

SAFETY IN OUTDOOR ADVENTURES



Exploring the great outdoors with all the adventures, experiences and amazing scenery, is not only great recreation, it is an essential part of our being healthy, both mentally and physically. There is huge personal and societal value in having healthy work life balance and as our cities and towns become crowded and busier; escaping to the Australian bush with all its forests, mountains, snowfields and waterways have to offer is a simple to access.

While there are amazing places further away to visit and experience, there are also numerous walking and riding trails, urban bushland, cliffs etc. quite close to all major cities and towns, so short "micro" adventures are available to us all, from a few hours to a full day. We just need to make the time.

There are also many skiing, caving, climbing, bushwalking and other activity based clubs to join for those that do not have close friends who adventure. Many outdoor clubs have State or Federal "peak" bodies that liaise with land managers to ensure safe access to public land etc but who also run activity and safety training.

For the young, scouting, guides, lifesaving clubs and many other youth organization's are great options for learning bushcraft, safety in the bush, plus the amazing life skills and social aspects of these clubs and groups.

The great outdoors is just at our doorstep and while it is easily accessible we need to take care to ensure that we minimise risks when we experience its wonders.

Ensuring your safety when adventuring is important, not only from a personal point of view but to reduce the community and tax payer cost of mounting extensive and costly search and rescue operations.

Safety in the outdoors is primarily a personal and group responsibility so the key to managing personal, family and group risks are simple. Always ensure that the leader and the groups skills and level of experience is commensurate with the isolation, level of difficulty of the terrain, complexity of the activity, identifiable risks, available communications, weather and any other relevant issues.

Ensuring that personal and group equipment, clothes, vehicles and communications are appropriate for the adventure that you are undertaking is also critical as this will not only impact on safety but will affect the level of enjoyment for the participants.

Visiting easily accessible locations where communications are good and where the adventure or experience is easy to manage is a good starting point for adventuring and you can then raise the level of difficulty and isolation as your skills and experience improve. An activity plan might be developed informally as a chat amongst mates or be a detailed written list for more complex trips or expeditions but some level of planning should occur for all activities.

The following is a list of factors that could be considered when developing your plan, this is only a short guide and there will be many other issues that you may need to consider:-

- > What the group and individuals want to achieve or experience. Make sure that this is similar for all.
- > The expected duration and extent of the activity or adventure
- > Age, experience, fitness, skill level of participants
- > Any medical issues that need to be considered
- > The group size
- > The level of difficulty of the adventure or activity
- > The ease of access and egress for the group
- > The skill and leadership levels of any leaders
- > The ease of communications
- > Expected weather and effects on the adventure

Group size is a major consideration as a large group often has a wider range of experience levels, fitness and expectations. This can make it harder for the group to achieve objectives.

Severe weather is an increasing cause of accidents and incidents in the outdoors, in particular with water based activities or in the snow. The Bureau of Meteorology and the many weather forecasting "apps" available for our smart phone make obtaining weather warnings and information extremely accessible.

Severe weather that might affect safe outdoor activities in winter can include storms, flooding, snow storms, extreme cold, high winds or a combination of a number of these. Including weather considerations in our activity planning can be critical.

Weather considerations and warnings can include:-

Physical environment - Know the landscape of your activity area and how it relates to weather events.

Severe Weather Warning - These warnings are provided when severe weather is expected that is not directly related to severe thunderstorms, tropical cyclones or bushfires.

Severe Thunderstorm Warning - These warnings are provided by the BOM when thunderstorms are expected to produce dangerous or damaging conditions.

Blizzards - The Bureau of Meteorology defines a blizzard as a violent and very cold wind that is laden with snow, some part, at least, of which has been raised from snow covered ground.

For all sorts of weather information and warnings for both the land and sea go to - <http://www.bom.gov.au/>

Adventuring in snow conditions requires additional care in particular if you are travelling out "off Resort" but even in the resorts one needs to take care and there is safety information available at the various snow resort entries and information centre's. Carriage and fitting of snow chains may be required (NSW and Victoria have different laws in this regards so check before you travel)

Two useful location definitions for use when planning a snow trip are:-

Well supported areas-This includes areas where there may be resort, lift company leased areas, groomed trails and patrols, there is reliable communication and emergency services can readily reach the site within one hour.

Back country areas- This includes areas where professional medical care is more than one hour away, communication is unreliable and there is no patrols or support. Leaders should understand that it is possible to inadvertently move out of well supported areas and on to public land where no support exists.

Adventure Activity Standards – Most states and territories have adventure activity standards that have been designed to assist with provision of safe dependent group adventures and these can be found by a quick internet search. For example the Victorian standards are at <http://outdoorsvictoria.org.au/aas-list-of-standards/>. There is now a move to develop national outdoor safety standards and information on this project can be found at <http://australianaas.org.au/>. While designed and intended for lead dependent groups, these standards have useful information for all adventures and so are a good and easy to access resource.

Winter adventures (and all outdoor activities) should be fun and with some planning and care can be safe as well. Start with easy locations and challenges, and then extend the levels of difficulty as you gain experience. Have a great time in the great outdoors!

