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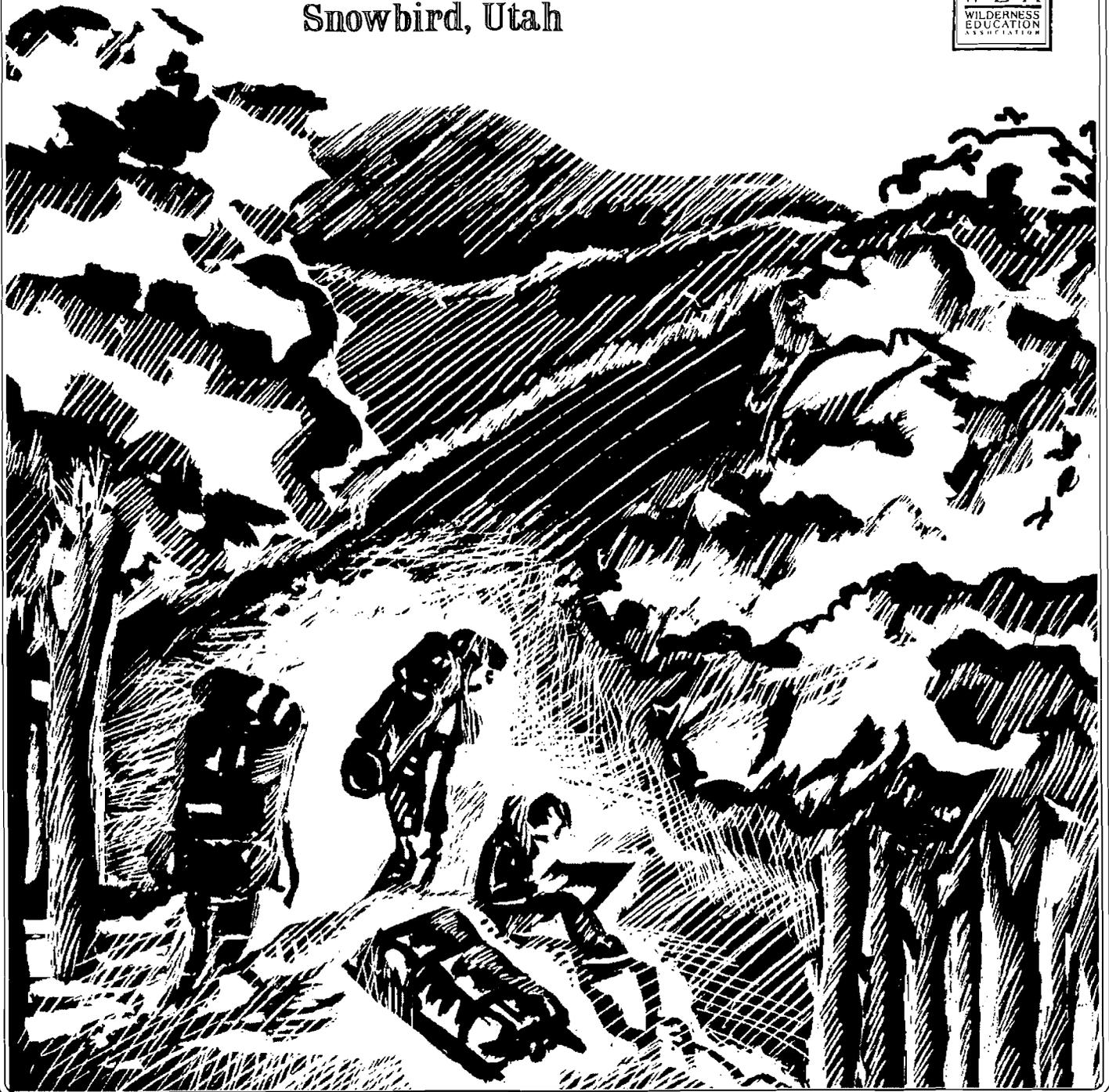
The Impact Of Diversity Issues On Risk Management
by Nina S. Roberts and Sky Gray

The outdoors provides an environment which is often mysterious, unquestionably objective, and immeasurably complex. When such variables as culture, isolation, unfamiliarity, and language differences come into play, the potential for increased risks are heightened. While new scholarship continues to surface regarding "objective and subjective hazards," the area which still remains relatively untouched relates to the impact of diversity issues on risk management.

Many people may ask, "How do diversity concepts relate to risk management in adventure programming?" Sadly, the answer (historically speaking), is that they have not. Why there is an increase in diverse populations in the outdoors, and why there should be, are two areas of inquiry not universally agreed upon. To further understand the issues, one must step outside of traditionally held beliefs that risk management is only, or primarily concerned with technical and physical aspects of adventure/wilderness programming. To think otherwise is to promote cultural blindness and ignore the importance of broadening our understanding of more holistic risk management practices.

While most industry standards are implemented for instruction of "hard" (or technical) skills, leaders/instructors also continue to be trained in the area of interpersonal skill development and enhancement of "soft" skills. This fact notwithstanding, progress must be made regarding building allies and improving relationships with participants who are "different" than ourselves in order to maintain a truly safe environment. Even when knowledgeable professionals have this commitment, they often mistakenly believe this "commitment" - by itself - is enough of a tool (coupled with the expertise they already possess) to reach out and serve a new and different population from what they are accustomed to serving.

Leadership training must stress issues of cross cultural communication. And, this training must incorporate concepts where gender, ethnicity, race, culture, urban/rural residence, disabilities, sexual orientation and other diverse elements of our clients can be recognized as barriers that impact a leaders ability to perform effectively and safely in the field. By increasing the quality of training and education, leaders can assist with developing and expanding the connection for diverse populations to wilderness or outdoor-based experiential learning. This is critical for the participants, the outdoor industry and for anyone who cares about maintaining both an international commitment to protecting the world's natural resources, and for social and environmental justice.

Critical perspectives
Social inequality is woven throughout our social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). Outdoor programs are part of the fabric which we infuse our personal bias, prejudice, or bigotry into our relationships and structures that also permeate most other aspects of our lives. What this means is that our training must include concepts related to how dominant or privileged groups benefit (sometimes in unconscious ways) from the disempowerment of oppressed groups. Once managers and leaders of outdoor programs acknowledge the benefits they gain from access to social power and privilege not equally available to people of color (or others), programs are more likely to be enjoyed safely and successfully. The relationship to risk management may be less discernible. Because the appreciation of differences are inextricably linked to social justice, and the ways that power and privilege construct difference unequally in every aspect of society, both leaders and participants must be educated to how this pertains to safe program operations and group dynamics. The process may not always be smooth, but individual difference will be validated and supported.

Participants who are disabled, gay or lesbian, Black or Latino, female or male must feel secure that their contributions to the program will be treated with respect whether or not the leader or other group members agree with them. If leaders are in control and aware of potential threats and risks, participants will inevitably feel safer knowing they will intervene, if necessary, to prevent personal expressions from provoking personal attacks by a peer who may find them offensive. At the same time, it is imperative that leaders balance the need for creating a safe space with their obligation to ensure that blatantly false assumptions are subjected to mature and thoughtful criticism. Mastering the precise balance is no easy task. And, how does this relate to the natural environment and/or the activities themselves?

Connection to programs
It is a known fact that no evidence exists proclaiming outdoor recreational activities are inherently dangerous (Ford & Blanchard, 1993). Accidents and injuries typically occur, for example, when people are "in the wrong place at the wrong time," use wrong (or faulty) equipment, or perhaps make "wrong" decisions. Subsequently, risk taking is an element found in a vast array of situations. While many individuals pursuing outdoor and adventure based activities may be

considered "risk takers," leaders must recognize the varying degrees of risk depending on an individual's background. Indisputably the participants age, skill level and maturity, to name a few, will have a direct correlation with minimizing actual risk. This obviously includes mental and emotional affliction and as well as physical harm. What about the participant (or leader) who is deaf? How do we reach a young person from the inner-city who is experiencing "culture shock" of being in a wild environment away from conventional sanitary procedures? When do we address the situation regarding the gay or lesbian youth who encounters extreme isolation from the rest of the group? Why do we often avoid crossing boundaries with the Latino student because our fear of misunderstanding obstructs our connection? The potential for accident or injury is increased exponentially when issues of diversity, such as these and numerous other cases, arise during outdoor programs.

Consequently, in intercultural communication work, the concept of *critical incidents* is a model that fits well within the concept of risk management. A critical incident is a situation where there is a misunderstanding, problem, or conflict arising from a cultural difference between interacting parties or there is a problem of cross cultural adaptation (Fowler & Mumford, 1995, p. 12 7). If programs work with a diverse population, then critical incidents may happen without any awareness from the instructors, unless there is training and emphasis placed on understanding differences. Thus, other safety related issues could emerge as a result of not understanding the cultural context. The dominant cultural approach may be inappropriate and potentially harmful to individuals as well as an entire group. The complexity of diversity issues is not to be underscored or simplified, but explored and identified, as the experiential education profession continues to advance and grow.

Important to note is the fact that there are different kinds of *risk* other than safety. For example, by working inadequately or incompetently with diverse participants (despite "good intentions"), leaders may create barriers and cause participants to abandon the experience rather than encouraging them to be an integral part of it. United with this is a theory that by unintentionally disempowering an individual (and possibly an entire group of people with similar backgrounds), that we are trying to empower, we may also be reducing the number of advocates for environmental protection and conservation that should be practiced in our programs. Educating all people about proper land ethics and low impact outdoor skills is paramount for sustainability of our public lands and engaging people with diverse backgrounds must be included fully in the process.

Change always challenges
The field of outdoor and experiential education is an on-going process of undergoing a dramatic paradigm shift. No longer do "dangerous conditions" only refer to lack of water, tornado season, forest fire potential, or hyperthermia. Many other components have potential dangers and subsequently safety issues. And, in some situations the issues are twofold. That is, one for the participant who may not understand the risk, and two for the leader who comprehends the risk, but who may not be experienced or comfortable in challenging the participant. What may occur is that leaders being perceived as racist can be a major obstacle to taking proper responsibility or effective management of the group. For example, different climates can effect ethnic minorities differently; that is, an African American may feel their darker pigmentation is a natural defense against the sun and refuse to wear proper protection. · This manifestation is influenced by a lack of understanding about the effects of exposure at higher elevations or due to being in a region different from where they are from. Subsequent questions which might arise include: Is simply "being Black" enough for this individual to make this judgment? Does a white leader have enough understanding to know the danger? Can the white leader exhibit sensitivity and challenge the participant without racial bias being assumed? Or would the leader, because of concern of the perception of racism, choose to remain silent hence increasing potential risk to the participant?

When providing opportunities for people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, outdoor leaders must be responsible for acquiring knowledge of other cultural systems. Ewert, Chavez & Magill (1993) present a wide range of interests involving research, management and leadership as relating to the "wildland-urban interface." They provide information regarding the complexity of visitor behaviors and land ethics, discuss the influence of ethnic and cultural diversity on resource management, and address some of the difficulties around multicultural communication and sociocultural meanings of outdoor recreation.

While some of the strongest outdoor leaders have a sense of compassion such as empathy, warmth, and sincerity, alone, they are not adequate for working with all clients in general and, in particular, clients of diverse backgrounds. By themselves, these skills are not sufficient for fully understanding the needs, previous experiences, and expectations of all our participants. And, in some areas, these interpersonal skills are often not valued as highly as technical skills. It is essential that the standards of leader qualifications include acquiring knowledge around issues of diversity and adequate training with regards to interpersonal skill development. Solid professional

leadership training is only one form of acquiring this knowledge. Learning from diverse communities themselves is another. How can leaders enhance gender relations? Why is it important that leaders comprehend issues relating to sexual orientation? How does one become "ethnically competent?" This refers to conducting one's professional work in a way that is congruent with the behavior and expectations that members of a distinctive ethnic and cultural group recognize as appropriate among themselves (Ewert, Chavez & Magill, 1993). In other words, we must learn about the experiences of people from diverse backgrounds (e.g., beliefs, values, ideology). This definition stresses an awareness of behaviors within various cultures. As with all components of diversity, what this denotes is the ability to carry out professional activities consistent with that awareness.

Additionally, it is a common misperception in this field that if there is a need to choose one leader over another based on level of skill, that managers/directors should select leaders with "better" technical skills over interpersonal skills for safety purposes. Increased experience working with diverse populations has proven this is not always accurate, and numerous incidents reported have substantiated this assertion. Once hired and trained, leaders must recognize the importance of "difference" and respond appropriately and safely to all the needs of diverse groups. Approaches to effective risk management are enhanced with the development of solid rapport and respectful interactions with clients from diverse backgrounds.

The following strategies and principles can be adapted for use in a variety of programs to assist managers, directors, and instructors with addressing issues of diversity regarding safety and risk management:

Strategies for addressing diversity issues relating to risk management *

1. Hire and train outdoor leaders who are sensitive and knowledgeable to differences in gender, are ethnically competent, and understand issues around people with disabilities.

2. Actively recruit and train representative staff of the populations and culture your program serves.

3. Training modules should include increasing personal awareness. This includes teaching leaders about the conscious and unconscious prejudices and assumptions they hold.

4. Operate a holistic recruitment and training program, and promote attention to cultural representation and understanding.

5. Conduct an internal audit of representative staff to student ratios.

6. Leaders should value awareness, personal growth, embrace change as outcomes of the learning process. Leadership that balances different learning styles and is distinctly organized around goals of social awareness, knowledge, and action-oriented behavior will undoubtedly decrease subjective hazards. Accommodating various learning styles is critical.

7. Value diversity as it relates to programming and risk management in the same way as valuing a good safety briefing prior to a course going out into the field. Step "outside the box" of traditional risk management concepts and integrate the emotional aspects of safety relating to gender, culture, religion, sexual orientation, etc.

8. Attend to social relations in the wilderness. Instruction should help participants name behaviors that emerge in group dynamics, understand group process, and improve interpersonal communications, without blaming or judging each other.

9. Use reflection and personal history/background as tools for experiential learning. Programs instruction can begin from the participant's world view and experience as the starting point for dialogue or problem-solving.

10. Allow contradictions and tensions to emerge. Part of what is often overlooked relates to fear of the leader to allow tensions and personal anxiety within themselves and/or participants to materialize. Overlooking tensions, attempting to resolve contradictions, or inappropriately relieving uncomfortable situations often increases the level of risk to the mental and emotional safety of the group. These experiences and feelings are an integral part of the learning process in wilderness education. Leaders should allow themselves to experience the discomfort as well as encourage participants to step out of their "comfort zone." This helps participants work through their own learning, and strengthens instructors potential of becoming better leaders.

11. Administer an internal assessment of clinical/critical incidents that may link your programs and leadership to diversity issues arising. Determine if there are trends, and allow those trends to provide information about the program areas needing additional training.

* Some of these principles and strategies have been adapted and modified from Adams, Bell, & Griffin (1997), and Fowler & Mumford (1995) for applicability to experiential education and wilderness programs.

Conclusion

Failing to address diversity issues as related to risk management could be devastating to program success. In an era of increasing cultural pluralism, having an incomplete tool box relating to issues surrounding race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ableism, and others, is an invitation for tragedy. Wilderness leaders and instructors must engage in a new way of thinking about how issues of social justice impact our programs.

We cannot convince people that the outdoor industry should be committed to this agenda and related issues. However, professionals must re-examine old approaches for accomplishing the same goals, rather than simply merging a new obligation or activity. Organizations can no longer ensue outmoded solutions or methods to solve new challenges. A commitment to embracing issues surrounding diversity will inevitably lead managers and program instructors to face these issues in a very personal and forthright manner. And, people should expect to be uncomfortable in the process. This will help cultivate honesty, trust, and building allies.

Experiential education professionals must better prepare future leaders for dimensions of diversity relating to their work. While these issues are not new, the challenge has only begun to incorporate these important variables into our risk management practices.

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Author Bios

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