

Mountaineering with Scouts — The Vital Culture



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This is one of a set of factsheets to support The Scout Association's revised Mountain Authorisation Scheme, which was introduced in February 2001. It replaces all other fact sheets relating to this topic.

It provides guidance for any members undertaking activities on Moors, Hills and Mountains throughout the United Kingdom.

Further editions will be published in the light of experience. The publication of further editions will be notified in SCOUTING Magazine, Talking Points and the Activities Newsletter.

INTRODUCTION

"Climb if you will, but remember that courage and strength are naught without prudence and that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste; look well to each step; and from the beginning think what may be the end."

These words were written over a hundred years ago by Edward Whymper, the first man to reach the summit of the Matterhorn. Although the phraseology is Victorian this quotation has as much relevance to us today as it did when first written. Any leader taking Scouts to the hills should have the spirit if not the words firmly in their mind before setting out for a day's mountaineering.

A SENSE OF ADVENTURE AND A TASTE OF THE OUTDOORS

However Whymper's words are not incompatible with what Lord Hunt wrote in his book: *Life is a*

Meeting, when describing the planning, in 1956, of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. "To make the journeys (i.e. what are now called expeditions) too easy, to hedge them round with precautionary measures, to place the leadership in adult hands – would diminish the essential element of adventure and its appeal to the boys". Today we need to add "and girls" but the rest stands.

Scouts join for adventure and without it they will leave. Scouting looks to the outdoors for much of this adventure. It is the role of leaders to provide that adventure and challenge – safely. Young people will gain the greatest value in terms of development if they have played a major part in the planning of the adventure. They will find adventure in quite modest activities in easy country. The higher or more technically difficult challenges can follow once the necessary skills have been gained. You can do no better than to remember the unofficial motto for Scout Activities – to enable more young people to experience more activities – safely.

THE AIM OF SCOUT MOUNTAINEERING

The aim of the Scout Association is *the physical, intellectual, social and spiritual development of young people*. These four attributes should be exercised in every well-run Scout mountain activity. The proportion of each however will vary according to the age and experience of the Scouts, the locality of the activity and many other factors. This factsheet seeks to consider some of these factors and the way that they will govern the scope of the activity. It is vital that any leader

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considers these factors before leaving the shelter of a camp, youth hostel or other habitation.

AGE RANGE PROBLEMS

Human beings develop most rapidly and dramatically from birth to about 20. They go from being a totally helpless infant to becoming a fully mature adult. The Progressive Training Scheme covers a wide age range. Every Leader should be aware of the very big difference between, say, an 11-year-old and a 17-year-old. There can also be major differences in the physical, mental and emotional capabilities of two people of identical age. Despite these problems how often do we hear of the dangerous practice of members of a troop or unit going off to do the same programme? 'Most of the time' is the probable answer and yet it can be the first step in a disaster. That trite phrase 'an accident waiting to happen' comes to mind. With a little effort and planning solutions can be found; The best probably being to split into an A party and a B party with a different programme or route for each. If all else fails then the pace and scope of the activity must be that of the slowest and weakest. They have a right to expect this.

THE SUMMIT OR BUST!

Many humans are imbued with a desire to succeed and civilization would be a much poorer place without it. This desire often expresses itself by wanting to be the fastest, strongest, richest etc. person in town, country or the world. Without this desire there would be no Olympics, world championships or FA Cup Finals! In mountaineering the desire is often satisfied by getting to the top of a chosen summit and it is salutary to note that virtually every peak of any importance in the world has been climbed in the 150 years since mountaineering for pleasure started. However, it is wrong if leaders think only in terms of summits. The key word in the Association's Aim is *development* and this is a word that implies an on-going process starting very simply and ending with the young person

reaching their full individual potential. A few troops and units might be described as mountaineering clubs in Scout uniform but for most Scouts mountaineering is only one of a range of activities and should therefore be enjoyed at an elementary or 'taster' level. For them there can be just as big a thrill on modest summits or even going *through rather than over* mountain terrain. For the urban youngster - and they are the majority - a day trekking up an uninhabited valley, over a col and down another valley could be just as challenging and different as sloggng up a crowded tourist path on Helvellyn. We should always be using routes with which the whole party can competently cope. Once the necessary skills and experience have been acquired, the higher summits can be tackled.

A LEADER'S EGO TRIP?

All of us who have more than a passing tourist's interest in mountains have a list of peaks to climb or routes to traverse. Usually the list is more than can be achieved in a lifetime and so we always look for the chance to 'tick-off' something on the list. This is all well and good when we are out with other adult friends who probably have a similar list anyway but, if we do this when we are with young people then it could become another 'accident waiting to happen'. Any Scout activity must be planned totally from the point of view of the capability of the young people and the leader's ambitions must not intrude in any way. It is probably true to say that a safe, interesting and enjoyable day in the mountains for the young people, will be described as 'boring' by the leaders but that is better than having to live with the outcome of a young person dying because a leader wanted to complete his ego trip.

SNOWDON, SCAFELL PIKE OR BEN NEVIS?

All Scout activities, be they in the mountains or anywhere else, should involve young people in their planning and execution. The leader's role is advisory and intervention is only necessary when a matter of safety or impact upon the enjoyment of

others or the environment is involved. However, it is important to remember that the knowledge and experience of young people is limited and they may, for example, have only heard of the highest mountains in Wales, England and Scotland. If asked where they want to go for their next expedition this is all they can suggest but how many leaders then hide behind this inadequate knowledge ("That's what they said they wanted to do") to justify yet another slog up the tourist path to Ben Nevis from Fort William? We must beware of devolving decisions to young people when they have inadequate knowledge on which to base a good choice. The subtle leader might, just in passing of course, suggest that they could take the train to Corroon, get out there and walk back to Fort William across country and via Glen Nevis with an overnight camp to add further interest.

A GENUINE ACCIDENT

These are in fact extremely rare. Almost all mountain accidents have their origin in a human failing or mistake. Some are obvious like starting too late, ignoring the weather forecast or forgetting the map and compass. Others are less obvious. The wrong selection of a path demonstrates poor navigation and lack of ability to relate the map to the ground. Being benighted can stem from over-estimating the ability of the party or spending too long admiring the view, eating lunch etc. Even when the incident has only been a near miss the leader should think back and determine the cause. Every near miss is a valuable lesson in the overall study of mountaineering. Every mountaineer of any stature has had such incidents and they are brave enough to admit to them and learn from them. A fully investigated near miss this year could prevent a fatality next.

RISK ASSESSMENT

While a Risk Assessment file can be written about mountain activities it cannot be absolute since the hills are a constantly varying environment. The vital thing is to take the Risk Assessment culture

with you every time you leave home. For Scouting purposes Risk Assessment starts when a leader meets with the young people before setting off on any activity. The initial risks may be those of travelling on a motorway, then undertaking routine activities at a campsite or other accommodation and finally walking in the open country itself. A leader must constantly assess the terrain, state of the party, the weather and many other factors to decide what the risk is at any moment and then decide if plans must be altered in the light of the newly assessed risks. Many risks are not obvious. Loose gravel on a smooth boulder can be more of a risk than a 200m precipice if you are 30m away from the edge. Risk is present in our every action from getting out of bed awkwardly in the morning to attempting the most difficult 8000m peak. The art is to minimise the risk in any situation to remove the real danger while (for young people) leaving the apparent danger to be enjoyed. Risk Assessment is not a 'black art'. With some thought and practice it should become almost a sub-conscious action. Risk and the actions to reduce it must be communicated to others in the party. Often almost without thinking a leader in the hills will point out a loose boulder or an icy patch on the ground but the communication must be done.

PARTY MANAGEMENT

This is linked to Risk Assessment. The party leader will be varying the management of the party while conducting an ongoing assessment. Party management brings into use the whole range of mountaineering skills. Some of these, like tying a knot, are straightforward technical skills. Others, like setting the speed of the party, are taken from immediate observation while more come from personal experience gained over a period of time. There is no short cut to gaining such experience and there is no instant one-week course in safe mountaineering although formal instruction can be very valuable. There is no definitive checklist of party management points to be ticked so that a leader can breathe a sigh of

relief when they have all been checked off. Party management, like risk assessment, is an on-going action for every moment that the party is in open country. Readers of this factsheet can do no better than to read the chapter on Party Leadership in the book *Mountaincraft & Leadership* by Eric Langmuir.

All that has been written above could be applied to any mountain party. Now it is time to look at those special things that apply to mountaineering under the auspices of the Scout Association.

RULES

The Scout Association lays down a number of rules for the safety and well being of Members of the Movement. These rules are there to provide a framework within which activities can be undertaken. They provide a clear statement and expression of good practice. The rules indicate to everyone, be they the activity leader or the person approving the activity what can and cannot be done. Everybody undertaking any part in a Scouting activity MUST abide by the rules and by being involved they implicitly accept the application of the rules in all respects. In matters of activity safety there is no discretion permitted. These rules are found in *Policy, Organisation and Rules*, and in those factsheets that deal with matters of safety. It is important to realise that the Association's Rules and factsheets are only published after lengthy discussion and consultation by many people, who bring a wide variety of experience and knowledge to the publication. These rules are adequate for the control of the activities concerned. Additional local Rules or systems are not required. It is people who make an activity safe not bits of paper.

TOO MANY LEADERS?

Some might say that one cannot have too many leaders in a party but this is a dangerous suggestion. Leaders, because they are probably similar in age, outlook and interests will have a lot

to talk about amongst themselves. This is fine when the whole party is composed of adults who are experienced enough to look after themselves on the terrain they are traversing. When supervising a party of young people the matter is very different. Then it is vital that the leader's whole attention is on those young people without the distraction of other adults. It is for this reason that the Association's rules limit a party to no more than seven i.e. leader, six young people or two leaders and five young people. Exceptionally, were a party contains two authorised leaders the total party size maybe increased to eight. Six is the maximum that an adult, who is not professionally involved with young people in the outdoors, can supervise adequately.

NATIONAL GOVERNING BODY (NGB) QUALIFICATIONS

The Association does not make it mandatory for leaders taking mountaineering parties to hold a NGB qualification such as the Walking Group Leader Award (WGL), the Mountain Leader Award (MLA) or the Single Pitch Award (SPA). However the Association has no hesitation in commending these awards and encouraging anyone to obtain one or more of them. To this end some financial help is available from a variety of sources. The Association's own Scheme of Authorisation for hillwalking has one major difference from the NGB scheme. The WGL and ML Awards assess candidates up to a benchmark level, which, if they are successful, deems them suitable to lead hillwalking parties anywhere in UK. Our own scheme seeks only to assess up to the level indicated or requested by the applicant for the areas to which they want to go. It does, however, use the standards of the NGB awards as key benchmarks. This means that many Leaders who only want to lead parties on their local hills can do so without all the skills and experience required for someone wanting to go to the furthest reaches of the UK or the highest peaks. However, it is vital that the limits of an authorisation are never, under any circumstances, exceeded. The scheme allows for a re-assessment at any time,

should a Leader wish to widen their area of activity. It also has a limit of validity not exceeding five years. Should the Review Date be passed then the authorisation is null and void until the applicant is re-authorised. The Scout Association cannot support anyone who acts without or outside the terms of Authorisation.

Publications Cross Reference

The current editions of:

Policy, Organisation and Rules of the Scout Association

Risk Assessment

FS120000

Authorisations - A District Commissioner's and Group Scout Leader's Guide

FS120002

Application for Authorisation for Hill Walking

FS120416

Mountain Advisers and assessors

FS120417

The Scout Association's Authorisation schemes for activities in moors, hills and mountains

FS120418

Mountain Craft and Leadership by Eric Langmuir

ISBN 1-85060-295-6

Safety on Mountains, *BMC*

ISBN 0-903-908-271