

---

## Wilderness Risk Management for Small Programs

Christopher Barnes, Executive Director  
High Mountain Institute

### Introduction

The majority of wilderness risk management issues apply to all programs small and large; however, there is a subset of issues that are either exclusive to or substantially different for smaller programs. A small program fundamentally can and should meet or exceed the general practices and standards for wilderness risk management, however doing so requires careful thought and focused efforts.

What is a small program? If your program director stuffs envelopes because she has to, (not because she is helpful), yours is a small program. If your job requires you to fill out tax forms and know the name of the public lands official who signs your outfitter-guide permit, yours is a small program. Finally, if any employee knows the first and last names of over 50% of your participants in the last five years, yours is a small program.

The concepts and ideas that follow are presented as one individual's fodder for thought and discussion, rather than prescriptive cures. Learning from others by discussion, criticism, and collaboration are vital elements to the health and well being of the entire wilderness risk management community.

### Small is Beautiful

#### *Close Participant Contact*

Typically, an administrator of a small program knows the name, hometown, and other basic information of nearly all participants. A personalized approach allows for significant screening and educational opportunities before, during, and after a program.

#### *Smaller Staff*

Fewer staff means that a program needs fewer layers of management and opens the door for direct and clear communication from the very top of an organization to the bottom in minutes, not days.

#### *Nimble Decision-Making*

Smaller organizations can review, discuss, and implement a decision rapidly. The power to make an important decision typically resides at a desk or tent nearby. The myriad of details fit into a few people's heads and this grasp of the details is a powerful tool for making good decisions about risk management.

### Small is Challenging

#### *Limited Resources*

With one or a few individuals responsible for a broad array of functions, the hours in a day rapidly disappear. Preparing, leading, and cleaning up after a program leaves little time for writing a Risk Management Plan. Compared to larger organizations, smaller programs have smaller budgets. Typically, paying a full time Risk Manager position is out of the

question and paying for diverse staff training and development is a stretch. Doing more with less is not a goal, but rather an imperative.

Given a list of 25 possible risk management practices to implement with the resources to do only 20, the task is simple; prioritize the list, implement the top 20, and call it a day. That the 21<sup>st</sup> possibility is an industry practice you have not met is irrelevant; you have allocated your resources to the best of your ability.

Common sense dictates that the overall goal of running high quality programs supercedes implementing innovative risk management practices. However, if you can't manage the risks, don't engage in the activity!

Much of wilderness programming is dependent on only a few simple variables; participants, staff, basic equipment, a curriculum, and the wilderness. Rarely is money invested in these core elements a waste. Unfortunately, to save money, an administrator has to target the big and important expense lines, the little ones just do not add up to real savings. Every organization, big and small, strives to allocate resources to meet the mission in the best possible way. A constant focus on the core purpose and values of an organization should be an integral part of the budgeting process.

#### *Industry Practices*

A handful of large organizations push the standard practices within the industry to ever-higher levels by simply implementing better practices, and sharing their successes and failures along the way. This is beneficial to all; however, evolving practices can be expensive and often the small program risk manager must be creative in order to meet or exceed the formal or informal standard created by improved industry wide practices.

### Issues & Commentary

#### *Risk Management Lingo*

"Safety" implies a guarantee you can't honor if your program seeks out risk as an element of the program. Consider avoiding the term and informing your participants why. "Incident" implies an unplanned outcome but not necessarily a terrible outcome, which is the implication of "accident." "Protocols," "procedures," "guidelines," "standards," "practices," "rules," "policies," and "regulations" combine to make a confusing landscape. Consider defining the couple of terms your organization uses and avoid the rest.

#### *Risk Management as part of the Curriculum*

Treating risk management issues and the associated information exchange as key elements of your curriculum can greatly enhance the level to which participants are informed. Explaining why risk is integral to your activities goes a long way to creating informed participants.

### *Documentation & Paperwork*

Documentation is vital but should be simple. Let each element of your risk management practices, plans, and culture have one, and only one home. For example, multiple references to procedures, policy, etc. in various locations (RMP, EAP, etc.) means lots of editing to keep everything up-to-date and in agreement. If the handbook is streamlined and portable, maybe staff will actually carry it in the backcountry.

### *Risk Management Plans*

Do you have one? You should. Many programs have separate RMP's, EAP's (Emergency Action Plans), Media Relations Guides, and Emergency Procedures. If there is overlap between these documents, combining them can reduce the amount of precious time you must spend on each.

### *Emergency Communication Systems*

We can put a man on the moon but still don't have simple, cheap, and functional backcountry emergency communications. Thank goodness! What is wilderness if you can order out for Search & Rescue? However, as EPIRBs and satellite phones get cheaper, we will all adopt them in droves. When capital costs are controlling risk management decisions, it is important to freely disclose the logic behind the decision – E.g. "For our program, the increased cost of satellite telephones is better spent on staff training." But, then you need to actually allocate the resources this way.

### *Insurance*

A "hard market" means higher prices and is the result of numerous factors within the insurance industry—recent national level loss history (9/11, mold in houses, hurricanes, etc.), investment returns for insurers investments (down with the rest of the market), and perception of acceptable risks (declining). Rates are rising for nearly everyone, and smaller programs are finding it harder to shop the market for competitive pricing. Small programs must work very hard to develop good personal relationships with their actual insurance carrier representatives. Knowing your friendly agent probably isn't enough in the event of an undesirable incident.

### *Standards and Practices*

Numerous formal standards exist, from entities such as AEE, AMGA, OIA, ACCT, ACA, as well as applicable legislation (State and/or Federal). Standards tend to be formal written documents that outline a set of practices, protocols, or procedures. Typically, the publishing entity has sought and documented a consensus among its constituents to create the standard. Relevant standards can be a tremendous resource for small programs attempting to compare their own practices with other programs. Practices are simply what other programs do. Practices and standards frequently overlap, e.g. wearing helmets while top roping is both a common standard and a common practice. Other common practices are not necessarily standards, such as carrying emergency communication equipment. Seeking out the nuances of the common practices is a formidable task – Often staff

with diverse experience are a great resource.

### *Staff Development*

Most wilderness programming has a significant educational component which attracts staff who are curious about many things, excited to learn, and enthusiastic about the process. Engaging the staff's curiosity and furthering their skill sets is a wonderful job benefit that pays dividends to the individual and to the program. Typically, spending a little more than you think you should on professional development is just right.

### *Medical Protocols & Screening*

Treatment protocols is an area that is changing rapidly with individual programs struggling to balance a documented set of protocols with realistic expectations for keeping them updated, an area to watch carefully.

Small programs can often solicit the direct participation of a physician advisor in the screening process. With a good physician advisor, the small program is in a charmed position. Educating the physician advisor can be a hidden bit of work because many great physicians do not know much about wilderness medicine. Just because s/he loves the outdoors, does not mean s/he will be thrilled to write out a prescription for 10 ANA-kits or write protocols for reducing dislocations in the backcountry.

### *Parent Organizations*

Many small wilderness programs exist as a small department or element of a much larger institution. Often blissful ignorance is the unofficial position of higher administration – until something goes wrong. Clarity of purpose and methods by all parties should be a clear part of the program's wilderness risk management. Good and clear communication is always important, especially so when your "boss" doesn't actually understand what you do. Accreditation and External Reviews

The various processes available for individual staff and for programs to be accredited are growing in stutter steps. Lack of accreditation is not much of a barrier for most programs. If the process can serve as a review of your practices, it will increase the value of the time spent. In the end, accreditation may offer more benefits to small programs than to larger programs because it provides review of your practices compared to the industry at large, something a large program can have a full time risk manager do internally (at least in part). Less formal "external reviews" may be an appropriate first step for many programs.

### *Transportation*

The current 15-passenger van issues are challenging. The actual inherent risks of these types of vehicles, accident causation, and outcomes are being debated in the media by individuals who are not fluent in risk management. Small programs face significant financial challenges because a rental market for alternative 15-passenger vehicles (e.g. mini-busses, moon vans) doesn't exist and purchasing them is a major capital expense. For many programs, wait and see is the only option; however, clear and fair disclosure of the program's use of 15-passenger vans to participants is a

vital risk management practice in the mean time. Driver training is shifting from a common practice to a standard. If you don't specifically train your drivers for

your vehicles, and loads and trailers, you probably should be nervous.

### **Conclusion**

Wilderness risk management in the small program setting is not onerous or unattainable; it simply requires a different outlook and creative approach. It can become an integral part of the program, woven through the experiences you provide. Addressing risk clearly and joyfully is a vital countermeasure to "safe schools" and to the nonsensical elements of our society that seek reward without risk. Relish the challenge, have fun, and focus on providing participants with experiences that reflect the core values and purpose of your program.

### **About the Author**

Christopher Barnes is the Executive Director of the High Mountain Institute in Leadville, CO. Questions, comments, and criticisms welcome: [christopher@hminet.org](mailto:christopher@hminet.org).

# Wilderness Risk Management Conference Proceedings

