderness status limits mechanical intrusions which are frequently waived to allow rescues. Is this an acceptable ethical violation? Technological development has brought us to controversy but should technology necessarily win?

Recently, costs of rescue are making many agencies re-examine their positions. Elemental questions now include, "Who gets rescued?" "Whoever needs to be.", used to be the answer. With the current climate, however, the who and how, and at what cost and risk, has become a controversial issue. Is rescue really a public obligation provided to all wilderness areas of the world?

Should rescue free wilderness areas be established? Is the true definition of a wilderness area where even mechanical intrusion for the saving of lives is prohibited? Perhaps the answer is to take wilderness on its own terms, which include areas so wild that nobody except the user can solve the unforeseen problem.

RESCUE RESPONSE MODELS

There are a wide variety of rescue response models available to agencies tasked with providing rescues. These models include everything from one end of a continuum, where the expectations are the provision of fully professional emergency medical system (EMS) responders utilizing professional paramedic/rescuers and an immediate response period—to the other end of the continuum, where absolutely no response is provided nor allowed in an area. Most response agencies tasked with providing wilderness search and rescue services choose to emulate some varying point on the continuum between these two. From higher service levels to lower service levels these theoretical points may represent any combination of:

- 1) A fully professional EMS model with professional search and rescue response
- 2) A fully professional rescue service with volunteers providing search support
- 3) Organized volunteer search groups with professional rescuer support
- 4) No agency rescue with organized volunteer groups providing search and rescue response
- 5) Organized volunteer groups providing search services with non-organized ad-hoc rescue response
- 6) Ad-hoc volunteer search and rescue response
- 7) Rescue-available and rescue-free areas (isolation or land manager imposed)
- 8) Communication/technology bans to protect the wilderness experience
- 9) No external search or rescues are carried out

- 10) No external search or rescues are allowed

Any choice of the level of rescue response (or any combination thereof) that should be provided in an area is a jurisdictional decision which is comprised of elements of wilderness experience philosophy, rescue philosophy and economics. A more intrusive response policy that supports high levels of rescue response from organized agencies has both the result of impacting the level of experience that is available to the wilderness user, while at the same time increasing the costs to the agency.

"WHITE WILDERNESS" RESCUE AND DANGER

Rescue response is a philosophical decision as it has direct implications on the experience that is available to the user. Reinhold Messner in his description of his concept of wilderness states, "At the beginning of this century, the big adventure was to fill in the white spots on the map. I would prefer to leave the remaining blank spots on the map. It's not necessary to go to wild places and create maps or write guidebooks" (Soles, 1994, p. 24). In addition to the impacts of the creation of maps and guidebooks on the wilderness experience, I would argue that the provision of extensive search and rescue throughout all wilderness areas of the world has the compounding result of providing an unnecessary and unacceptable intrusion into the "white wilderness." Access to rescue changes the mental attitude towards adventure and is, in many cases, inessential and superfluous.

Discussions around whether or not there should be rescue free wilderness areas will

increase as the world's true wilderness areas decrease in size and number. This is because human beings will ultimately realize that there is no end to the potential urbanization of the vast spaces; the ensuing backlash will result in our striving to create true white wilderness areas, ones that do not include artificial elements such as rescue.

In addition to retaining blank spaces on the map that enable true exploration, the wilderness experience is characterized by other factors, not the least of which is an appreciation of the potential harm which may result as a consequence of interacting with an untamed environment. No matter how you attempt to package it, outdoor experience without the risk of harm is sport or guided tourism, not adventure. Risk and danger are inherent in the definition of adventure. Fear, as a result of risk and danger, is also part of the adventure experience. If someone starts a route with the knowledge that there is no outside assistance they are likely to be much more careful and much stronger, both physically and mentally. This level of fear is taken away with the expectation that rescue is imminently available. If this fear is taken away, a false sense of confidence ensues and not only are individuals more prone to incident, but they are not experiencing adventure. Adventure occurs only where there is the risk of death. If death is not possible, the activity is not adventure; it is sport (Soles, 1994). In fact, risk and danger are the *raison d'être* of the activity (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1997).

THE NEED FOR RESCUE IS A RELATIVE CONCEPT

When lost or injured in the wilderness, the adventurer obviously feels an increased need

for rescue. Prior to the accident there was no need for rescue to exist. Injury changes one's appreciation for rescue. When a life hangs in the balance it is easily worth the \$2,000 helicopter ride to safety; so too, is the understanding that when it is not required, rescue is clearly an extraneous need.

The concept of what is an extraneous need in the wilderness is very dependent upon a person's individual beliefs, the culture in which they live, the level of their wilderness knowledge, skills, and abilities, their tolerance for epics and whether or not they even know that a rescue option exists. There are legions of stories passed down in adventure folklore of users either calling in unnecessary rescues or waiving off those which rescuers were attempting. I have personally responded to rescue callouts that have included everything from a request for vehicle gas for someone who designated running out of gas an emergency requiring rescue, to a climber who refused to be rescued even though he had a broken leg. Ultimately, the decision of whether or not a rescue is desirable is highly variable and very relative to the individual. So, whose definition of necessary will we use? I trust not the definition which adheres to the logic of, "for any reason, any where, any time, using any means." This is clearly inappropriate in all wilderness areas.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF HIGH-TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATIONS ON WILDERNESS RESCUE

As a result of the physical isolation of many areas of the world (examples might include the Arctic, the Antarctic, Northern Canada, Tibet, etc.) there have effectively

been geographically imposed rescue free wilderness areas. However, recent developments in communication technology have given urgency to the discussion surrounding rescue free wilderness areas and have severe philosophical implications for how we view and are able to experience wilderness. Contemporary rescue teams routinely respond to subjects who can communicate with them by cellular or satellite telephone. While this has desirable effects on both the efficiency and effectiveness of the response, it also has the potential to significantly change the nature and frequency of callouts unless parameters are placed upon the use of these communication systems.

Another high-technology communications item with the potential to impact the wilderness experience is the personal locator beacon (PLB). Operating along the same technological lines as the more familiar emergency locator transmitters (ELT) used in aircraft and the emergency position indicating radio beacons (EPIRB) used on sea-going vessels, the PLB is manufactured and marketed for the use of land-based wilderness travelers. When activated by a user the transmitted signal is picked up via satellite technology and its position is forwarded to the appropriate search and rescue response agency anywhere in the world. Although the concept is sound and the technology works well; there are serious implications for rescue agencies, some of whom embrace the technology while others eschew it. The fact that a PLB transmits only one type of emergency signal gives no clues to the rescuer regarding urgency, which results in all PLB callouts in a jurisdiction receiving the same level of urgency. PLB technology in many jurisdictions is driven by its manufacturers; not as a result of either user or response agency demand. While manufacturer marketing

may subtly allude to high levels of rescue response when they are activated, the truth is that response agencies will set their own policies regarding the urgency given to PLB callouts. These policies may differ widely from manufacturer desires or user expectations. As an example, British Columbia's written policy is to respond to all PLB callouts as though they were a missing person and not as though the subject required a rescue-level response. Volunteer ground search teams are used as the initial response (Amy, 1994). This is likely to be disappointing to a wilderness user who is expecting a helicopter filled with rescue paramedics to come flying over the hill.

The obvious resulting question is what role in wilderness rescue decision making should the manufacturers of high-technology implements be allowed? They have an obvious bias regarding the level of technology that should be used in wilderness areas and philosophical decision-making regarding response levels should be removed from the realm of their influence. It is a fact that communications technology will advance far beyond what is available today and it is crucial for wilderness users to be the ones determining what technology is permitted in wilderness areas.

Although this paper is not particularly intended to argue for or against the merits of high-technology use in the wilderness, it is relevant to any discussion regarding wilderness rescue to consider that by its very existence in the wilderness, the use of high-technology communication impacts the user's experience level. I have never experienced anything as intrusive and disruptive to an expedition experience as carrying out media interview transmissions back to North America from the North Col of Mount Everest. Having experienced it once, I promised

myself that this level of high-technology intrusion would never happen to me again. Sponsors thrive on this, while mountaineers sell their souls because of it.

ECONOMIC REALITIES AND PUBLIC AGENCY RESCUE FUNDING

As much as we would like to think otherwise, rescue philosophy is ultimately dictated by economic realities. A rescue agency may strive to provide a level of service based upon its perceived mandate or corporate philosophy only to find that it is inachievable due to inadequate funding sources. Corporate and professional philosophy just met economic reality, an increasingly common occurrence in times when rescuers are striving for ever higher professionalism and increased response capabilities while funding agency budgets are ever shrinking. The net result of this conflict is healthy discussion regarding the level of service that should be provided, what level of technology (i.e., communication and helicopters) should be used, who should pay for rescue and ultimately, should rescue be provided in all wilderness areas.

Economic rationalization is positive when it results in a critical analysis of what, where and how rescue services should be provided. It is not necessarily a truism that the default position of rescue providers should be to continually strive for consistent and continually increasing levels of response throughout all wilderness areas. This is a fiscally irresponsible, inappropriate and unlikely scenario that causes much performance frustration throughout the rescue community. Economic rationalization must occur as part of rescue delivery decision making. To

do otherwise would be unconscionable. It is appropriate as part of this rationalization process to consider providing a scaled level of response; not all areas require similar response types or speeds. It is consistent with this line of reasoning that some areas require none at all.

RESCUE RESPONSE ZONING

Search and rescue response agencies normally set goals and expectations to the speed with which responders will access an injured person within their jurisdiction. Various models have been formulated by agencies to provide guidelines for their response targets; many of which are accompanied by some sort of zoning system that will provide direction as to what type of response time is acceptable within a specific area. This approach to pre-planning response is based upon the assumption that an agency will not be able to provide the same level of service to all areas within its jurisdiction. This is often due only to the varying lengths of time it would take to access all regions it is responsible for. A sample of one of these models follows:

1. *Near-urban*: Response targets to near-urban incidents will follow the "golden-hour" rule and access all urban and near-urban areas in under one hour.
2. *Front-country*: Response times to front-country incidents will be within one to two hours.
3. *Mid-country*: Response times to mid-country incidents will be between two to four hours.
4. *Back-country*: Response times to back-country incidents will be between two

to twelve hours (Province of British Columbia, 1996).

It is a logical extension of this type of model that there is a place for a *wilderness area* zone that does not have rescue provided. In effect, when an agency starts to base response on a land-base zoning model there are land areas in the world where there is effectively no useful rescue response. Thus, it is appropriate to call it like it is and state outright that these areas are or should be designated as no-rescue areas.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC RESCUE RESPONSE

In many ways, the discussion around whether there should be rescue free wilderness areas revolves around whether public agencies should provide rescue services to everyone and in all areas. Is rescue really a public obligation to all people in all wilderness areas of the world? It is not. Governments have no moral obligation to assume the responsibility for adventurer behaviours in what are best described as anarchic, anti-social, personal, recreational, non-contributory activities. Without rationalizing one over the other, these accident causing behaviours may include any combination of lack of planning, poor equipment, lack of skill or knowledge, recklessness, acts of God, and bad luck, among others. The reality is that adventuring is high-risk, fickle, and irresponsible from any societal point of view. That is partly why we do it. Placing responsibility upon society to support such behaviour is Machiavellian and misguided at best.

Should wilderness users be able to effect their own private rescue without relying upon public agencies to carry it out or fi-

nance it? Clearly, in most regions, yes. Should the publicly funded response agencies, for callouts that are deemed "extraneous", be able to provide this service on a cost-recovery basis if requested to do so by the user? Clearly, in most cases, yes. Should private alternatives to public agencies be developed to provide an alternate service if the user demanded it? Clearly, in most cases, yes.

Many of the reasons that public response agencies are moving to consider various forms of revenue-generation, cost-recovery or fee-for-service delivery formats are philosophical in nature and not deficit based. Many agencies feel that it is not responsible for tax-based funds to pay for all rescues in all areas. This is a clear indication of their position that it is unreasonable to provide rescue to all wilderness areas as funded by the public purse.

Rescue costs are directly or indirectly a part of a region's health care costs. Whether these costs are borne by the state, the user, or insurance, will depend upon the particular public policy of the region. Jurisdictions in Canada, the United States and Europe differ widely on their view of this. So, too, will their views on whether there should be rescue free wilderness areas.

INTERGENERATIONAL EQUITY AND FUTURE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

The most important aspects of whether there should be rescue free wilderness areas regard what is fair and equitable to future generations of wilderness users. The way we use our resources and the manner in which they are developed are, in effect, policy decisions about intergenerational distribution and equity. The main beneficiaries of rescue free wilderness areas are the inhabitants of

the future, as they will then be able to experience wilderness on the same terms that previous generations have. In social decision making, including whether there should be rescue free areas, there is no excuse for treating generations unequally. Decisions made today directly and profoundly impact the experience levels available to future generations. It is unethical and immoral to develop our wilderness areas today in a manner which precludes our children and their children, from experiencing the same isolation, dangers, fears, planning, and contingency challenges that we have been enabled to grapple with. Wilderness is not wilderness with the elimination of these critical elements of adventure!

Intergenerational equity is an obligation to conduct ourselves so that we leave to the future the option and capacity to be as well off as we are today. Distributional equity is an issue between the present and the future, so wilderness management decision-making today becomes a problem of what impact we are prepared to have on future experience opportunities, what we are prepared to do in order to protect future experience options, and what we are prepared to spend to invest in their protection. Current decision making regarding the evolution of rescue response has a tendency to default toward increased coverage and higher levels of service and do not inherently incorporate any concern about the protection of future wilderness experiences.

The provision of rescue free wilderness areas today can be regarded as an act of investment in the type of wilderness experiences available to future generations. I do not want my son to grow up believing that the only definition of wilderness available to him includes the intrusion of rescue teams flying around the wilderness upon the demand of telephone toting urbanites who expect a rescue service to make up in for the knowledge, skills, and abilities with which they should have been trained.

Should there be rescue free wilderness areas? Yes, there should be.

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