

# The Mountaineers

## Club-Wide Safety Committee Recommendations – 2009

The below concepts and recommendations should be communicated to all activity committees and leaders and should be disseminated or made available for review by The Mountaineers community.

Based upon review of submitted club-wide incident reports for 2009, the Safety Committee has decided to focus on the dangers of party separation. We believe this is one of the highest risks we face as an organization, and one of the most preventable. In many cases this problem of not keeping people together is not seen as very important, but it can have large negative consequences. We've seen several Search And Rescues be initiated over the last several years, all because a team member was able to get off by themselves and become separated from the rest of the party.

The problems of party separation have been part of the recommendations for the last few years. These points are still valid, and need to be re-emphasized:

The section following was taken directly from the 2007 recommendations:

### *Party Separation*

- *There is a tendency to split party up between strong and weak members*
- *Party separation reduces margin of safety, and increases the risk of the trip*
- *On the way out, it is inadvisable to let the stronger members leave weaker ones behind*
  - *If an incident occurs, strong members should be available to provide assistance*
  - *If stronger members wait for entire party to return to trailhead, no one is left behind*
- *Consider largest appropriate time & distance gap between any party member*
  - *Consider rule of thumb of no more than 15 minute separation between party members*
  - *Consider how long it could take to communicate with other team members and how long it could take for them to respond*
- *Stronger party members might take turns staying with slower members*
- *Avoid sending injured members back to camp/trailhead by themselves*
- *Leader needs to set expectations during sign-up, screen participants, insure compatible group, let members know their abilities, set expectations again at trailhead*
- *Ensure all members recognize goal of keeping party members together; even if a party member is slow from the start, party must accept requirement to stay together*
- *Set defined stopping points/breaks when members regroup*
- *Take turns staying with slower party members*
- *Radios are helpful for party communication if team gets spread out*
  - *Radios give flexibility, if you must separate, can still communicate, but understand limitations – an intervening ridge can totally block signals*

This section was taken directly from the 2008 recommendations:

### *Traveling Alone*

*Don't allow someone to travel by themselves, keep the buddy system.*

### *Injured parties never travel alone*

- *Don't let an injured or sick person hike back to trailhead by themselves.*
- *Injured party doesn't want to be burden to group so are willing to go by themselves.*
- *Leader should work to overcome this reluctance and should insist on someone accompanying the party out.*
- *Don't let embarrassment cloud judgment.*
- *Reemphasize no party separation, if folks spread out upon the trail, always sync up at trail junctions.*
- *Also consider not allowing person to leave trailhead by themselves if they arrive early.*

### *Buddy System*

- *Don't let one person go by themselves, even healthy party members.*
- *Set up a buddy system, each person responsible for another, buddy up*
- *Leaders need to set expectations of group members.*
- *Leader write down the license plates of cars at trailhead, would know that all parties accounted for.*
  - *Doesn't take the place of setting explicit expectations that nobody leaves the trailhead for home until everyone accounted for.*

In addition to the above, the committee would like to emphasize these additional points for 2009:

### *Radios/Walkie-Talkies*

- If the party uses radios or walkie-talkies, leader still needs to keep party together
- Radios don't work unless they are in line of sight, and the party can become dependent on the radio
- Radios can give a false sense of security
- If using radios, make sure everyone knows the purpose
- Don't let members think that radios are substitute for keeping party together
- Don't let group spread out. Use radio for emergency communication
- Radios have been misused as a substitute for requiring of keeping the party together
- Radios don't work if a ridge is in between, work line of sight only

### *Leader's Responsibility*

- The trip leader must keep the party together; any separation needs to be brought back together at critical junctures.
- Very difficult many times to keep party together, this is a critical leadership skill
- Leader must step in and enforce keeping together if some members want to go their own way
- Leader must set expectations with every participant

### *Personal Responsibility*

- Every participant has the responsibility to not allow themselves or others to become separated
- Everyone must have the expectation they are buddied up with someone else
- Activity participation privileges should be dependent on adherence to this policy

- Strong participants should consider carrying more of the gear than weak participants if that will facilitate keeping the party together and speeding the group's progress.

### Organizational Responsibility

- This party separation problem needs to be addressed by the organization (activity and Branch)
- Leadership privileges should be dependent on adherence to this concept
- Branch/Activity leadership should take action if a leader refuses to adhere to this concept
- Branch/Activity leadership should take action if a participant refuses to adhere to this concept

### Frequently Asked Questions

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Use the following Q/A for discussions within your branch or activity. Writing these out is an effort to surface the major questions that will be asked and to help provide clarification as to the intent of the recommendations.

Q) Does this mean we have to all be lined up and hiking in lockstep?

A) No. This means that every participant understands the concept, has been paired up with a buddy, and will insure they are not separated by sight or sound from that person.

Q) Does this mean that the entire group must always stay together?

A) No. The main party can split into subgroups (provided the leader has agreed), but these subgroups must know they are to stick together amongst themselves, know expectations on where to meet up with the other subgroups, and insure that nobody is left on their own. These subgroups should adhere to the other principles that have been discussed (don't separate strong and weaker members, etc.).

Q) What about bathroom breaks, and privacy?

The party can stop; folks can then go off trail as far as needed for bathroom privacy, then return to the group where the party then leaves once everyone is accounted for.

Q) What about someone who stays in camp by themselves?

A) This is not considered separation as the person is in a safe and known location with adequate supplies. This assumes the person is not so sick as to need attendance.

Q) What about a person who doesn't want to continue to the summit and nobody wants to stay with them?

A) If the person is in a safe and known location and visible by sight/sound from the summit, has adequate supplies, and everyone is assured they will not move, then that is not considered party separation. If the person is not within sight/sound of the party, then the leader needs to use sound judgment. Does the person have adequate supplies? Does this person have adequate shelter from heat, cold, wet? Are there any route-finding issues getting back to this location? Is there a radio available to keep in contact with this person? Is this person capable of being by themselves? Will this person stay put? If there is any doubt on the questions above, this person should not be left alone. The leader needs to keep someone with this person.

Q) Is it OK to leave two people by themselves, say waiting for the party to return from the summit

A) This is consistent with the buddy system and not considered a separation.

Q) What about a small party size (say 3 members) and one person has just had enough and needs to turn around, is having difficulty, and the destination will be out of sight/sound of this person?

A) The party needs to take care of this person and will most likely abandon the destination.

They will take care of this person, not leaving them alone, making sure they are warm/dry/cool as conditions warrant, and insure this person arrives safely back at the trailhead.

Q) What if the person I'm paired up with is obnoxious and I don't want to hang out with them?

A) The buddy system says you need to be in sight/sound of your buddy at all times. Speak with your leader if you need a change of buddies.

Q) A participant is very slow, feeling sick and is going to keep the main party from reaching the summit, can we just send them back to the trailhead?

A) A participant should never be left to navigate by themselves, particularly if feeling sick. Another party member should accompany them back to the trailhead.

Q) What about the start of a trip where different groups will start from the trailhead at different times to make up for the pace of slow or fast members?

A) As long as no one is travelling by themselves, and prior arrangements have been made so the leader knows when to expect everyone at camp or defined meeting place, this is consistent with the buddy system.

Q) We are on a Kayak trip and some of our paddlers are too tired to paddle against the headwind, can we split the party up, have the strong paddlers go back to the launch and have the tired paddlers go downwind to another dock?

A) As long as no paddler is left to fend by themselves, and there is adequate experience and supplies with each group, this is consistent with the buddy system and the group should split up.

Q) A leader experienced an incident on their last trip where one of the party members got out on their own and it took awhile to locate them, what should "branch/activity leadership" do to this leader?

A) Branch/Activity Leadership should insure that the leader and all party members are aware of the policy to keep the party together. Any incident should be investigated as to the cause: were folks not aware, did something out of the ordinary occur? Learnings should then be applied so the likelihood of this happening again is minimized. The goal is to grow the capability of leaders and to help them accomplish this difficult task. Assuming Branch Activity Leadership is satisfied this leader did not willfully allow the party separation, then it will stand as a lesson learned.

Q) A leader says they are not going to support this policy, that all participants should be capable of fending for themselves and this is too much bureaucracy from Branch/Activity Leadership.

A) If after much discussion this leader refuses to accept the responsibility of keeping the party together and understands the principles, he/she should be removed from activity leadership.

Q) A participant says he/she is not going to travel at the slow speeds of the party and will just go on up ahead and meet at the final destination (including back to the trailhead).

A) If after much discussion this participant refuses to accept responsibility of keeping the party together and the principles of the buddy system, this participant should be denied access to future activities.

Q) A participant is just not keeping up with the main party. They don't want to be a drag so they offer to leave the official trip midway through and go back on their own. Can the leader declare this person is no longer part of the trip and separate from them?

A) No. The leader has the responsibility to bring all party members back to the trailhead safely, they cannot abandon the trip midstream. There are times when previous arrangements have been made for folks to leave the main party, say they want to stay out and camp an extra day. These arrangements should be made in advance, but never for a single participant.