

This article may not be reproduced without the author's permission.

# LESSONS LEARNED

## Chapter Six

### Ethical Foundations of Wilderness Risk Management

By Jasper S. Hunt, Jr. © 2000

*This chapter addresses fundamental issues in the ethics of risk management in wilderness-based experiential education. The author examines the ethics of exposing people to risks and makes the case that ethical acceptability depends upon the organization's mission and the participants' informed consent. The chapter is based on a paper called "Ethically Acceptable Accidents in Wilderness Education," originally presented at the 1998 Wilderness Risk Management Conference in Black Mountain, North Carolina. The paper was later revised and presented at the 1999 International Camp Nurses Association Conference in Bemidji, Minnesota, and has been further revised for presentation here. Responding to concerns voiced at the first presentation, Dr. Hunt has disguised the names of the organizations from whose printed material and marketing brochures he quotes.*

My first response when asked to write about ethically acceptable accidents was puzzlement. Isn't the very idea oxymoronic? How can an accident ever be justified? Aren't accidents, by definition, unethical and unacceptable? I also doubted my competence to tackle this issue. Surely, there must be someone more knowledgeable about accidents who should be writing this paper. Then I started thinking back over my career so far as an experiential educator.

It has been 30 years now since Jed Williamson gave me my first job as a sherpa at the North Carolina Outward Bound School, and in that time I've become familiar with a lot of accidents. There was Henry McHenry's fall in 1972; Don Haldiman's fall in the Linville Gorge; the young woman raped while on solo at North Carolina Outward Bound School in 1971; Brad Shaver's death in the Himalayas; the two young women at Northwest Outward Bound School who died on final expedition in the Oregon Cascades in 1971; the University of Puget Sound students who died in an avalanche on Mt. St. Helens, while I was camped that very night about 1,000 feet below; Devi Unsoeld on Nanda Devi; Willi Unsoeld on Mt. Rainier; my own 30-foot leader fall in Boulder Canyon in 1982 that should have put me into a wheel chair for life; the 1989 NOLS accident on Mt. Warren where a young student died; the 1996 Everest expedition that has been so thoroughly written about and discussed; the 1997 University of Alaska Anchorage accident that killed two students and seriously injured many others; Craig Dobkin's fall several years ago that put him in a wheel chair. There are others. In running down the list, I realized that I have had a lot of personal experience with accidents, some of them with direct involvement and others from reliable second-hand knowledge.

I want to draw from my own experience as I approach this subject, but I am faced with a dilemma, one that is pregnant with meaning for me personally and for our profession in general. How do I use the accidents I know about as a source of moral education when many of the people who were directly involved or affected by them are still alive? An ethical analysis invariably leads to moral judgment. How dare I make a moral judgment about Willi Unsoeld, for example, or any other of the other people I know about and the situations they encountered?

One wants to learn from past experiences. But at the same time one must be very cautious about the effect

ethical analysis may have on the memories of the dead and the sensibilities and welfare of the living. The goal here is to do ethical analysis, not to make judgments, to understand rather than to criticize or defend. Although ethical judgments will and must be made as well, they are for the most part beyond the scope of this chapter.

#### **The Unacceptable Accident**

Before we examine ethically acceptable accidents, it is worth considering what makes an accident ethically unacceptable. And certainly one of those things is silence. The accident that is not openly discussed, not learned from, not held out as a case study for other practitioners and peers to examine, is an accident that is in its very nature unacceptable.

Several years ago I spoke with a Vietnam veteran about his experiences as a young 2nd Lieutenant of infantry in combat in the Mekong Delta in 1968. The issue of casualties came up. I asked him how he handled it as a leader when someone would get killed or wounded. Thinking along the lines of EMT training, I wanted to know how he would handle critical incident stress debriefs while in the field. It seemed reasonable to me that even in combat, a leader would conduct such debriefings after a wounding or death, once they were in a secure area and the action was over.

The guy looked at me like I was crazy. He informed me that the helicopter would land, the body would be thrown on board, the chopper would leave, and the men would continue on with the mission. There would be nothing said about the death or casualty, ever. Years later it would become apparent that this silence may be one of the chief reasons so many Vietnam veterans suffered from post traumatic stress disorder. Failure of the leaders to offer any sort of debriefing to survivors resulted in psychological harm being done.

I think it is legitimate to analogize from the Vietnam experience to an accident in an outdoor adventure program. A death or an injury suffered on an outing is often treated as a dirty little secret that we dare not talk about. We especially don't want to discuss the ethics of it all. It is interesting to note that once an accident occurs, one of the first things people are told is to not talk about it. The advice usually comes from legal counsel concerned about potential lawsuits. But that advice, sound though it may be from a legal standpoint, can interfere with both the healing and learning processes.

An accident not talked about or learned from is ethically unacceptable. Note that this is an after-the-fact argument. The aftermath of an accident can make it unacceptable, even if the accident itself is found to be ethically acceptable. Continuing with the Vietnam analogy, Dr. Shay argues that small unit leaders in the military have a moral duty to look after the psychological welfare of their soldiers. I argue here that we as outdoor educators have a similar duty to look openly and honestly at our accidents and share them with our professional peers.

This ethical duty extends outward in three directions. First, and most important, is the impact the accident has on the victim and his or her family and friends. Second is the impact of the accident on the students, staff, and administrators of the program involved. Third is the impact of the accident upon the profession of wilderness education in general. A proper response to any given accident can be very helpful to all three areas.

Another issue that may indicate an ethically unacceptable accident is boredom. Very often wilderness educators operate in areas where they have become very familiar with the terrain and its geographical and geological features. After someone has led student groups up the north ridge of the Middle Sister Mountain five or six times or more, it can become rather tedious to take another group up the same route. The same occurs with rivers, lakes, deserts, and other venues. I have seen many instances through the years where instructors have elected to take students on riskier outings, not because of a solid educational goal, but because the instructor is bored with the other, more predictable route. The students are placed in a riskier situation because of instructor boredom.

Why is this unethical? Let me again analogize. Imagine for a moment that you are an airline pilot. You have made hundreds—no, thousands—of takeoffs and landings at the same airport. You're bored, and you decide you need a little novelty in your professional life. So you order your co-pilot to shut off one of the four engines and land the plane using just the other three. It seems obvious that if a commercial airline pilot did this, he or she would immediately be out of a job. And there would be a good reason: The riskier landing added absolutely no benefit to the passengers and only served the needs of the pilot.

Boredom, however, is not the only reason an instructor might unnecessarily increase the risk for students; social status can also play a role. Staff members who take students on riskier routes are sometimes awarded higher status on the organization's social pecking order than instructors who stick to less risky routes. In the mountaineering and paddling worlds, for instance, social status is often directly correlated with the levels of risk an individual has encountered in his or her personal outdoor activities. The ethical danger emerges when they carry this measurement of social status, which may be appropriate for one world, into their work with students under their care.

I will never forget hearing the late Paul Petzoldt, legendary mountaineer and wilderness educator, say that just because an individual has pioneered a new route on Mt. Everest doesn't mean he or she is automatically qualified to teach students. The character traits needed to achieve mountaineering greatness may be very different from the character traits needed to achieve excellence as a mountaineering instructor. Indeed, there may even be, on empirical grounds, a negative correlation between the extremes of risk presented on a climbing or paddling resume and the qualifications necessary for outdoor leaders. The willingness to continue doing less risky routes may be a significant virtue for an outdoor instructor, rather than a negative character trait. Program administrators need to be alert to this issue of social status and diligent in assessing its effects within their organizations.

### Telos and Risk

Classical Greek philosophers described a concept known as the telos of an organism. The telos of something is the end at which it aims. The telos of an acorn, for example, is to become an oak tree. Acorns do not become chipmunks or rabbits. If conditions are favorable, they become what they are meant to be: oak trees. According to Aristotle, every organism has a telos that is intimately bound up with its nature in order that things become what they are meant to be.

Another way to say it is that a telos is a final cause of something. The telos or final cause of medicine is health. The telos or final cause of education is knowledge. In experiential education, each organization has a telos as well. It is essential to carefully examine that telos as part of our evaluation of the ethically tolerable accident.

In our earlier piloting example, the telos of commercial airline travel is safe delivery to a destination. The telos of the military, on the other hand, is to win wars. The military fighter pilot, therefore, accepts a different level of risk than the airline pilot does, even though the two perform many of the same activities. It is common knowledge that pilots who fly high performance fighter jets accept certain risks just by flying these aircraft. An F-16 is more dangerous than a 727 because the F-16 has been designed to achieve the telos of a combat mission. One carries weapons. The other carries passengers. One plane is highly temperamental to fly and the other is more predictable. The planes are different, the missions are different, and the teleologies are different. Therefore, the tolerability of risk differs between the two types of flying.

The same can be said of wilderness-based educational programs. The most basic question program managers and instructors must ask themselves is "Why am I doing what I am doing?" or "What is my telos?" The tolerability of risk will largely be ascertained by the answers given to these most basic questions.

As an example, let's compare the ethically tolerable amount of risk between two different organizations. I

will call one organization the Oak Creek Outdoor School and the other the Cedar Creek Outdoor School. Let's say that I am a parent and I want to know about the difference between these two schools. Of course there will be some obvious differences: location, price, course schedule, staffing policies, etc. There may be many similarities between the two as well. However, as a parent, one of my main concerns is about the levels of risk my children will be exposed to; in other words, the acceptability of risk to me as a parent is of vital importance. Adults who are deciding whether to attend one school over another themselves are also interested in how much risk the organization finds acceptable. I think part of the answer lies in the teleologies of the two schools. Are the teleologies the same or are they different?

For the sake of our example, let's say the telos of the Oak Creek school is to teach certain character traits or "core values" to participants, including courage, physical fitness, compassion, and craftsmanship. The telos of the Cedar Creek school, on the other hand, is to develop outdoor leadership in extreme wilderness environments. Clearly, the teleologies are different, but what does this difference have to do with the acceptability of risk?

We'll take Oak Creek first. This school believes it is possible to teach courage, compassion, physical fitness, and craftsmanship while at the same time minimizing danger and risk to participants. A quote from the school's course catalog is very revealing.

Oak Creek Outdoor School is vitally concerned about the safety and welfare of its students. In fact your safety is the ultimate, most important value we hold. Our instructors use perceived risk as the vehicle by which we teach our core values. You can rest assured that the risks you encounter while here are more perceived than real. In fact our instructors are experts at setting up perceived risky experiences, while at the same time maintaining your safety. Our equipment is first rate and meets or exceeds industry standards for student safety and welfare.

It is clear from this quote that Oak Creek's goal is to teach the specified core values using a wilderness setting but at the same time minimizing risk. In fact, the position is taken that safety is the "ultimate, most important value" of instructors. On empirical grounds it seems that the school has been successful in its approach, teaching the character values it espouses while at the same time running courses that are only perceptually risky. Real risk has been minimized, maybe even eliminated for all practical purposes. Therefore, it would be hard to ethically justify injecting risk—real risk as opposed to merely perceptual risk—into the programming of this school. Indeed, given the standards put forth in the catalog, it could be argued that no accident would be ethically tolerable for this particular wilderness-based program.

For a very different perspective, let's take a look at Cedar Creek's catalog. The Cedar Creek Outdoor School

describes its telos as teaching leadership and teamwork, environmental studies, outdoor skills, and safety and judgment. In their statement about safety in wilderness programming, the school has this to say:

Wilderness activity involves hazards: rockfall, wild rivers, and freezing temperatures can pose a risk to even the most experienced outdoor leader. Activities ranging from simple day hikes to climbing glaciers can, due to errors in judgment or the unpredictable forces of nature, become dangerous and potentially life threatening .... It is important you understand that there are risks. Some adventure programs say that they can guarantee your safety. Cedar Creek Outdoor School does not. The risk of injury, even serious injury or death, is unavoidable in the outdoor environment in which we teach.

It seems clear from this statement that the Cedar Creek Outdoor School accepts and even advertises to potential students the fact that they will be exposed to real and not merely perceived risk while on a course. Given that its aim includes the teaching of leadership, outdoor skills, and judgment, the institution has concluded that it would be inconsistent with its telos to attempt only risk-free activities or to design courses around merely perceived risks.

One would be hard pressed to find two more divergent views on the tolerability of risk than we find between Oak Creek and Cedar Creek. Indeed, my analysis suggests that Oak Creek Outdoor School is, in fact, risk averse, while Cedar Creek accepts the reality and tolerability of risk. My point is not to make a moral judgment here about the positions taken by the different schools. It is simply to point out the connection between divergent teleologies and different tolerances of risk. It appears that Oak Creek has decided its mission can be accomplished with very little real risk and that Cedar Creek has concluded the opposite: Its mission can't be carried on without it.

This comparison leads directly into the central issue of this chapter. Whether or not an accident is ethically tolerable must be determined within the context of the telos of the institution involved. This does not mean that we leap to conclusions and say that on an Oak Creek course absolutely no risk is acceptable (although one has to wonder, given the wording in their catalog). Nor does it mean that students on a Cedar Creek course will be lucky to come out alive. It does mean, however, that instructors in the field who have the ultimate responsibility for making decisions about safety and risk had better be very clear in their own minds about the telos of the organization for which they work and had better make decisions with that telos in mind.

I mentioned earlier the hypothetical instructor who decides to take a more risky route simply because he or she is bored with the standard route. Let's say that same thing happens in each of the two schools in our example. The instructor who works for Oak Creek, remember, is there to teach the goals of the Oak Creek school. It has been determined through past experience that a certain



route on a given peak is an appropriate activity at this point in the course to accomplish at least part of the Oak Creek's telos. The instructor, however, is bored with this route. He or she elects to take the students on a more inherently risky route, one with greater real, not merely perceived, risks. An accident happens on the climb. Is this an "ethically tolerable" accident? My answer is no. Absent mitigating circumstances, such an accident would not be ethically tolerable.

Suppose the instructor worked for Cedar Creek instead. It may well be that the standard route, with its attendant low risk, is sufficiently difficult for teaching basic mountaineering leadership skills to a beginning Cedar Creek student. Granted, this venue might not be challenging enough for an advanced Cedar Creek student. But if the route was sufficient for the teaching of basic leadership, and the Cedar Creek instructor, bored, was to take the riskier route with no justified gain to a basic student, then that instructor would have the same ethical burden that the Oak Creek instructor has.

However, here is where a major divergence might take place, based on the different teleologies of the two schools. It is a fairly well established truth in mountaineering and technical rock climbing that instructors must be able to lead at a higher level than the routes they take students on. So, if a leader takes students on routes of, say, 5.5, then he or she should be capable of leading routes of 5.6-5.7 and so on. A strong argument can be made that Cedar Creek is obligated (by virtue of its telos) to impel its students to attempt climbs of a more difficult grade than the standard routes which they might be leading in the future. In other words, if an accident happened to a Cedar Creek student who was pushing his or her limits in order to accomplish the telos of leadership—again, absent mitigating circumstances—that accident might be ethically tolerable within that institution.

### **Hubris and the Acceptability of Risk**

There is another concept from the ancient Greeks that is useful in analyzing the tolerability of accidents in the outdoors. Hubris refers to overbearing pride, presumption, or arrogance in a person's character. As I look back over the multitude of accidents that I am familiar with, there is a common theme in many of them that relates directly to the concept of hubris.

I was reading a book recently about the 1996 disaster on Mt. Everest, and I was struck by the way the author described the South Col route up the mountain as "the yak route." That phrase stopped me in my tracks. As I thought back to the climbers who first put in that route and the many people who have died or suffered on it, I could only shake my head in bewilderment and astonishment. How could any climber refer to any route up Everest as a "yak route?"

And yet they do. The same thing happens on other mountains, rivers, canyons, and other venues in wilderness settings as well. Trips and efforts that were historically challenging and even dangerous become trivialized and are even treated with contempt by certain

people who have developed an attitude of arrogance and pride towards these settings. It is my position that there is no such thing as a "safe" route up Everest—or Mt. Rainier, for that matter. The same holds for virtually every other wilderness environment in which we operate.

Hubris occurs when people begin to lose the respect they once had for the dangers and seriousness of wilderness areas. This usually happens because of their past successes in these areas or because they have developed personal skills that are higher than the skills needed on past endeavors. What was once personally challenging becomes routine, even boring. However, the potential for an accident is just as real on the 100th ascent as it was on the first ascent. Failure to recognize this fact is an act of hubris that can lead to disaster.

Once again, I am impressed by aircraft pilots and their institutionalized respect for what they do. They go through their preflight safety checklists, whether they have 100 hours or 10,000 hours of experience. Pilots who neglect the basics are considered inherently dangerous in the flying world. The same is, or ought to be, true of instructors and leaders in wilderness-based education. Hubris is an unnecessary, and intolerable, risk.

When we consider the tolerability of a given accident, we need to look for examples of hubris. Was this accident caused at least partially by an attitude of arrogance, undue pride, or presumptuousness on the part of the leader(s)? If it was, then the accident becomes ethically problematic, even intolerable. If a given venue caused a person to approach it with caution, care, even fear the first time around, then I suggest that same humility is appropriate and that same caution should be exercised on the 100th use of that venue, too. If a wilderness-based educator loses that respect, then it is arguable that he or she should not be leading students in that setting any more. In a wilderness context, lack of respect towards that which at one time evoked respect (or even fear) is a warning sign of approaching hubris.

### **A Cultural Gap**

Often there is a cultural gap between the people who do wilderness programming for a living and those who come on courses. Over the years, I have been struck by the insularity of many wilderness education professionals and the gap that separates them from the rest of society. Many wilderness professionals embrace a "counter culture" lifestyle that is at odds with the norms of the majority and many of the minority cultures in America.

For instance, there may be a great variance between the level of risk outdoor educators find acceptable as compared to the level that students find acceptable. Students do not always realize the amount of risk they are being exposed to. It has been my experience that a vast number of Americans do not have a clue about the potential risks that are inherent in wilderness activities. Evidence for this can be seen in something as seemingly minor as the kind of gear people wear in rainy weather. Professionals tend to choose gear that will prevent

hypothermia after prolonged exposure to rain, wind, and cold. Non-professionals often pay attention to different features such as color and style, how something looks and whether or not it goes with another thing. They do not always understand that the risk of hypothermia is real.

I think it is advisable for professionals in wilderness education to be aware of this issue and how it might influence their decisions on the acceptability of risk. The greater the cultural and lifestyle gap between professionals and their students or clients, the greater the potential for placing people in inappropriately risky situations. It is very easy for those who do risky activities for a living to grant a level of ethical acceptability or tolerability to accidents that might not be even remotely shared by the broader public. I suggest a very careful, ongoing, critical self-reflection on the part of wilderness educators in this area.

### **Informed Consent: An Ethical Imperative**

The discussion about the ethical acceptability of risk and the telos of an organization was framed earlier in terms of course catalogs and other program publications. But it does not follow that, just because I have read a statement describing the telos of an organization or program, I am therefore adequately informed about the risks associated with attempting to achieve that telos. A fuller understanding rests on the foundational concept of informed consent.

Informed consent is both a legal and an ethical imperative. The legal perspective is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Four, particularly in regard to the wording and presentation of release forms. From an ethical standpoint, however, the more completely a participant has been informed about risks, the better able he or she is to agree to accept those risks. And the more a participant fully understands and accepts the risks he or she is agreeing to, the more ethically justified the program is in using greater risks.

Students of the Greek philosopher Plato are familiar with the paradox of the impossibility of attaining knowledge. Basically the argument goes like this. Either one knows or one does not know. If one knows, then why would one seek to know what one knows, since one already knows it? On the other hand, if one does not know, then how can one seek to know what one does not know? Due to one's ignorance, one would not even know what to look for. Indeed, if one does not know but then attains knowledge, how would one know one had attained knowledge or falsehood? One does not know the difference between the two, since one starts from ignorance!

This is the sort of puzzle that drives non-philosophers crazy, but I think it is useful for the issue of informed consent. Put simply, the question is this: How can I give informed consent to risks that I do not know about until I have encountered them? In other words, doesn't informed consent imply that I have knowledge of that in which I am about to become involved? However, I have

not yet gotten involved, so how can my consent possibly be informed?

Modern philosopher John Dewey provides an answer to the old problem posed by Plato. Dewey argues that the paradox rests on an assumption that knowledge is an all or nothing affair. This assumption fails to account for the process of coming to know. Dewey argues that in reality human beings acquire knowledge gradually and in a processive manner. Coming to know is not a condition of either/or; instead it is incremental, processive, and gradual.

As a practical matter, risk management practitioners have something to learn from both of these great philosophers. Plato raises a vital question about the difficulty of knowledge. When we say that we are informing our students or clients about risks, then we are operating in the knowledge arena, not as a theoretical matter for a philosophy seminar, but as a matter of life, death, or injury for those who come to our programs. Yet Dewey's reply provides a practical "solution." We should see informed consent as a gradual, on-going matter that pervades the entire relationship we have with students or clients.

I remember hearing an experienced medical doctor talk about informed consent between patients and physicians. Speaking from a medical ethics standpoint, he said that the most common mistake health care professionals make regarding informed consent is to assume that once a patient has signed a release the matter is closed. Too often, once the form has been signed, health care providers never ask for informed consent again. His point was that health care providers should be getting informed consent regularly from their patients, throughout the entire professional relationship.

None of our potential students or clients is either completely knowledgeable or completely ignorant about potential risks in wilderness education. Rather, each of them lies somewhere along a continuum between the two extremes. The problem for the ethically concerned practitioner is to determine where along that continuum a particular individual lies. A reasonable man or woman is only able to make a truly informed consent decision relative to the place he or she occupies on the knowledge-ignorance continuum.

In the legal arena, informed consent is related to what a "reasonable man or woman" might think or do. This issue is complicated by the fact that there is no absolute standard of reasonableness. Any number of parties may be called upon to make a determination of reasonableness, including individuals, program administrators, outside agencies, professional certification and licensing agencies, and judges or jurors in a legal proceeding. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to attempt a definition of what a reasonable informed consent might be. However, it is sufficient at this point to be aware that the concept exists, that it affects the determination of informed consent, and that

an ethical organization needs therefore to consider it when designing its approach to risk management.

Another ethical problem can occur whenever there is a gap between an organization's marketing and admission departments and what actually goes on in the field. Several years ago I was speaking at a well-known outdoor education school. It was the all-staff meeting, just before the summer season with students got underway. The issue of acceptable risk came up. I asked the assembled field instructors how many of them had read the material that their students had been sent by the marketing and admissions departments. Out of some 95 field instructors, not one had read the most recent material that had gone out to students. The office staff who were there were quite taken aback. The point is that it is extremely easy for a gap like this to develop between field staff and office staff, and for the perception of risk to be different on either side of that gap.

A different problem can occur when an organization paints a too-rosy picture of itself to the public. I am grateful to Mr. Charles (Reb) Gregg, LL.B., an attorney active in legal issues in outdoor education, who pointed out the significance (both legally and ethically) of the kinds of photographs that an institution puts in its public catalogs. If the photographs depict only happy, smiling people in safe situations, he noted, then potential students might well get a false impression of what they are really getting themselves into. It is arguable that the pictures in an organization's catalog should accurately reflect the potential risks and hazards students or clients might encounter on the institution's outings. This point has tremendous implications for the ethics of informed consent.

Marketing and admissions departments, of course, are often under extreme pressure to fill courses. After all, that is what they are hired to do. Thus a tension can develop between the ethically concerned practitioner who wants to adequately inform potential students and clients about the risks of a particular course or program and the equally ethically concerned, yet market driven, admissions and marketing people who do not want to scare potential students away. At minimum, the field staff and the admissions and marketing staffs need to be in close communication about the potential risks inherent in the programming offered by the school. From an ethical perspective, it is better to overplay the potential risks involved in the interests of informed consent than to underplay them in the interests of enrollment.

In summary, I would like to make four practical suggestions for outdoor professionals to consider. First, program marketing materials and any other informational publications that discuss risks must do so in terms of the telos of the organization. Second, risk managers must make a good faith effort to understand how much potential students or clients really know or do not know regarding what they are getting themselves into when they come on programs involving wilderness-based risks. Third, informed consent must be seen as an

ongoing ethical obligation throughout the entire duration of the professional relationship. Informed consent is not a one-time responsibility, completed through pre-course materials and documents, and then forgotten. Instead, field instructors should regularly discuss risks with their students and re-obtain their consent on an ongoing basis. And finally, the standard of the "reasonable man or woman" should govern this exchange between information and consent in wilderness-based professional relationships.

### **Ethical Feedback Loops**

I can remember my time as a field instructor for two Outward Bound schools: North Carolina and Pacific Crest. One of the key things I learned from Outward Bound was the importance of external safety reviews, conducted by evaluators from other Outward Bound schools. We would be out in the field, on course, and a safety review team would suddenly appear and just watch what I was doing with my students. Similar reviews were conducted throughout the school's entire programming. Each review team produced a report reflecting on what they had observed. The entire school would then use that review as a source for reflection and learning in areas of safety and risk management. In other words, Outward Bound built in risk management feedback loops for their entire system. Many people would argue that they set a standard for safety reviews that has become a de facto industry standard.

Drawing from this precedent, I think it is useful for all outdoor education schools to develop ethical feedback loops. An ethical feedback loop is any means whereby an organization regularly engages in ethical analysis and reflection and then acts on those insights. Too often, ethical reflection only occurs after some sort of problem has arisen. But it doesn't have to be that way. Regular ethical reflection can be as integral to an organization's functioning as accounting or equipment inventories. This means institutionalizing ethics as a mainstream concern at all levels of the organization. Field staff, office staff, members of the board of trustees, every member of the organization can and should engage in ethical reflection. I am not suggesting some sort of prissy puritanism here whereby institutions suffer from the "paralysis of analysis" and ethics becomes an undue burden. Rather, I am suggesting the inclusion of ethics within the overall context of the organization and its mission. I urge practitioners to take a proactive rather than a reactive approach to these issues.

### **An Ethically Tolerable Accident?**

I want to take my final pages to connect the history and telos of the Wilderness Risk Management Conference with the topic I've been discussing throughout this chapter. Since the mid- to late 1980s, there has been an ongoing discussion within the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) about the broader issue of safety and risk management at the national level, issues that affect other outdoor programs besides just NOLS. I can remember participating in the end-of-season NOLS staff conferences in Lander, Wyoming, during the early years of those discussions. Seminars were offered.



Speakers came in from other programs. Intense discussions were held about wilderness programming, safety, risk management, and a host of other topics. The NOLS leadership wanted their staff to have an opportunity to learn from each other and from other professionals so that their own professionalism would be enhanced, with the concomitant result of better courses for their future students. There was also a desire from NOLS that there be more open discussion about risk within the profession of outdoor education.

Also in the late 1980s, three NOLS students and one instructor attempted to climb Mt. Warren in the Wind River Range of Wyoming. During the ascent, the weather deteriorated and time was running out, so the instructor decided to abandon the summit bid and descend from the peak. As part of the descent, the instructor decided to lower the students over some steep rock to a snow couloir and then exit the mountain via the couloir and an adjoining glacier. The instructor was careful to make sure that once a student had been lowered there was sufficient space on the resting ledge for the student to move well out of the way of the fall line of the next descending student. It is an accepted mountaineering practice to avoid standing beneath people who are rappelling or being lowered, due to the possibility that the person descending might dislodge a rock that could injure the climber below.

The first student, 24-year-old David Black, was lowered to the ledge. There was a large-enough space to clear the fall line of the other descending students. The second student was also lowered without incident. The third student, however, accidentally dislodged a rock the size of a small watermelon. The rock ricocheted off the wall and struck David Black's helmet, even though David was well out of the way of the natural fall line of the lower/rappel system. David Black died from injuries received in this accident.

A post-accident investigation and analysis determined that the accident was caused by a freak ricochet and that the instructor and students involved had operated well within the standards of prudent mountaineers with their level of experience and training for the activity they were engaged in. However, that was not the end of the story.

David Black's family was in severe grief and searching for some meaning in their son's death. The NOLS community was also in grief and also sought meaning in this tragedy. What happened next makes profound ethical sense. The combined sorrow and grief brought David Black's family and the NOLS organization together in a creative and ethically acceptable way. Rather than engage in blame, accusation, and retribution for this event, the family and the outdoor leadership school came together to find a mutually beneficial meaning and resolution.

David's parents wanted his death to help produce something useful for the profession of wilderness education. They did not want him to have died in vain. I do not have the space here to go into the details, but the death of David Black coincided with the prior efforts of NOLS to get a national dialogue going about risk management and led to the creation of The Wilderness Risk Managers' Committee and the first national Wilderness Risk Management Conference in 1994. The committee and conference had been envisioned before, but David Black's death was a catalyst that helped in overcoming lingering inertia and getting the ball rolling. Other major players in the wilderness education field (such as Outward Bound, the American Alpine Club, Student Conservation Association, Wilderness Medical Society, and the Boy Scouts) came on board to aid the National Outdoor Leadership School in its efforts to encourage a national and international dialogue about risk management issues.

Recall that I suggested in the opening of this chapter that the ethically unacceptable, intolerable accident was one that is not discussed openly, not learned from, not used as a teaching vehicle for practitioners as they go about their professional lives in the future. Human beings by their very nature seek meaning out of life. We can stand great tragedy, great loss, and great suffering. But we have a very low tolerance for the loss of meaning, for meaninglessness. One of the hallmarks of the ethically tolerable accident, in my view, is the accident that helps in the development of meaning for people. It is not caused by negligence, boredom, arrogance, or any of the other questionable practices outlined here. An accident that might be deemed tolerable is one not caused by negligence and from which great learning takes place, where people think about things they may not have thought about before, where the balance between risk and benefit is examined, where the continued welfare of our students is held as a sacred trust.

When we engage each other in dialogue, in argument, in the sharing of the latest research, and informal discussion, we are well on the way to creating meaning. As I think about Willi Unsoeld and Devi Unsoeld and Brad Shaver and Scott Fischer and David Black and all the others who have died or been injured in wilderness accidents, I realize we have a moral, ethical obligation to learn and to share our learning, drawing from their experiences and from our own.

Facing these difficult issues openly and honestly together is at least a step in the right direction toward understanding the ethical foundations of wilderness-based risk management.

Reprinted with permission from "Lessons Learned"