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November 17, 2009

Deep Survival with Laurence Gonzales

Search + Rescue: Should Victims Pay?

Most backcountry searches don't cost the victim a dime. Let's keep it that way.

On April 25, 2009, Scott Mason set out to hike the Presidential Range in New Hampshire on a popular, 17-mile route that crosses several peaks, including Mount Washington. Mason had decided to do it in one day. With his training and experience (he's an Eagle Scout), it wasn't an unreasonable plan.

But then the 17-year-old turned his ankle. At first, Mason continued hiking his original route. Then he tried to find a shorter trail off the mountain but was stopped by a stream swollen with spring runoff. The weather was good, and he was fairly well equipped, so he wasn't in any immediate danger. He had food and was able to make a fire.

A search was mounted for Mason when he didn't return as soon as planned. Things got complicated fast, and before long the operation involved the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, Mountain Rescue Service, Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue, the Appalachian Mountain Club, and a Maine Forest Service helicopter.

The Fish and Game Department found Mason four days later, and he was all right. Mason's parents sent \$1,000 to the department to show their gratitude. Fish and Game responded by calling Mason "negligent" and sending him a bill for \$25,238 to cover the cost of his rescue.

I've been working with search and rescue (SAR) people for a decade or so and have never met one who thought it was a good idea to charge for rescue. Most SAR workers like helping people. They like to feel good about what they do. And they hate it when a rescue turns into a body recovery. But there's also a selfish reason to their logic: Charging makes their job more dangerous.

As Steve Rollins of Portland Mountain Rescue explains, "Charging for rescues creates the unintended consequence of discouraging people from calling for a rescue, increasing risks and likely increasing the complexity and costs of rescues."

Charley Shimanski, president of the Mountain Rescue Association, echoed Rollins when he told me, "I once led a rescue of a climber at 14,000 feet in a raging blizzard at 1 a.m. Conditions were horrific. The man's wife knew he was overdue six hours earlier—when the weather was great—but did not call for help because she thought we charge a fee."

A position paper released around the same time as Mason's ordeal by North Shore Rescue in Vancouver, British Columbia, states, "It is essential that the team be called out as quickly as possible . . . There have been instances in the past where the subject has deliberately tried to avoid the searchers . . . thinking, If I get to the car park before they find me, then I won't be charged. This makes our job substantially more difficult."

The same month, the National Association for Search & Rescue issued its own statement against charging for rescue. It said that delays in calling for help, "can, at the minimum, cause further danger to the person in peril and, at the maximum, place their life in jeopardy. Delays can place SAR personnel in extreme danger and unnecessarily compound and extend the length of the SAR mission."

Richard L. P. Solosky, former president of the Alpine Rescue Team and regional chair of the Mountain Rescue Association, pointed out to me that the entire National Park System spent a total of \$4.52 million on SAR operations in 2006, while it had 272 million visitors. Which means the total cost of SAR was less than two cents per visitor. Although there are no comprehensive statistics for New Hampshire, from 2007 to 2008 Colorado sheriffs requested reimbursement for just 60 SAR incidents and were paid \$60,310. That's an average of \$1,005 an incident. The fact is that most mountain rescue operations are performed by volunteers—other mountaineers—and the cost is relatively low.

The one thing that can send costs skyrocketing is the use of helicopters. But even this is largely subsidized. The Air Force and National Guard are often the ones that provide them, and they would rather be flying real rescue missions for their training than fake ones. With or without an actual rescue mission, the helicopters will fly and the taxpayer will foot the bill.

The reason New Hampshire charged Mason, according to the Fish and Game Department, is as follows: "In the department's opinion," a spokesman said, "he was negligent in totality. He had an aggressive hiking itinerary."

Mason told one of the supervisors at the Pinkham Notch Lodge, where he slept the night before he set off, about his plans. No one said he was nuts. In 2008, literally hundreds of people hiked a similar route, the 18-mile Presidential Traverse, in a day. So what exactly is an aggressive itinerary?

I hiked in the Presidential Range myself one nice spring day in weather that must have been similar to what Mason experienced. The trail was wet and snowy as I slogged up the steep, slippery slush in a dense forest of birch and pine richly carpeted with blowdown and ice storm damage. I was acutely aware of how easy it would be to slip and hurt myself. Was I being aggressive and negligent? I don't think so. I was never out of sight of at least a dozen people. I saw octogenarians in long johns and six-year-olds in high-tech ski jackets. There were snowshoes and flip-flops and serious-looking hikers with ice climbing gear. Everyone was grinning, joking, and saying hi to strangers in a giddy spring rite of passage on Mount Washington. If somebody had dropped an ice ax on my foot and I'd had to be carried down the mountain, I

wonder what it would have cost. Would five different departments have been called in for a helicopter rescue then too?

It is true that some people just seem determined to get themselves killed. It's very frustrating for search and rescue workers to encounter such stupidity in the wilderness, but if bureaucrats get to decide how much risk I can take in New Hampshire, I guess I'll spend my money somewhere else. There is an easy way to put an end to the boneheaded idea that SAR requires payment by the person who's rescued: Stop taking trips to places that charge for rescue. Simple: No visitors. No rescues. No charge.

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There is some reason behind charging because people will know not to take unnecessary risks. Although there is a couple of "rules" that a hiker should keep in mind while going for a hike, like, taking a mobile phone or some other communication equipment with him, also it's good to have a map of the area (if he had a map he wouldn't get lost) and maybe to consider not to go hiking alone.

I wish everybody safe and nice hike!

Posted by: [Jean](#) | [November 18, 2009 at 11:50 AM](#)



There should be some type of panel made up of volunteers that participate in the sport or activity the rescued person was doing to decide whether or not there should be a charge. The guys that don't take water and use their Spot three times a day should be charged. Not this guy.

Posted by: [Chris Jennings](#) | [November 17, 2009 at 03:52 PM](#)

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