

GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
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Human Attitudes that Lead to Suffering in the Backcountry (No. 8)

Not many of the so-called *accidents* in the outdoors are actually “acts of God” – totally unpredictable and capricious acts of harsh Mother Nature. Most of them have *human causes* – namely, particular attitudes of bravado or ignorance that place one in a position to have a disaster. In this series of short essays, we are exploring 10 different “**human attitudes that lead to suffering in the backcountry.**” Think deeply about each one – reflect on your own experiences, and prepare yourself and your group mentally before departing, so you don’t get added to the stories that follow.

Human attitude No. 8 that leads to suffering in the backcountry *Hurry, for any number of reasons*

G. Pecoste advised: “*Go carefully lads, be careful; a single moment’s enough to make one dead for the whole of one’s life.*”

In November of 1995, a 13-year old boy suffered open fractures of the femur and the humerus when he fell 75 feet while running along the top of a sandstone fin in Arches National Park.* In Yosemite, Mark Sorenson earned a ride in an evacuation helicopter with a broken foot when he chose to jump off a steep section instead of down-climbing; he was on belay, but was out-climbing his rope. His evaluation: “*I would say my [biggest] mistake was being impatient.*”** The *physical act of hurrying* requires greater skill and dexterity

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than going slowly, and misjudging this can have catastrophic consequences. Physical hurrying can also place greater stresses on equipment (climbing anchors, etc.) Adam Holenberg's rappel rope severed at a sharp point, in part because of his high speed bounding technique; three significant fractures will remind him of this error in years to come.***

Sometime, hurry is more in the *mental realm* – trying to save time, racing against dark, or attempting to squeeze in one more ski run, or one more climbing pitch. Sam Gitchel rappelled off the end of his rope because the ends were not equalized; later he reflected:

*“...several things may have contributed to my haste. This was to be our last climb of the day and as the sun began to sink in the sky, we could feel the late afternoon chill beginning to move in ... As I built the anchor and set up the rope, I was in a rather uncomfortable position. I was eager to get down and try the climb. The rope was moderately tangled, so I tossed it down, hoping it would straighten itself out. But I forgot to even out the ends of the rope.” *****

Narratives from numerous other epics include the common theme of “*late in the day*” or “*trying to get down before dark*.” Mental hurrying tempts us to skip significant safety steps, make faulty assumptions, or disregard perfunctory precautions. It also decreases our situational awareness and input radar, so we give ourselves less time to pay attention to navigational cues, or process the implications of weather changes, or human fatigue. In May of 1995, two stranded hikers who had intentionally left the trail in an attempt to *take a shortcut* back to the rim of Kilauea (Hawaii Volcanoes National Park) became lost and began yelling for help after wandering around for three hours.*

The irony is that, when we create an incident due to hurry, we have actually defeated the very reason for hurrying in the first place. Wilderness First Responders say often: “*Slow is safe, and safe is fast*.” This is even and particularly true in emergency situations. If we are trying to hurry an evacuation along the path, and end up stumbling one of our rescuers off the trail into another injury, we have compounded the situation, and ultimately slowed the entire enterprise exponentially. If we are rushing out for help for an injury, and in trying a shortcut, end up lost, we have created a navigational epic to complicate the initial incident. In short, there is rarely a reason to hurry in the backcountry!

**Death, Daring, and Disaster: Search and Rescue in the National Parks*, Charles R. Farabee, Jr., Taylor Trade Publishing., 2005, pp. 439, 442.

***Accidents in North American Mountaineering – 2005*, American Alpine Club, p. 53.

****Accidents in North American Mountaineering – 2006*, American Alpine Club, p. 59.

*****Accidents in North American Mountaineering – 2000*, American Alpine Club, p. 51.

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