



Sanitizing Adventure

HOW OVER-ZEALOUS RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES ARE SUCKING THE LIFE FROM KIDS' PADDLING TRIPS

By Bob Henderson and Ryan Howard

NO MORE outings for the Outing Club. This was the gist of the many newspaper headlines in April when Penn State University shared its controversial risk management review of its 79 student clubs.

While the university publicly acknowledged the many benefits students gain participating in outdoor activities like hiking, backpacking and paddling, it also stated the university would no longer allow the 98-year-old Outing Club to organize student-led, outdoor trips.

"Campus Recreation at Penn State remains focused on providing as many opportunities in the outdoors as possible, while also keeping safety as a priority," the statement read. The Outing Club, as well as Penn State's caving and diving clubs, were deemed to have "an unacceptable level of risk in their current operation model."

The university's martial arts and rifle clubs were allowed to continue.

The Penn State Outing Club decision received a lot of press, but it's just one example in a trend sweeping across North America. For more than a decade, there has been a noticeable erosion of the joy factor on guided youth paddling trips. The culprit is the risk management frenzy in our risk-averse society. These decisions are often made by school board officials with a fear of litigation and a general lack of familiarity with outdoor environments and activities.

Overbearing risk management plans are diluting the outdoor experience. And from recent stories of school- and camp-organized trips, it's not surprising if a

kid goes once and never wants to participate again.

It's absurd for a school board to approve a year-end, capstone paddling trip for students with the caveat there is no swimming allowed, even if everyone wears a PFD. Other programs mandate youth on trip are not allowed to handle knives—pocket knives and kitchen knives—or stoke the fire. If kids can't swim, tend to the fire, whittle or help with dinner—what are they left doing? Probably wishing they had Snapchat.

There are many benefits to learning to manage risk. In healthy doses, outdoor risk builds confidence, independence, self-regulation and other life skills. Are the real risks students face every day on and off campus—driving to school, for example—smaller than those they would experience on an organized paddling trip? And are they providing comparable benefits? Certainly not.

If it was safety we were truly concerned about we would wear helmets not just in rapids but in the van ride on the highway to the trailhead. Data from one of the most comprehensive studies of whitewater rafting injuries in the United States from 2002 highlights whitewater rafting—considerably more risky than any flatwater trip—ranges from approximately 2.2 to 8.7 fatalities per million participant days, whereas driving motor vehicles results in approximately 152 fatalities per million

"REAL PROTECTION MEANS TEACHING CHILDREN TO MANAGE RISKS ON THEIR OWN, NOT SHIELDING THEM FROM EVERY HAZARD." —WENDY MOGEL, EDUCATOR. PHOTO: MARK ZELINSKI



YOUTH ON A 14-DAY EXPEDITION WITH OUTWARD BOUND IN CLAYOQUOT SOUND, VANCOUVER ISLAND. THE MISSION OF OUTWARD BOUND IS TO CULTIVATE RESILIENCE AND LEADERSHIP THROUGH CHALLENGING JOURNEYS IN THE NATURAL WORLD. PHOTO: COURTESY OUTWARD BOUND

participant days. Canoe and kayak tripping fatalities didn't make the list.

Contextualizing risk is important. According to the National Safety Council in the United States, in 2009 there were 35,000 motor vehicle fatalities, of which approximately 2,000 were children under the age of 16. There were also 5,300 pedestrian fatalities, 8,600 fatalities from unintentional public falls, 4,500 fatalities from unintentional public food poisoning and 800 fatalities while bicycle riding.

Those numbers might sound scary but remember the U.S. had 306.8 million citizens in 2009. Approximately 610,000 died of heart disease the same year.

In the many real risks we encounter every day, outdoor recreation barely makes the list yet receives disproportionate outcry.



PADDLING TRIPS LED BY QUALIFIED GUIDES OFFER AN OBJECTIVELY SMALL RISK IN COMPARISON TO OTHER SPORTS AND EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES. PHOTO: COLIN FIELD

A 2014 report by the NCAA revealed nearly one in 10 of the United States 70,000 college football players reported suffering multiple concussions during their college career, which is linked to long-term brain damage, including higher rates of dementia. Why is an elevated risk of injury—especially traumatic brain injury—acceptable on a sports field? Colleges aren't keeping stats on concussions in outdoor adventure because they're so rare.

We need to stand up for paddling and its minimal yet inherent risks. These are inextricably linked to the joys and benefits of the activity itself. As paddlers we need to help schools, camps and community groups move beyond a narrow safety-only focus.

If meeting safety standards is the sole mark of success for a paddling trip, the bar is set very low. Should safety be a given? Yes. All trips must be safe. Safety first, but not safety only. As safe as necessary, but not as safe as possible. Let's then move onto higher aspirations, goals and motivations. Why not instead focus on instilling joy and a love of the activity and the landscape.

To complement and parallel the many outdoor adventure risk management conferences, we need joy management conferences. Time spent with other guides teachers and club leaders discussing the merits of a particular campfire game messy desserts and the best swimming holes. Time spent on ensuring the next generation learns to cherish wild places, instead of fear them.

On the slippery slope we're descending, risk-averse decisions could become paddling-adverse programs. And this would be joyless for all.

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