Learning from fatalities in outdoor education – some key points

Drawing on the work of Andrew Brookes (2003a; 2003b; 2004)

Some key findings from Brookes’ work on outdoor education fatalities in Australia between 1960 and 2002 are summarised. One of his aims was to examine common patterns that might exist across cases. While he describes only Australian cases his findings are useful for New Zealand outdoor educators. Three points will be discussed here. The first is why it is important to analyse these cases. Second is the need for planned supervision structures. Third is the need to plan for emergencies.

## Why analyse fatalities

Brookes (2003a) makes the point that fatalities in outdoor education are rare and most of us will never deal with one. Lessons learnt from everyday outdoor education practice are essential to quality programmes. But fatalities can arise from a specific set of circumstances that are not necessarily recognised through common-sense or experience. There are patterns common to many programmes.

## Supervision

* Supervision is not just about student – staff ratios. It is about what staff are expected to do. What they understand their roles and responsibilities to be. Given all of the demands placed on them, what they are actually competent to do.
* There is a difference between supervision and expert judgement.
* The most striking area (in relation to fatalities) of loose or absent supervision (either planned or unplanned) is of teenage boys around moving water or steep drops.

There are several considerations for supervision.

* Outdoor education requires a special emphasis on supervision structures and practices, both during planned activities and in the spaces in between.
* There must be tight supervision around moving water or steep ground
* Periods of general supervision should be planned to take place where there is no steep ground or moving water (Brookes notes that it is probably not educationally desirable to have constant close supervision, but levels of supervision must be planned)

## Emergencies and rescues

Better planning for emergencies and rescue could have saved lives.

* Rescue or emergency situations involve a sudden change of state from normal operations. Situations can change very quickly from one where teachers feel comfortable to one they are uncomfortable in and have no experience of.
* Planning for a rescue or emergency requires deliberate attention.
* There is a strong case for calling assistance sooner rather than later. A precautionary view of any potentially serious incident should be taken.
* Emergency communication should be planned and tested.
* Know local organisations that operate in the area. They may understand the situation and be able to offer more immediate assistance.

## References

Brookes, A. (2003a). Outdoor education fatalities in Australia 1960–2002. Part 1. Summary of incidents and introduction to fatality analysis. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education, 7*(1), 20–5.

Brookes, A. (2003b). Outdoor education fatalities in Australia 1960–2002. Part 2. Contributing circumstances: supervision, first aid, and rescue. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education, 7*(2), 34–42.

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