Beneficial Risks

The Evolution of Risk Management for Outdoor and Experiential Education Programs

Theories, Research, and Lessons Learned Through Experience

Steve Smith
Editor

Foreword by Sidney Dekker

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This book is for every parent who has ever entrusted their child to the care of an outdoor program for any length of time, and for every leader who has shouldered the extraordinary responsibility of changing that child's life while sending them safely home again in the end.

It is also for the parents whose children did not come home safely, and for the leaders and programs who have carried that trauma as well.

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The word "risk" derives from the early Italian *risicare*, which means "to dare." In this sense, risk is a choice rather than a fate. The actions we dare to take, which depend on how free we are to make choices, are what the story of risk is all about.

And that story helps define what it means to be a human being.

—Peter L. Bernstein,
Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk

Take your pick: Blame human error, or try to learn from failure.

—Dr. Sidney Dekker

Appreciations

It has been said that we see further by standing on the shoulders of giants, and I am quite certain that any of the panoramic views I've enjoyed in my career are the result of being uplifted and inspired by risk management/wilderness education friends, mentors, and colleagues such as **Reb Gregg, Lewis Glenn, Doug Mahon, Jay A. Satz, Rob Chatfield, Drew Leemon, Josh Cole, Amberleigh Hammond, Mitsu Iwasaki, Cathy Hansen-Stamp, Norm Eckman, Samantha Goff, Jeff Rose, Joel Reid, David Moskowitz**, **Rick Curtis, Mike Armstrong, Brendan Madden, Liz Tuohy, Katie Baum Mettenbrink, Leah Corrigan, Mark Vermeal,** and **Martin LeBlanc**. Their support, friendship, laughter, generous wisdom, and critical feedback have helped me (and this book) immeasurably. I would also like to thank my Australian colleague **Grif Longley,** who introduced me to the term "beneficial risks," commonly used in his home country, which I incorporated into the title for this book.

I am inspired by the example set for me by all of the authors and researchers whose brilliant work set the stage for me to pull together the concepts in this book, especially **Sidney Dekker, Todd Conklin, Erik Hollnagel, Clare Dallat, Jeff Jackson, Richard Louv, Deb Ajango,** and **Ken Wylie**.

I am grateful to the **Wilderness Risk Management Conference (WRMC)** community and the three primary organizations who partner to plan the conference: **NOLS**, **Outward Bound**, and the **Student Conservation Association (SCA)**. I spent five years as risk management director at SCA, I am a proud NOLS alum, and I have been involved with Outward Bound in various roles continually since 1998. Each of these organizations has contributed greatly to my own personal growth and professional development, and I simply could not have written this book without the WRMC community's support and involvement.

For the professionals who spent time writing, editing, or contributing photos for this book, I am thankful to **Sidney Dekker, Ross Cloutier, Luke O'Neill, David Moskowitz, Jeff Rose, Josh Cole, Reb Gregg, Jay A. Satz, Shana Tarter, Amberleigh Hammond, Taylor Feldman, Mike Pigg, Juan Martinez, Robin Chiles, Steve Pace, Christine Norton**, **Clare Dallat, Stuart Slay, Drew Leemon, Jed Williamson, Jeff Jackson, Cathy Hansen-Stamp, Jake Huddleston,** and **Becca Polglase.**

I am grateful to my mother and father for the support and sacrifices they've made over the years so that I could have an education and be set up for success in my life and career. I am grateful to my brother for being a risk management role model as a firefighter, and in many other ways as well.

Finally, and most of all, I have been supported in my risk management career, as I have been in so much of my life, by my wife and outdoor adventure partner, **Tamara Walker.** *Although many miles of mountain-climbing, trail-walking, and ocean-paddling are behind us, I am most excited for the adventures that are yet to come.*

Foreword

"How many lives does dad actually have?" my youngest daughter reportedly asked my wife after my latest scrape in an aircraft—which left it totaled after a rudder cable failure. It left me walking away dusty but unscathed.

I think I only have one life—or at least I don't know any better. So it is gratifying to see, within the short time I have here in this world, the ways that some of the work to which I have contributed is being used in outdoor and experiential education programs. This is an industry aimed at making dreams come true, an industry that has the power to set the human spirit free, to stretch and extend the boundaries of imagination and achievement, an industry that makes adventures happen, that widens horizons, that gives people the days in their lives that really matter, and that leaves many people wiser, deeper, and wishing for more, ever more.

It is also an industry about which many outside observers (who spend most of their time inside, ironically) would say that risk is something you, as the outdoor and experiential education provider, ask for. And because you do, you somehow deserve to live (or die) with the consequences—no mercy, no mitigation, no management.

What nonsense. Steve Smith opens up a world that should deservedly be at the apex of risk management, a world from which many others can learn a lot. Not the management of risk through nanny-ish compliance and rule-making just to alleviate liability anxieties—like so many corporations do. No, this is risk management by tapping into and keenly developing what Amalberti calls "native resilience." This is the ability to recognize, adapt to, and absorb threats and harmful influences that come from a complex, dynamic world and that fall outside the design or training base you have initially given people to work off. In a complex world, the only thing you can ultimately bank on is nurturing and enhancing people's adaptive capacity. This is simply so because you do not know what is going to be around the corner, or on the other side of the crest, or on the back of the weather change thundering its way across your world. No one knows, but we can develop the capacities and confidence to deal with it.

More rules do not necessarily make people safer. More risk avoidance does not make people safer. Risk competence does make people safer—and Steve's book goes a long way to helping you get there. But to get that message through to the people you work with or have to convince, you need to answer many more questions. Steve answers these questions, too. How can you stop the blame game after an accident, how can you prevent falling for the lure of a "root cause," and how can you engage in a meaningful learning review of what happened?

Even more, Steve picks up from the literature on resilience engineering and what is known as Safety Differently or Safety II that safety is not so much about the reduction of negative events but about, as Erik Hollnagel says, understanding why things go well. Because many more things go well than go wrong! If you learn from how and why things go well, you can become smarter about the risks baked into that very activity. Because to make things go well, you can never be fully compliant, nor completely safe, nor utterly risk free. If you were, you would never get anywhere. That means that for things to go well, you need to make judgments and assessments and sacrifices, trading the achievement of one goal for another or for multiple others. Learning how people do that when the outcome is good will allow you to reflect on how to do it even better—without the demons of hindsight and outcome biases and without the sharks of liability swimming around you.

Further, when there is a tragedy to deal with, do not immediately ask who broke which rule, how bad that breach was, and what the consequences should be. If you ask those questions, you learn nothing of value. Leave those questions to the people who make money off the answers and try to keep them out of the situation as long as possible. Instead, ask who is

affected by the tragedy, ask what they need, and ask whose obligation it is to start meeting those needs. That leads to an entirely different conversation, a conversation of healing and restoration, of learning and improvement. As I said, our time in the world is short. You should not spend your time responding to suffering by inflicting even more suffering on your fellow human beings. You should, as Steve both does and explains, capitalize on the gifts and talents given to you, to create unique opportunities for growth—in all kinds of ways.

Read this book. Doing so will stretch your mind and will make your spirit grow, even before you join Steve on his next adventure.

Dr. Sidney Dekker
Brisbane, Australia, April 2020

About This Book

This book uses theory, research, and lessons learned through experience to challenge long-standing assumptions and traditional views of risk management to help outdoor programs and schools evolve their risk management practices. This book is not about checking boxes or looking good; it is about the hard work, teamwork, and joy associated with running high-quality programs that support risk management.

This book is for the following audiences: outdoor and experiential education professionals, volunteers, or college and university students studying outdoor recreation. Organizations that would be best served by the concepts in this book include colleges, schools with experiential learning programs, outdoor education programs, gap year programs, outdoor guide services and outfitters, service-learning programs, volunteer clubs, wilderness therapy programs, and conservation corps.

Steve Smith, author *Beneficial Risks*

Photo: Tamara Walker

About the author: After he earned a master's degree in English and taught writing at Washington State University over several years, Steve Smith played leadership roles in outdoor education and conservation programs for over 30 years, specializing in risk management. In 2008, he founded Experiential Consulting, LLC, a risk management firm based in Seattle, Washington. Career highlights include a five-year stint as risk management director and vice president of program quality at the Student Conservation Association and wearing many hats at Outward Bound since 1998. Honors and awards include Staff Member of the Year (while at Outward Bound West) and the John McGrory Safety Award from Outward Bound USA. He chaired the Wilderness Risk Management Conference (WRMC) for three years and served on the WRMC steering committee for six years. When not working, he can be found exploring the mountains and coastlines of the Pacific Northwest with a camera, kayak paddle, or ice axe in hand.

EXPERIENTIAL
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Risk Management
for
Outdoor Programs

Chapter 1

Introduction

A Mountaineering Course in the North Cascades, WA State. ***Photo: Luke O'Neill***

1998, North Cascades, Washington: I was instructing my very first course for the Pacific Crest Outward Bound School, deep in the Pasayten Wilderness (approximately 20 miles from the nearest trailhead, close to the Canadian border). A heavy afternoon rain was pouring down on the nylon wall of our floorless tent and after checking in on our students, I huddled inside with my coinstructor. Given the weather and our remote location, I was surprised to hear an adult voice calling to us from outside. We unzipped the tent and saw our colleague (from basecamp in a nearby town), wearing shorts and running shoes—he had apparently run the 20 miles to get to us to tell us something important.

We were shocked to hear that an Outward Bound student in another part of the range had died in a mountaineering accident—she had slipped on a low-angle snow slope, but with a heavy pack she had been unable to self-arrest. She slid over a cliff band and died from trauma induced in the fall, after her stunned instructors had administered CPR. The school had sent in a runner to let us know, so we would not be caught off guard by the news when we returned (or if we encountered other groups in the backcountry who knew about the incident). We were not told how (or if) we should share this information with our own students.

Again, this was my very first course working for the school, and it had been a challenging course with some particularly acute group dynamics and behavioral issues. I was wondering what I had signed up for and if this was the right field for me. How could someone die on

such a well-run program? The way the school answered all of these questions would change the trajectory of my life.

When we returned to the basecamp, and over the next few years, the school embarked on a deeply honest journey of grieving, reflecting, healing, accountability, and evolution. Instead of blaming the instructors (or worse, the student herself), the school looked in the mirror and asked, “What did we do to set these instructors up for success? What equipment and training did we provide? How do we decide who gets promoted from assistant instructor to lead instructor, and using what criteria?” along with many other questions. Over the next few years, the school provided a vulnerable, humane, and compassionate environment with counseling support for those who needed it, while refining and improving hiring standards, training curriculum, and systems to both prevent and learn from incidents. As these elements changed, the school’s culture and capacity for safety flourished.

Rather than walk away, I stuck with that school, and I remain involved with them in various capacities to this day. But more importantly, I learned that *even the most tragic of incidents can lead to learning and organizational changes that can combine to prevent, mitigate, or increase resilience to future incidents.* It has been said that it is important not to react but to *respond* when a critical incident occurs. I was proud to work in a program that focused on learning rather than blaming, a school that was willing to look in the mirror to make the hard changes that needed to occur for real learning to take place. My career, and much of this book, is rooted in lessons from that misty but unforgettable day in the North Cascades.

While we as outdoor and experiential education providers need to remain diligent to the hazards, going too far with risk management can carry its own risks. Mainstream Western society[1] has shifted appreciably since the vignette outlined in this introduction, and people are more risk-averse than ever. Overprotecting young people from outdoor experiences creates other problems, which are outlined in Chapter 2. More young people face obesity, bullying, and mental health issues than have ever been injured on a hike or a climbing wall. New developments such as environmental grief or the COVID-19 pandemic compound the challenges facing people today.

I intend for this book to empower outdoor programs, school administrators, and leaders to fulfill their missions, to engage and connect people to powerful outdoor experiences, to understand their appetite for risk, and to accurately assess and manage their risks along the way. As you learn about managing the risks of your adventures, you may learn that your conception of risk itself changes, not to mention the deeper reasons why those adventures are worth having.

1 When I refer to Western society today, I also recognize that my understanding of “mainstream society” is written from my personal experience as an able-bodied, middle-class, White, heterosexual male—a position of privilege. Further, a lot of my mental framework comes from working in programs which have been built by (and for) people like me. Many decades of working in this context invariably and deeply influences my own world view. Like the outdoor industry’s collective pursuit of risk management goals, my own work on a path of equity and inclusion is a work in progress, but important work worth doing.

Chapter 2

The Value of Risk

Key Concepts

- People often think about (and talk about) risk in negative ways—as something to be minimized, avoided, mitigated, or transferred—without considering the benefits of risk
- Outdoor programs carry inherent risks that are not only inseparable from the activities, but essential to their personal and educational value
- Many factors in society (and human nature) have pushed people toward risk aversion, and away from risk literacy
- Over-protecting people (especially children) carries unintended consequences for their personal growth and health
- Outdoor programs are well served by recognizing the beneficial risks that can arise from quality programs, and to design their programs to optimize those benefits

In 1974, the early days of Outward Bound in the United States, senior instructor Willi Unsoeld was giving a presentation about the program at a high school when a mother in the audience raised her hand. As the now-famous story goes, the dialogue went as follows:

> **Mother:** "Can you guarantee the safety of our son?"
>
> **Unsoeld:** "No. We certainly can't, ma'am. We guarantee you the genuine chance of his death. And if we could guarantee his safety, the program would not be worth running. I do make one guarantee, as one parent to another. If you succeed in protecting your boy, as you are doing now, and as it's your motherly duty to do, I applaud your watchdog tenacity. But if you succeed, I guarantee you the death of his soul!"

Unsoeld teaching knots to his daughter Devi in 1973.[1] ***Photo by Ira Spring.***

1 Devi Unsoeld would die from altitude sickness while climbing Nanda Devi, the mountain for which she was named, in 1976. Unsoeld would continue guiding, teaching, and climbing until his own death on Mt. Rainier in 1979.

Unsoeld's oft-quoted words advocated for the value of risk-taking long before the society around him was ready to fully embrace his message. Indeed, in the decades that have passed since Unsoeld's counterintuitive answer, society has become even more risk-averse. As surprising as his answer was in the 1970s, can you imagine someone standing up in a school assembly hall and repeating Unsoeld's words in today's lawsuit-prone society? This chapter looks at research supporting the benefits of risk-taking and at some of the societal factors that make advocating for risk-taking more essential than ever.

defining risk: The French monk Blaise Pascal first developed and introduced *probability theory* in the 17th century, a new way of calculating the likelihood of events occurring in the future. In some circles, risk has been defined mathematically, the product of multiplying the severity of an event by the probability of the event occurring. Others describe risk as a measure of uncertainty, relative to potential loss or gain. Insurance providers create actuarial tables to calculate risks for financial purposes. Slovic and Weber (2002) provided a more human, less mathematical definition, explaining that risk is not something that objectively exists "out there," waiting to be measured through our instruments—instead, "risk is seen as a concept that human beings have invented to help them understand and cope with the dangers and uncertainties of life."

For the purposes of this book, in the context of outdoor programs, I define risk as **"uncertainty, with potential for both loss and gain."**

Further, the benefits of risk taking and related societal factors bring about the interesting concept of "risk literacy." Although people encounter risk all the time in their daily lives, that does not make them particularly adept at interpreting and assessing risks to make the best decisions. In the words of Ross (1999), "*Maestros of risk, we are not*. Questions of risk permeate every waking second of our lives. But a number of recent studies reveal that most Americans remain misinformed about even the most basic issues concerning risk" (p. 2).

Many of these issues arise from people's collective inability to do math and calculate statistics accurately. Advertisers use this weakness against people all the time. If a mountain guide working outside on glaciers on a regular basis heard that a new skin product had been proven to *triple the odds* of avoiding skin cancer, they might see that as an essential product to buy immediately. But what if the tripling involved relatively tiny shifts, such as

Risk is defined as uncertainty, with the potential for both loss and gain. ***Photo by Jake Huddleston***

moving from a 3-in-7000 chance of getting skin cancer to 1-in-7000 chance? Although the product may in fact triple the chances as stated, the likelihood of getting the specific condition was already so low that the product would not make a meaningful difference.

Here is another example (adapted from an example provided by the Harding Center for Risk Literacy [Ross, 1999]): You are planning a canyoneering trip with a group of students, and the forecast says there is a 30% chance of rain in your region, which could create hazards such as flash floods. If you ask the trip leaders what that 30% chance means, would they say

- that it will rain in 30% of the region?
- that it will rain 30% of the time today?
- that it will rain 30% of the days that have this forecast?

The correct answer is the last one—yet many people (who do not know what the daily weather forecast communicates) rely on it to determine their planning decisions anyway. This lack of risk literacy contributes to societal confusion about what risks a person should focus on or how to manage them.

Statistics on popular activities illustrate a gap between what many people (or parents) *perceive* to be risky and what the injury rates show. See Table 2.1.

Table 2.1
Statistical Risks of Various Activities

Activity	Injury rate[a]	Source
Climbing/rappelling	.52	Leemon (2008)
Cheerleading	1.0	Shields & Smith (2009)
High school soccer	2.43	Rechel et al. (2008)
High school football	12.09	Rechel et al. (2008)

[a] Average number per 1,000 program/game/practice days.

The media has recently started to close the gap between the perceived and actual risks of contact sports such as football, with an increased understanding of head injuries and traumatic brain injuries. However, society has not yet caught on to the low incidence rate of seemingly "extreme" sports such as climbing, which continue to have a high *perceived* risk.

perceived risk: A subjective measure of risk based on what people perceive, which could be greater or lesser than the actual risk of a given activity.

actual risk: The objective amount of risk attached to a given activity, regardless of how it may be perceived.

example: Although the *perceived risk* of top-rope rock climbing may be high, its *actual risk* (in most cases, if done properly) is quite low. Ironically, driving children to a climbing gym usually carries low *perceived risk*, but the *actual risk* is statistically high.

As mentioned, human beings are not hardwired or socialized to be "maestros of risk." Brain physiology, once so helpful to humankind as we evolved through the immediate risks of life on the savannah, now conspires against us in our fast-paced, digital world of global risks, technology, and slow-moving hazards such as climate change. A phenomenon known as *probability neglect* occurs when a person is so driven by either dread or desire for something to happen that they cannot accurately assess its likelihood. People are particularly bad

at giving an accurate assessment of the risks of things that they dread. Multiple studies—some more infamous and unethical, perhaps, than others—have tried to explore how well people make decisions about the possibility of receiving electric shocks (or delivering shocks to others). Although none of these studies involved actual shocks being delivered, the participants did not know this at the time. In one study conducted by the University of Chicago (Croston, 2012), undergraduate students at another university were told that they would be administered a brief, painful, but not medically dangerous electric shock, but they were also given the option to pay varying amounts to avoid the shock based on different likelihoods of being shocked (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2
Amounts Students Were Willing to Pay to Avoid Electric Shock

Given 1% chance	Given 99% chance	Given 100% chance
Students were willing to pay $7 to avoid it	Students were willing to pay $10 to avoid it	Students were willing to pay $20 to avoid it

Note. Data from *The Real Story of Risk: Adventures in a Hazardous World* (p. 204), by G. Croston, 2012, Prometheus.

Further, based on what students were willing to pay, students *saw more of a difference between 99% and 100% than they did between 1% and 99%.*

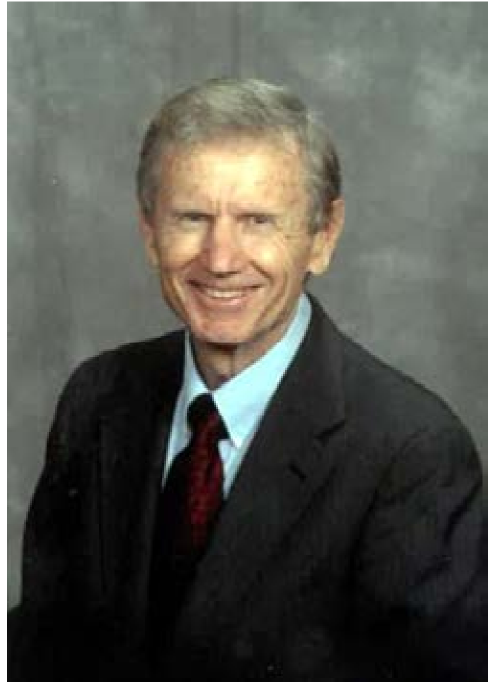
How could this be? They dreaded the idea of a shock so much that *any* chance of receiving it felt about the same to them. Probability neglect is an example of how ill-equipped people are, in general, to understand risk, let alone manage it. Probability neglect also comes into play when a person desires something such as a winning lottery ticket and chooses to pursue it based on the level of reward versus the chance of success. When potential winnings grow big enough, people who would never otherwise play, do play (despite their infinitesimal chances being even lower than usual because of all the new players). It is easy to imagine how the things a person either dreads or desires in their outdoor pursuits could lead them into *probability neglect*.

The Unintended Consequence of Societal Risk Aversion

Richard Louv is a best-selling author and cofounder of the Children and Nature Network. In *Last Child in the Woods*, Louv (2008) paints a vivid picture of how mainstream society has changed its tolerance for risk since he was a child. He describes something that I personally relate to: a suburban, middle-class childhood of unstructured playtime outside, parents who did not need to know where I was every minute of the day, a youth spent disconnected from electronic games or media, and the freedom of embarking on an unaccompanied "bike ride to nowhere" (as Louv called it) with no cell phone or parents hovering nearby. The freedom I found so easily then is hard to come by in much of middle-class, Western society today.

Many of today's youth live in a different world. At a young age, kids are taught about "stranger danger." News shows and social media portray stories about kidnappings, or worse, despite *actual* rates of kidnapping being lower now than in the past. Climate change, September 11, and the escalating threat of school shootings create a different backdrop than I remember growing up—not to mention the profound societal changes arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, it is hard to imagine most of today's parents allowing the same unstructured outdoor playtime that Louv describes—harder still to imagine today's youth collectively putting down their video games and cell phones to go on a bike ride to nowhere. In short, they suffer from what Louv termed "nature-deficit disorder."

The story of **Dr. Joe Frost** (pictured), a playground safety consultant and author, illustrates how views can shift. After some high-profile playground accidents led to a wave of media stories and legal cases in the 1980s, Frost testified in hundreds of playground injury cases. State laws, manufacturer specifications, school policies, and public parks collectively recoiled, removing many pieces of playground equipment or altering them to (presumably) eliminate risks of injury. Sharp edges, tripping hazards, opportunities to get entrapped or slide too fast, even natural surfaces such as grass were viewed as "too risky" and were removed, but the regulations, increasingly, were being written by engineers and attorneys, people who knew little about childhood play or cognitive development. Along with the fear of more lawsuits, insurance premiums began to soar on playgrounds. At some point, even Frost, who had been an advocate for playground safety, realized that things had gone too far, creating what he later referred to as a "play deprivation crisis."



For the remainder of his long career, Frost transformed into a passionate advocate for appropriate risk-taking by children through outdoor play:

> Adults have come to the mistaken view "that children must somehow be sheltered from all risks of injury," Frost writes. "In the real world, life is filled with risks—financial, physical, emotional, social—and reasonable risks are essential for children's healthy development." (Rosin, 2014, para. 22)

Chabon (2010) builds on Frost's perspective:

> The helmeting and monitoring, the corralling of children in certified zones of safety, is in part the product of the *Consumer Reports* mentality, the generally increased consciousness, in America, of safety and danger. To this one might add the growing demands of insurance actuarials and the national pastime of torts (lawsuits). But the primary reason for this curtailing of adventure, this closing off of Wilderness, is the increased anxiety we all feel over the abduction of children by strangers. This is not a rational fear. . . being a child is exactly no more and no less dangerous than it ever was. What has changed is that the horror is so much better known. At times it seems as if parents are being deliberately encouraged to fear for their children's lives, though only a cynic would suggest there was money to be made in doing so. (p. 64)

Whereas most parents have their children's best interests in mind, being overprotective can create unintended consequences for the child's personal growth and cognitive development. Increasingly, scientific studies bear out what many people intuitively know: Time spent indoors, connected to electronic media instead of the natural world, inhibits socialization skills, cognitive development, and physical fitness. The Children's Play Council (2004) explained,

> Risk is a complex issue, one which requires a consideration of the task, the risks involved, the likelihood of success or failure in terms of one's abilities, and the

severity of any negative outcomes compared to the positive outcomes. What is important is how these experiences are scaffolded to allow for the gradual transfer of risk management to children. Through exposure to carefully managed risks, children learn sound judgment in assessing risks themselves, hence building confidence, resilience and self-belief—qualities that are important for their eventual independence. (see Play Provision and Risk section in https://www.playengland.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/managing-risk-play-safety-forum.pdf)

Gill (2007) added this advice:

We need to support parents so they feel able to give their children back some of the freedoms that they enjoyed when they were young. Perhaps most important of all, we need to accept that it is natural and healthy for children to explore, take risks, make mistakes, seek out adventure and test boundaries. (para 5)

According to Gill, and as echoed by many other researchers, parents fear letting their children play outdoors unsupervised—but when encountering risks, children learn to overcome challenge and develop resilience and self-reliance. By restricting outdoor experiences, parents unintentionally corrode their children's opportunities for meaningful growth and cognitive development.

Mountain guide climbing with his child.
Photo by Josh Cole

In the most compelling cases, society's culture of fear, in the words of Gill (2007), "undermines the very ties that make communities safe and welcoming for children" (p. 54). He illustrated this example with the tragic story of Abigail Rae, a 2-year-old who escaped her day care facility through an unlocked gate and wandered down the street past at least one adult member of the general public, only to ultimately drown in an overgrown pond nearby. One adult, a bricklayer who had seen her alone in the street, later testified that he was afraid to intervene or approach her for fear that he would be accused of kidnapping her.

Relevance of Societal Views for Managing Risks in Outdoor Programs

How do shifting societal views affect your work in outdoor programs? Simply put, they affect everything—the attitudes and expectations of parents; the mindset and physical abilities of the students; and the perspective of insurance providers, legal counsel, board of directors, donors, and beyond. In the words of Liz Tuohy, Director of Education at NOLS, and McQuarrie (2013),

Risk can bring great reward, and we run programs in outdoor education that change people's lives (for the better) in a way that nothing else can. And at the same time,

nothing we do is worth harm to one of the young people that we educate. And that's a paradox. (para. 11)

It can be tempting to jump straight into the details of planning trips and activities without first focusing your organization's collective effort on identifying and agreeing on the crucial question, how safe do you want to be? After recognizing the value of clarifying that, you can consider another side of the coin: What are the benefits of risk-taking in your programs? Programs that focus on the cognitive development aspects of outdoor play for children have started to develop program planning models that focus on *risk benefit*, and hazard assessment methods that encourage staff to make programs "as safe as *necessary*, not as safe as *possible*" (Lasinsky, 2017). This is a tremendous shift from the playground lawsuits of the 1980s.

At the risk of stating the obvious, all hazards cannot (and should not) be eliminated—but you still need to decide how much risk is the right amount. There is a useful distinction to be made between your *personal* risk tolerance and the risk tolerance of the organization for which you work. This is especially important if you are unclear about your organization's risk tolerance, which is often implied but not always explicitly stated.

Shana Tarter, assistant director of Wilderness Medicine for NOLS, has been a leader in helping outdoor programs better assess and understand their risk tolerance and capacity to manage risks. Consider the personal reflection from Tarter in the Risk Management box.

Risk Management Lessons Learned From Experience

by Shana Tarter, NOLS

I remember sitting on a metal folding chair, shivering in the damp cold that seeped into the event tent at the first Wilderness Risk Management Conference (WRMC) in Conway, Washington, in 1994. I sat transfixed by the mock trial unfolding in front of me and realized with growing excitement that I had finally found my people. For a number of years, I had been blending my experiences in wilderness medicine, expedition trip-leading, and university outdoor programming to create a curriculum to share with my students and wondering whether I was getting it right. Suddenly, I found myself surrounded by the thought leaders in the industry and knew I was meeting the people who would become my mentors in wilderness risk management for the next 25 years.

I have had many occasions to look back on that first conference. Though I am certain our conversations have matured and deepened, I believe what we understood back then is still the foundation of our discussions today. We no longer vociferously debate whether technology has a place in wilderness risk management, but rather how to wean our students from their connected world and how to navigate the very public online scrutiny we face after a significant event. Our conversations around access and inclusion have appropriately evolved with the changing times. The cohort of lawyers presenting at the conference has grown and their teachings continue to prepare us to face an increasingly complex legal landscape.

Nevertheless, I am heartened when I look at a WRMC program from 1997 and see that even then we understood the importance of tailoring wilderness risk management for small programs, learning about the effects of medications for mental health, and most importantly, as our keynote speaker Royal Robbins reminded us that year, knowing the value of risk.

Today our students come from a society that encourages them to curate a perfect image on social media while living privately with their fears and insecurities. We help them learn to navigate in the literal and metaphorical sense of the word. It is a precious gift we give, teaching people to function and make decisions in an environment of uncertainty. Our power lies in the ability to integrate education and experience. This synergy is our tool and, as we well know, also creates the opportunity for loss.

In my time, I've totaled a company vehicle, survived a river crossing in the Wind Rivers that was as close as I hope ever to come to not walking out of the mountains, been terrified beyond reasoning as lightning lashed out at a group of teenagers in my care, and provided CPR to a 22-year-old buried in an avalanche. In each of these situations, the outcome was not due to my actions in the moment, but due to a constellation of preparation and a cascade of decisions leading up to those moments.

Risk is real and cannot and should not be eliminated. This we know. Our obligation is to embrace the challenge of mitigating that risk by anticipating and preparing for the decisions that lead to those moments. Many of us began our careers as outdoor leaders, embracing the freedom of our days and enjoying incomparable views. We now sit behind a desk, translating our hard-won expertise and knowledge into words a parent can understand, into practices and trainings for our programs that make the difference between a student walking out of some mountains of the future—or not.

This brings us together every year to share our successes and our failures.

This is our "why."

I entered this industry nearly 30 years ago. Though my years leading others into wild places will forever be a part of who I am, I have learned that I find as much fulfillment with a whiteboard marker in my hand as with a rope. I revel in the process of helping others forge a path forward in the midst of confusing and incomplete information. I hold steadfast to the belief that in structure there is freedom. I teach new instructors to think in principles and then to add context. When we send our staff and students away from our watchful eye, we take a risk, much as the parent does leaving their child in our care. For both, the structures we put into place make the parting bearable.

Recently, I've been teaching my own daughter to drive. Through this process, I've been reminded how much information a person must take in all at once to make the simple decision of whether to proceed at an intersection.

With experience, we become accustomed to sorting and acting on this information, yet fundamentally all of us rely heavily on the same indicator that aids a novice in the process: the stop sign. The stop sign causes us to pause and assess before proceeding. Whether consciously or habitually, we use this cue to prompt our situational awareness.

As program managers, we are responsible for putting in the stop signs, for giving our staff the guidance necessary to make thoughtful decisions. Whether we call this a handbook, a protocol, a practice, a manual, or a standard operating procedure, making clear our expectations so staff know what is expected of them reduces stress rather than takes away freedom. There remain plenty of decisions for staff to make.

I believe some of the greatest work we've done through our annual conversations is to memorialize these strategies to sustain our industry into the future. We as an industry can weather tragedy, but all of us suffer when it occurs. Our commitment to lessening this potential and our willingness to share our fears and mistakes strengthen our

community and industry. So too does the chance to share when we get it right. These commitments will allow a new generation of wide-eyed participants, talented outdoor leaders, and increasingly gray-haired administrators to keep doing what they love.

I hope that you too can find your community and your mentors. They will provide you with the simplest piece of advice that has the biggest impact. They will support you through your successes and failures. They will keep you humble and remind you there is always something to learn.

Conclusion

This book is about managing risks and, moreover, I intend to expand our definition of risk itself, in the context of outdoor programs, to include the many *beneficial risks* that come from these outdoor experiences—growth that would not otherwise have occurred. One Outward Bound student described the unique benefits that arise from outdoor pursuits:

> I have lost my blood to sand flies, my skin to rocks, my tears to the sea and my legs to runs in the mountains, and still I feel there is more of me left than lost. For what I have lost does not equal what I have found. I have found the courage to continue rock climbing when I felt nothing was worse than the fear I was feeling. I have found the time to smile when all I could think of was crawling into my bunk and crying. I have found the patience to listen to someone's pain when my own pain was foremost in my mind. I have found it in me to trust and care for the people I lived so close to during this course. (Caulfield, 2005, p. 69)

In the following chapters, we will explore how to determine the level of risk that is right for your program, a decision that is different for each program and that has its roots in your organization's mission. Rather than running *away* from fear of liability, you can solve those concerns by running quality programs, programs that take *intentional* risks for a specific purpose.

Each chapter in this book ends with a self-assessment checklist for your organization to use. The following questions are meant to guide your self-assessment of your organization's philosophy and ability to advocate for the value of risk in your programs.

The beneficial risks of outdoor experiences create unique learning opportunities. ***Photo: Jeff Rose***

Self-Assessment Checklist: Advocating for Beneficial Risk

- ☐ Does your organization think of and talk about risk as a purely negative element, something to be “minimized or eliminated”?
- ☐ Does your organization have a written statement on your philosophy toward risk (e.g., a risk tolerance statement)?
- ☐ Have you discussed your views toward risk-taking with stakeholders (e.g., board, leadership, legal counsel)?
- ☐ If a parent asked you about “guaranteeing safety” for their child on your program, would different staff members be able to provide a consistent answer?
- ☐ Do your promotional materials discuss the merits and role of risk-taking in your program?
- ☐ Does your enrollment process and participant agreement clearly articulate the risks inherent in your program?

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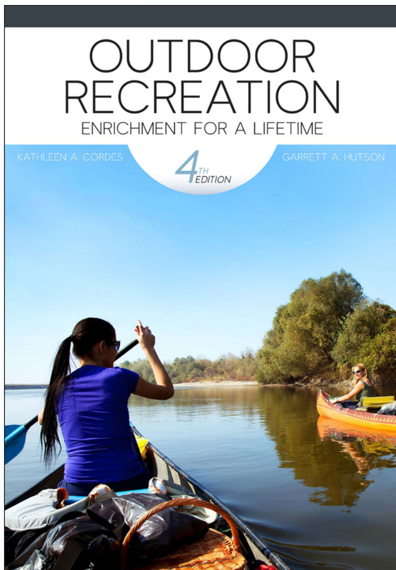

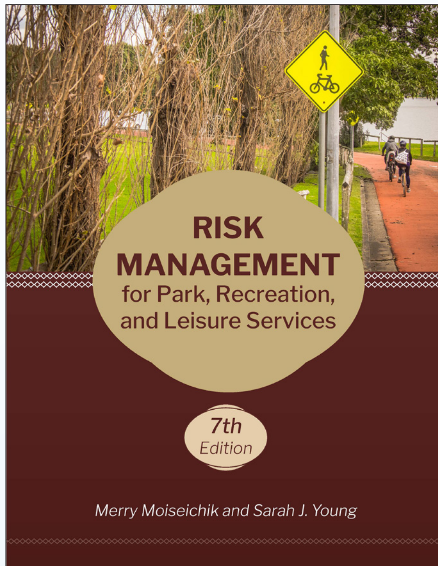

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