

Rescue Dynamics®

5109 - 17A Avenue NW, Edmonton, AB T6L 1K5

780 - 461 - 5040 fax / voice

Internet - www.compusmart.ab.ca/resqdyn/ or email: resqdyn@compusmart.ab.ca



Subject: **Getting Ready for the Big Trip**

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Instructional Support Technical Note

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Planning a weekend outing to a local campground is not very difficult. However, when you plan a long outing deep in the wilderness, the amount of planning required can increase dramatically. Here is a primer for planning a major backcountry trip.

Trip Objectives

The first thing to do when planning a major trip is to bring the participants together and determine what it is that you want to get out of the experience. In addition to deciding where it is you want to go, you should ask the following questions:

- Why are we on this trip?
- What is our risk threshold? (i.e. How far are we willing to push to succeed?)
- Are there other ways of getting the desired enjoyment out of our trip if the going gets too rough?

Clarifying the expectations of everyone involved is the most important initial step in ensuring a safe and enjoyable experience for the entire group. Informing everyone of the skill level required is also significant.

Pre-Trip Investigation

Once the objectives are clear, you can proceed to the information gathering stage. Guidebooks and references exist for even the most remote outdoor destinations in the world. The local library, outdoor stores and outdoor clubs are places to start looking. See if you can find

someone who has completed your trip before. You may be rewarded with valuable trip planning information.

See if any permits are required for camping, fires, access, etc. Within National or Provincial Parks, there is often a system to register your trip plan. (In some parks, this is mandatory.) Parks personnel are also excellent sources of information.

Check into any hazards that may be encountered along your route. Look into the weather patterns for the time of year you will be on your trip. You may choose to do a shorter reconnaissance trip to get to know the area and terrain before committing yourself to the big trip. If your trip happens to be out of the country, you should also consider travel and health insurance.

Check into your travel requirements. If your trip starts in one place and ends in another, you may need to arrange a car shuttle or alternate transport to get back to your vehicle.

If you find that your trip calls for special expertise, organize training sessions for everyone involved. If you will be in a remote area, you may also need skills in first aid, survival, or even self rescue procedures.

Route Planning

Once you have done your initial investigation, you can begin a more detailed written route card

or trip plan. You should already know the type of terrain you will encounter and the hazards that you can expect. Begin outlining the estimated times and distances that you will travel for each part of your route. By recording elevation loss and gain for each section of the trip you will have a better idea of how difficult the going will be and how long it should take.

If weather is poor, travel by map and compass may be necessary. Establish the bearings and back-bearings for each leg of your journey. Be sure you have all the maps you need. Prominent features that will help you navigate, such as river drainages and mountain ridges, should also be noted.

If you can, determine the availability of wood and water along your route. Pick your anticipated campsites for each day as well as the locations of any emergency places to camp if you don't get as far as you hoped. If particularly scenic spots are on your route, you may plan to make them lunch spots.

Emergency Plans

Murphy's Law states; "anything that can go wrong, will go wrong" and it usually does so at the worst possible moment. When making your route plan, include details of any possible escape routes to get back to civilization quickly. Locations of the nearest road, telephone, hospital, ambulance service and police department are valuable information. Remember that just because there is a road nearby, it does not mean that help is readily available.

Within parks, wardens or rangers may have a special number to contact for backcountry emergencies. The Canadian Forces have Rescue Coordination Centres across Canada that respond to many emergencies in remote places. If you don't know who to contact outside of National or Provincial Parks, start with the RCMP who will either handle the situation or get the proper wheels in motion for you. In many areas, search for missing persons is already the responsibility of the RCMP.

If you do have an emergency, you may need a good first aid kit, survival gear, repair kit and

perhaps specialized rescue equipment. These kits should be large enough to contain what you really need and small enough that you are willing to carry them. A realistic kit is based on the size of your group, length of your trip and distance from help. The type of activities you are doing and your level of training will also determine what you will bring along. (More on this topic in a future article!)

One item some groups choose to carry is a two-way radio. If radio, mobile phone or cellular service is available at points along your route, you may be able to get help days before it would be otherwise available. Radios do add weight to your pack however, and they are not always reliable. Check with a reputable communications firm to determine how useful radios would be for your trip.

Knowledge Of Participants

Before you set out with the group, you should know more about each member. It is important to have a medical history for each group member. What is their general health? Do they have any significant current or past medical problems? Do they have any allergies or dietary restrictions? Are they taking any medications? Do any of these things affect their ability to participate on this trip? Your family physician can advise you if you have any concerns in this regard.

The fitness level and experience of each individual can tell you about how they may do on the trip. Find out their strengths and weaknesses. If there is any significant information regarding a group member, share it with the rest of the party. It is better to be aware and prepared for a possible problem than to hide it from the rest of the participants.

Trip Management

Once you have set the meeting time and place for your final departure, all that is left is a pre-trip briefing. Go over your goals again before setting off. Review the route plan with everyone. Establish meeting places along your route in case party members get separated. Identify a "leader" and a "sweep" who will follow along last and help weaker members with any problems. Maintain a steady pace that everyone can keep

up to. Keeping a group closer together avoids many problems.

Along the way, keep assessing your progress. Constantly reevaluate your group. Look out for problems before they happen. If you encounter hazardous terrain, rest before the hazard, then move quickly through it. Reduce the time you are exposed and only expose one person at a time if possible.

Critique

Once your trip is over, have the participants get together and review how things went. Use this information to help you plan even better trips in the future.

Remember, it takes years to be prepared for most things the wilderness can come up with. Proper trip planning is the foundation for all safe trips in the outdoors.

This article originally appeared in Family Health Magazine and is reprinted courtesy of Cyril Shokoples. Cyril is an internationally certified Mountain Guide and has been a member of the Alpine Club and Edmonton Section since 1975. He became a Senior member in 1979 and received the Silver Rope Award in 1988. He currently resides in Edmonton and is the proprietor of the firm Rescue Dynamics, which is involved in climbing, rescue and safety instruction, as well as mountain guiding. Further information on courses as well as additional copies of this and other technical notes in this series can be obtained directly from Rescue Dynamics. On the Internet, visit the Rescue Dynamics World Wide Web Site at - <http://www.compumart.ab.ca/resqdyn/>