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THE OBJECTIVE HAZARDS OF CULTURE: RISK MANAGEMENT IN AN INTERNATIONAL SETTING

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INTRODUCTION

When the wilderness is abroad, the biggest challenges may be getting to the trailhead—as many mountaineering expeditions have found on their approach to their objective. In addition, the definition of what is “wilderness” may be different (and usually is), adding to the challenge of managing risk in a new setting. While risk management is well understood in the wilderness, a sometimes unexpected hazard can arise in an international setting—cultural and other differences—which make the risk management process potentially more difficult. Adding to this, the skills, attributes, and habits of proficient and accomplished wilderness instructors may not apply in an international setting, as the familiar challenges of the wilderness (rock, river and mountain) are added to by the fluid and dynamic challenges of different cultures, languages and infrastructure. However, the habits and approach to risk management used in the wilderness can be adapted to an international and cross-cultural setting by taking into consideration changes in culture, context and unique hazards. This essay seeks to examine how risk management in an international setting might differ from risk management in a home-culture setting. It will discuss judgment and risk management, with a special emphasis on practical suggestions for

international programs. While this comes out of experience in risk management in developing countries, much of it can be applied to programs in any international or cross-cultural setting. This essay is not intended to be a comprehensive literature review on risk management in study abroad or in wilderness education, but to help risk managers who may be dealing with international programs think about some of the potential additional challenges they will face.

BACKGROUND

This essay is informed by the experience of the International Sustainable Development Studies Institute program (ISDSI), an initiative of Kalamazoo College, based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The ISDSI programs are a fusion of cross-cultural learning with outdoor experiential education for American college and university students. The academic core is focused on people, the environment and development, with deep immersion into local cultures and communities. ISDSI has developed "expedition field courses," which are month-long block courses (four per semester), exploring specific issues in depth, such as political ecology and watershed management, island cultures and ecologies, etc. A large part of the time these courses are in remote areas, such as villages, islands or other "non-traditional" study abroad locations. In addition to the academic focus, this requires competency in two areas: cross cultural skills (language, knowledge of local norms, etc.) as well as the expedition skills to travel safely (leadership, technical skills like backpacking or sea kayaking, etc.). This combination of elements led us to spend a great deal of time studying wilderness-based risk management and applying it to the different demands and context of an international and cross-cultural setting. Even with urban-based courses, risk management is an important part of what we do, and an essential skill we, in turn, teach our students. In the fall of 2002 we worked with NOLS Professional Training on a risk management audit, which helped to refine and improve ISDSI's risk management plan and procedures. Now a core part of what we are doing is taking risk management principles from the wilderness and applying those management techniques to dealing with cross-cultural hazards.

WHAT CHANGES ABROAD?

There are several aspects of risk management that change when one goes abroad, from the more obvious to the less obvious. These can be broadly grouped into changes in *context* and changes in *culture*.

Contextual changes: Four key changes in context have a bearing on risk management in an international setting: language, culture, expectations, and infrastructure. *Language* shifts are sometimes the most critical, since if the local language is different than that of the leaders and/or participants, all communication outside the group will have at least one party using a second language. Key questions leaders and risk managers in these contexts need to consider are how they are going to ensure clear communication, from logistics (when you're getting picked up), to emergency communications (who is going to understand you if you talk on the radio?). Even when one shares a common language, key differences in dialect (from American to Australian) are important to at least be aware of in advance. *Culture* changes (described more fully below) are important to consider, even if the interaction with local people may be limited to the pickup from the airport. Culture shapes legal systems, expectations about time, and other factors. *Expectations* which we have about specific contextual "facts" (e.g. everyone has a phone at home) need to be critically examined to help figure out areas where we might expect something ("If I find a house, I can make a phone call.") which may not be the case in that specific setting. Our expectations about what a "hospital" is, for example, may be significantly different from the local expectations ("hospital" may not be equal to "doctors present" for example). The time to find out the difference is, of course, before you have an incident, not in the middle of one. Finally, *infrastructure* can be considerably different in an international setting, from different types of traffic lights and road systems, to phones, to the existence or capacity of local emergency services. As we venture into the wilderness, it is often to get away from the trappings of our high tech industrialized world. We do, however, usually expect that the support systems of that sort of infrastructure will be available for us as we work to manage risk. For example, when looking at evacuation times, the seasonal nature of roads needs to be examined. A student on a program once asked, when examining the author's 4WD truck (with knobby tires, a high suspension system, air-intake snorkel, winch, petrol cans, roof rack, fog lights, hi-lift jack, etc.), "Do you go off-roading a lot?" Nope—that is what you need for the *roads* some places in Thailand!

Cultural shifts: While language is a part of the shift in culture, important cultural shifts also include definitions of risk, wilderness, time and distance, as well as how one thinks of spatial relationships. *Definitions of risk* can include different understanding of how things happen (fate vs. free will), as well as different understandings and assessments of probability or severity, based on cultural values. What is *wilderness* can vary greatly, since while people in North America think of "wilderness" as having no human presence, in many places in the world, people have lived in the "wilderness" for hundreds (or thousands) of years (as they did in North America until the recent past). Because of this, the risks of operating in the "wilderness" will be different, changing both the resources available (a whole village may be able to help with carrying out an injured participant) as well as the hazards (not everyone will be a friendly "native" as is often assumed). Conceptions of *time and distance* are shaped by culture, as most travelers learn. How this might impact risk management plans, as well as create unfamiliar hazards needs to be considered. Local ideas of time may not only leave a party waiting at the trailhead for a pickup, but can impact how long a reputed "short and easy" section of trail may take. Finally, *spatial relationships* vary across cultures, and while having maps can help to understand the terrain from an "objective" viewpoint, there are a lot of resources available through talking with local people. For example, the Akha, a tribal group in mainland Southeast Asia, includes spatial relationships in their language as a matter of course (who is where on the mountainside), while other groups may orient things to landmarks rather than North or South.

Getting away from people into the "wilderness" doesn't eliminate the risks of culture, as you are still embedded in the wider cross-cultural and international context. A key part of risk management in an international setting would be to take the above contextual and cultural risks (and others), and follow through how they impact your risk management plan. How do things change when you can't understand local emergency response personnel? How do things change when there *are* no emergency response personnel? What assumptions (from "wilderness" to defining "risk") do you have to reevaluate in an international and cross cultural setting? Each of these challenges can be managed and compensated for, but like with traditional risk management plans, they need to be identified and examined in advance.

THE NATURE OF RISK

What is risk? How do accidents happen? Priest and Gass (1997) argue that accidents occur when accident potential is realized. Accident potential is the overlap between environmental dangers (objective dangers, outside human control) and human dangers (subjective, or within human control). The probability of an accident "is greatly influenced by the relative strengths and numbers of dangers present, as well as the proactive, active and reactive countermeasures you take." (Priest and Gass, 1997, p. 88-89) It is the *interaction* between these objective and subjective factors which leads to accidents. In the wilderness this might be the combination of a steep snow slope and deteriorating weather (environmental dangers) with an inadequately equipped group (human dangers). In an international situation, this could be seen in the environmental danger of being in a foreign city (driving in heavy traffic on the "wrong" side of the road) and the human danger of participants not paying attention.

The distinction between objective and subjective dangers can be extended from the wilderness into international and cross-cultural settings, because it helps to identify where the risks are (environmental or human) and what the response should be (avoiding, removing or dealing with risk). Rather than lumping all "dangers" into one category, this distinction is useful for international programs as it allows risk management plans to define and deal with very different types of dangers, which (as discussed above) may include cultural or contextual hazards that are significantly different than the "home" context.

Graydon and Handson's classic way of assessing accident potential is useful in evaluating risks and cross-cultural hazards. "You can look at risk assessment as a kind of formula. It can be helpful to think of it something like this: risk = severity x probability x time. This simply means that your risk is multiplied when there is an increase in any of the three risk variables: the likely severity of any accident, the probability an accident will occur, and the length of time at risk." (Graydon and Hanson, 1997, p. 442) This model allows us to analyze discreet elements of risk (severity, probability and time) which are often conflated. For example, this would tell us that the risk profile of a short versus long program is inherently different, due to the increase in the time variable. This is why one can "get away with" lots of short-term trips (reducing the time variable) even if the probability of an incident is high. This also points out how longer-term programs should be more careful in trying to reduce probability and/or severity since they significantly increase the time variable.

We have found this model a useful way of helping to break apart and analyze discreet elements of risk. A good examples comes from a time when we were working with local tribal guides to lead a group of students through a new area. After extensive discussions (conducted in Thai and Bak'er'yaw) one of two possible trails was selected as being "safer" in the judgment of the local counterparts. However, once far down the selected trail, it became clear that "safe" didn't mean what we thought it did—as the trail was narrow and along the top of an extremely steep slope high above a river. As the instructors were rigging a rope over some of the more difficult sections, we were wondering how bad the other "unsafe" trail must be. Later on, we went back and found that the other trail—while muddy and slippery—was only 2-3 meters above the river, not 200-300 meters above it! That night in the village, talking over the incident, we realized that "safe" to local people was referring to probability (the chance of falling), but not related to potential severity (the consequences of a fall). Thus, they had judged a dry but narrow trail "safer" than a wide muddy trail, as there was less chance of slipping and falling. However, the consequences of a fall on the "safe" trail were severe, while the consequences of a fall on the "unsafe" trail were minor. Using Graydon and Hanson's formula helped us to break apart different areas of risk, and understand how different cultures and languages interpret what is, and is not, safe. Now, when talking with local people about trail conditions, we explicitly focus on probability and severity as distinct aspects of the trail—instead of lumping everything together into "safe" or "unsafe" based on local perceptions.

An additional area of risk management with which international programs must consider encompasses the very different values and expectations regarding avoiding risk of other cultures. If a program is operating in a culture where the dominate cultural belief is that "fate" determines outcomes (what is going to happen will happen regardless of what we do), then prevention will not be valued or practiced to the same extent as it might be in a culture where agency is given priority (we can influence the outcome of events by our actions). Some cultures may not place a value on proactive risk management, which will make the job of managing risk effectively in that context very difficult. If the program administrator comes from a culture where prevention is valued very highly (as in the US), but working in a culture where fate is seen as determining outcomes (as is the case in many Asian cultures), then the host culture itself is, in a sense, a subjective hazard and/or contributing factor. Our expectations about common risk-avoiding behavior (such as wearing a seat belt) should be carefully examined within the context

of international and cross-cultural settings, as risk avoidance may not be valued where we are running our programs. The dangers of working in a culture like the US, where common wisdom tells us that we are one hundred percent the "masters of our fate" is left as an exercise to the reader!

These cultural and contextual differences mean that international programs need to identify areas of potential risk exposure that would be different from where they operate in their home environments. Practically, this means leaders of international programs need to be questioning their own—and others—definitions of “safety” as well as “risk.” This also means extra due diligence is needed, from inspecting vehicles (since “safe” may only mean that the engine runs, not that there are seatbelts), to understanding local languages and customs.

LEADERSHIP AND JUDGMENT IN INTERNATIONAL SETTINGS

> “Leadership means timely, appropriate actions that guide and support your group to set and achieve realistic goals. Great leaders create an environment that inspires individuals and groups to achieve their full potential.” (NOLS, 1999)

Central to good risk management plans are leaders who are capable of carrying them out. Leadership for international programs is often not given much thought beyond who is available or next in line to direct a program or has the necessary technical skills. While we know that leadership makes a big difference in how successful the group is, as well as how safe the group is during its sojourn abroad, cross-cultural skills and sensitivity can be as or more important to success in an international setting, especially with a multi-cultural team. Instructors and leaders need to be evaluated on how sensitive they are to cross-cultural issues (not how sensitive they *think* they are). This can be very difficult, as it is easier to watch someone supervise a climbing site and evaluate how well they check the safety systems than to see how well they listen to and interpret people from another culture. Strong technical skills are, of course important, but the soft skills can be even more critical in an international and cross-cultural setting.

We have found that consciously cultivating leadership skills in our staff, as well as teaching these skills to students, have contributed towards better risk management. Building on our work with NOLS Professional Training, we have used the seven core leadership skills

identified by NOLS as a way to evaluate staff and understand where we need to focus extra attention in our international and cross-cultural context: expedition behavior, competence, communication, judgment and decision making, tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, self awareness, and vision and action (NOLS, 1999; Harvey, 1999). There are, of course, other ways to talk about and develop leadership, but we have found these seven skills a good way to think through different components of leading groups in an international and cross-cultural setting.

Expedition behavior refers to being courteous and caring for each other in a group. For a good team of students or mountain climbers to work well together, they need good expedition behavior. This behavior needs to be modeled by the leaders and become normative for the group. In a wilderness setting this might mean the faster hikers stopping early and to brew hot cups of tea on a cold day for the slower members of the team. In international programs, this might mean those students with a better grasp of the local language working with students whose language skills are not as good to help them buy food in the market. It can be something as simple as helping someone to lift a heavy bag onto a bus. Expedition behavior, in short, are those actions and attitudes that keep a group working well together, the sometimes small but always significant acts that contribute to a good expedition. Good "EB" is especially important when dealing with jet lag, culture shock, and the many adjustments that go into a journey abroad.

Leadership competence refers to technical competence for the task at hand. Priest and Gass (p.76) identify three types of competencies that leaders need to have. "Generic competency" refers to skills necessary for all activities, such as first aid, trip planning, awareness, etc. "Metaskills" refers to areas that combine hard and soft skills, such as leadership style, problem solving, judgment and decision making, etc. In addition to these skills, leaders need to have "specific competencies" unique to the particular activities. While in wilderness education this might mean technical skills like kayaking or rock climbing, in an international and cross-cultural setting, these skills might include competency in the local language, ability and knowledge of local laws, transportation systems, and other essentials of daily life.

For international programs perhaps the most important "competency" is cultural sensitivity and understanding, which directly leads to appropriate behavior in a culture. The more sensitive one is to the norms of a culture, the greater the likelihood that one will behave in culturally-appropriate ways. Cultural knowledge and sensitivity (or lack of the same) directly and indirectly influences the safety of the group in two ways. First, culturally-appropriate

knowledge and behavior can help avoid potentially dangerous situations. Second, culturally-inappropriate behavior can, conversely, create an unsafe situation.

An example we know about helps illustrate this point. Another program had a group of participants in a village homestay. All of the participants were asleep in the home of a local village leader when the wife of the village headman woke up the group leader at 3 AM, and asked for some money. When asked why, the leader found out that armed drug traffickers were outside, demanding payment—money the village headman did not have. Because he had grown up in the region, the leader was able to sit down with the village headman and the drug traffickers, and help defuse the situation. Because the leader was very calm and able to understand not only the language but the underlying cultural issues, he was successful in keeping his group safe. Not all situations involve angry drug smugglers with AK-47s in the middle of the night, but simple tasks, from getting wilderness permits to making sure the local contact will answer the phone in an emergency all depend on cultural sensitivity and understanding of local norms.

Cultural sensitivity, knowledge and behavior, or "cultural competency," is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a safe international program. Conversely, cultural incompetence can turn an otherwise safe situation into an unsafe one. For example, by being loud and attracting attention to the group, a leader who doesn't understand local norms of behavior can place his group in a dangerous situation. While this can be directly dangerous in village settings by offending local people (especially during festivals and other events), this can indirectly increase the risk exposure of a group by raising their profile and highlighting that they don't know how to operate within cultural norms. Groups which *do* understand local cultures and norms are perceived (correctly) as having better resources and relationships, which act to protect the group.

In groups, there is a second level in which cultural sensitivity is important. The *modeling* of culturally competent or incompetent behavior becomes critical to the safety of students abroad, as students will look to their leader and model their own behavior after the leader's. If the modeling is not appropriate, when the students are on their own they may end up in potentially dangerous situations due to their cultural ignorance. Likewise, they may be in a safe situation and turn it into an unsafe one through cultural insensitivity. In other words, cultural sensitivity enables the group leader to safely lead his or her group, and by modeling culturally-appropriate behavior the leader enables the students to be safer when they are on their own in the

host culture. Conversely, someone who is culturally insensitive is dangerous in two ways: directly when leading the group, and indirectly, when participants are on their own. For example, correctly understanding and modeling culturally appropriate dress and behavior on the part of the leaders can help the participants understand how to act in a way which will help them to blend into the local culture, rather than potentially being taken advantage of if they "stick out" and draw attention to themselves.

Concerns over cultural competency do not just extend to people abroad. International programs often are led by local people and by experts from the host country. However, one cannot assume a citizen of the country will understand and be able to operate in a specific local culture. City people may have little understanding of village culture and may approach it with preconceptions and stereotypes. Likewise, people from one region of the country may not understand the culture or language in another, and members of ethnic-majority groups may not understand the culture or language of ethnic minorities. It is important for risk managers and group leaders to understand these differences and develop ways of compensating, for example, by finding local people rather than relying only on people from the capital city.

The leadership skill of *communication*, the ability to communicate and listen, is often more difficult in an international context than in a wilderness setting. Participants and leaders often use a second (or third) language, and even when they share a common language there may be regional or cultural differences in nuance, meaning and understanding. Not only are communications skills important within the group, in the context of international programs, good communication skills extend to the people and culture outside the group. Cultural differences also impact communication, because they influence behavior beyond words. For example, in Thai culture what is not said can be more important than what is said. Even someone fluent in the Thai language who does not understand the importance of what is left unsaid would have a hard time communicating and listening accurately. Thus, someone planning an excursion into the Thai countryside may be told things are fine, but what they are *not* told may be the key factor in deciding if the expedition is going to be safe or not. Recognizing this is happening requires both cultural competency and good communication skills.

Another example in Northern Thailand helps illustrate this point. After planning a trip to study specific mountain forest ecosystems, linking together several villages and deciding on an itinerary, the instructor team talked it over with local people knowledgeable about the area.

While the local contacts agreed that it was a good trip, and said that the villages and the route were safe, the instructor team noticed that they talked more about some villages than others. After further discussion within the instructor team, they agreed that the villagers seemed to be reluctant to talk against the plan the instructor team had already decided on. After the most senior instructor left so that the more junior instructors were able to have a more "candid" talk with the villagers, the feedback from the villagers was very different. This talk revealed that the villagers did not think it was a good plan after all, but out of respect did not what to contradict a more "senior" person—respect being a key value in Thai culture. Subsequent to this talk, the route and the course of study were revised. Three key factors allowed the instructor team to reveal the "unsaid" information. First, all of the members of the team were sensitive to both verbal and non-verbal communication, and were able to pick up on what was not being said about the villages in question. Second, the instructor team had enough rapport to be able to honestly talk through what issues—cultural or otherwise—might be influencing what they were hearing. Finally, the senior instructor had enough insight and humility to know that his presence was causing problems—and trusted the other instructors to figure out what was going on without him there.

Judgment and decision making refer to using appropriate decision-making styles for the task at hand. "Decision making should reflect the gravity and urgency of the decision being made" (Harvey, 1999, p. 173). This means both how one makes a decision and, also, when a specific type of decision making is appropriate. For example, autocratic decision making may be appropriate in a crisis, but consensus-based decision making might be appropriate in other situations. Judgment and decision making require correct assessment of subjective and objective dangers. As discussed earlier, subjective and objective dangers can combine, and one needs to recognize these combinations and guard against poor judgment.

> "Judgment is something that can be learned, but only with reflection. Two people who go through the same experience will have two different results. The person who does not reflect on her experience will miss the opportunity to learn and develop her judgment. That person will make the same mistakes over and over and never develop the judgment it takes to be a good leader. The person who takes a moment after a consequential mistake to think things over and reflect on the lesson learned and seek input from outside sources will develop good judgment in a hurry." (Harvey, 1999, p. 173)

A key part of developing judgment is seeking input from outside sources—in this case local people familiar with the environment, culture and geography of the places we go. For example, a sea kayaking trip would benefit enormously from talking over weather, tides and currents with local fishermen. Where interacting with local cultures, having local people help the group understand what things mean from *their* perspective is invaluable.

Another key leadership skill is *tolerance for adversity and uncertainty*, an ability to work under pressure, keep calm, not complain, and deal with the inherent stress of leading. Good leaders learn to endure and enjoy hard work and challenge, and "live in rhythm with what you cannot control; control what you can" (NOLS, 1999). As with cultural competency, this is a skill that can be modeled to participants, helping them to develop tolerance for situations which they might be having a hard time and struggling. While in the wilderness this might mean keeping a positive attitude while hiking in a rainstorm, in an international setting this might extend to difficult travel situations, unclear expectations from host families and many of the aspects of cross-cultural immersion. Sitting in a tribal home around the fire, we have noticed our students get nervous because they don't understand what tribal people are talking about—even when just talking among themselves. By modeling tolerance, our instructors can help the group adapt to not knowing what is going on. While our instructor teams are multi-lingual, if we are in a situation where there is a language being used that we don't understand, rather than constantly interrupting for translations (not tolerating uncertainty), we let the conversations flow naturally, modeling comfort in a situation where we don't know exactly what is being said. The instructors also demonstrate judgment by knowing when to interrupt (such as with a safety related discussion) and when not to (such as when the villagers are talking around the kitchen fire while cooking).

Two final leadership skills are *self-awareness* and *vision and action*. Self-awareness is knowing your self and your reactions, strengths and weaknesses. In the context of international and cross-cultural programs, self-awareness can help a leader understand his or her limits, recognize fatigue, burn out, or when assistance is needed. An important part of this is knowing your own culture, and how you react to situations compared to the host culture. For example, in Bak'er'yaw culture, when speaking about a sad or uncomfortable situation, people will smile. Without understanding this reaction, it would be easy to misinterpret both what is said and the

body language of the people you're speaking with. Self-awareness also helps you to see how your behavior impacts others—critical both with host cultures and in a multi-cultural team.

Vision and action refer to knowing what needs to be done and how to do it, knowing where to go and how to get there. Just as in home-country programs, this can be enhanced in international programs by careful pre-planning and program design. However, additional challenges exist in the international setting, as pre-program visits can be difficult and/or expensive, and all the factors which will impact a trip may not be known. Seemingly simple tasks (like getting fuel for the stoves) can become a major epic abroad, and leaders with strong skills of vision and action will be able to have contingency plans for when things inevitably go awry.

Choosing a leader for an international program can be difficult. In addition to technical competency, a leader must be competent in basic leadership and risk management skills, and strong cross-cultural skills. How does the person deal with stress? Is she "cool headed" in a crisis? Does he get rattled easily? The ability to handle stress is, possibly, the most important factor in safe outcomes. As we know, risk management plans are worthless if, in situations of high stress, one cannot execute those plans.

SAFETY COUNTERMEASURES

Risk management strategies can be grouped within what Priest and Gass describe as "safety countermeasures" (1997, p. 93). They describe three types of safety countermeasures that are useful in the face of both objective and subjective dangers. Proactive/primary measures are procedures carried out in advance, such as "reconnaissance trips," orientation, site pre-visits, training, and dissemination of written information. Active/secondary measures are actions during a program, as well as during an accident, such as first aid, evacuation, and the on-site recording of incidents. Reactive/tertiary measures are follow-up actions after an accident, investigations and final documentation. These can be extended beyond use in the wilderness into international programs by focusing on appropriate modifications to pre-program, program and post-program procedures.

Proactive/pre-program measures involve preparing any documentation, policies and procedures before the start of the program. For example, specific procedures, known as "accepted field practices" (AFPs) or "standard operating procedures" need to be developed

beforehand to ensure a consistent risk management plan. These can be quite detailed, depending on the activity, but are in place so that field staff members understand what to do. For example, loading and unloading from a ferry onto smaller "long-tail" boats in the ocean can be done safely, but clear directions on what is OK (passing bags by hand) and what is not OK (jumping down into the smaller boat with a large backpack) need to be in place before one is in the situation. In an international setting, these take on added importance, and need to include cultural issues as well. There are obvious differences (some cultures don't shake hands, for example) as well as less obvious ones. If you are going to be interacting with government officials, for example, are there may be certain expectations in terms of how you should dress, how to conduct business or ask for help in an emergency. Other things might not be as critical, but are still important. For example, in the villages in Thailand, if we are making a donation to a village or paying a guide, we place the money in an envelope first. While not required, culturally it is seen as more polite, and helps build positive relationships with local people.

An important part of pre-program risk management planning may involve reconnaissance trips to field sites. When setting up a new program this can be an involved process, taking several days and involving a number of field staff members. In an international setting this can be especially important, as it give you time to assess contextual and cultural risks which may differ from that in your home country. Our trip-planning documentation includes writing down the state of available medical care, the condition of roads, local contacts, evacuation plans, photographing key sites, and a great deal of other relevant information. These trips also help in figuring out logistics and timing, as well as building and renewing relationships with people. We often have found that, as we are evaluating relative risks during a reconnaissance trip, we find ways of simplifying a field study so that the study becomes academically stronger and safer. Even in areas where we have been many times, often at least some members of the staff team will go in advance of the students in order to see if anything has changed and if there are new risks or new resources. In developing countries this is especially important, as things can change dramatically in a short amount of time—roads might wash out, phones might be available in a village, etc.

Because of the dynamic nature of the environment, many programs keep course logs or journals, day-to-day records of the program kept by the leader or instructor. Course logs provide the instructor or leader of the group a chance to stop and record significant events during the day.

They do not need to take a lot of time, but are they useful in terms of overall record keeping, and for helping program coordinators at the office in-country know what is going on in the different field courses. Important changes since the reconnaissance visit can be noted, concerns with specific students and other issues all have a place in the course logs. More important, they provide institutional memory, and allow us to keep tabs on any necessary changes in AFPs or other risk management related issues. Reviewing course logs with local people—from national park or forestry officials to villagers, can be very useful, as they can point out near-misses, or other useful information that you would not be able to collect on your own.

In addition to course logs a designated leader (field staff) is responsible for filling out incident reports if someone is injured. Unlike wilderness education, our incident (cultural or accident incidents) and near miss reports (an event where a cultural incident or accident was narrowly averted) incorporate cultural "incidents" as well. For example, we might record an incident of a student offending a host family in a village, and what we had to do to deal with that. Later trips to the same village can follow-up on the incident, and help to continue to build strong relationships.

Reactive, or post-program procedures, assess how a completed course went, and include writing up any necessary reports as well as debriefing both students and staff. We review risk management procedures, note any necessary changes, revise and update AFPs, and begin the process of planning for the next course. Student and staff evaluations are a very important part of this process. Walking students through the program chronologically, and then involving the students in the evaluation and assessment, with the goal of improving the program, has been essential. Once students realize that we are serious about listening to their input (which we establish early on in debriefings during the course), they are invested as stakeholders in improving the programs. Some of the best ideas for field courses have come out of student debriefing and review. Likewise, reviewing a course and debriefing staff as well as local villagers is critical, especially after a difficult student group or if there have been any incidents during the program. Having the course log to consult at debriefing is valuable, as we can recall together what happened on a course, and decide what went well and what may be improved. In an international setting, this needs to include members of the host culture (ideally as instructors or staff) to identify any areas of cultural concern. For example, certain areas of the forest may be "off limits" if there are ritual or other uses for the land (e.g. sacred groves, abodes of the spirits,

etc.). It is very important to know about and be able to recognize these places—in a sense cultural "leave no trace."

MEDICAL CARE AND RESCUE

Assessing medical care in any country is critical, including local emergency services and hospitals. As professionals working in an international setting know, emergency services we take for granted in North America often do not exist in developing countries. Key aspects and assumptions about rescue and medical care may be different in developing countries as well. For example, in a rescue or evacuation, what resource do you have? Not only may helicopters not be available, roads on the map may not be in good repair, or only be seasonal. While hospital services in most capital cities are excellent, what about regional hospitals? Is extended care available? Do emergency personnel know how to care for someone with a suspected spinal injury? Does the emergency room know? Carefully examining our assumptions about what happens once we turn someone over to more highly trained medical professionals is important, as those assumptions may not hold up in a very different context. An important part of planning for a trip should include how the trip—even if self sufficient in a wilderness setting—is going to be able to interface with existing medical care in the host country.

THE LURE OF TECHNOLOGY

There are seductive enabling technologies which many programs consider purchasing in order to make things "safer." However, it is well known that judgment and experience are more valuable than equipment and gear. Just as some backcountry travelers assume a cell phone can get them out of trouble (and as a result of this thinking take greater risks), we do not assume advanced telecommunications or other equipment will be of use in a crisis. While we carry satellite phones, global positioning systems, digital cell phones, radios and other equipment as necessary, our risk management plan includes contingencies in case the technology fails. All of these things can augment a risk management plan, but they are not substitutes for a well-trained team and a clear understanding on the limitations of the equipment. We have learned not to be dependent on equipment but to be prepared to improvise and "make do" with what we have. Gear breaks and batteries go dead. It is easy to think that once you've bought a satellite phone, things will be safer. However, whom are you going to call? Do you have an agreement with a

helicopter medical-evacuation service or the local military? While technology is helpful, it has to fit within a wider risk management plan to be of use. An added challenge internationally, is that in developing countries the *infrastructure* may fail.

SHARING THE RISK MANAGEMENT PROCESS WITH STUDENTS

The goal of wilderness education is not merely to lead students through a landscape, but to teach them to be competent to live and travel in a very different setting than they are used to. Most wilderness education programs equip students to be independent by teaching risk management principles as a part of its program. This is done through concepts such as "leader of the day," in which a student shares leadership tasks with the staff team, as well as through opening up decision-making and assessments to the students where appropriate. In an international setting, this can be expanded beyond the trailhead to include cultural and contextual considerations which impact the trip.

Sharing the reasons behind risk management decisions is important for student safety. "[T]he leader of an inexperienced party may mentally conduct a flawless evaluation of a hazard and determine that conditions are safe. But unless the leader shares the thinking that went into this decision, the members of the party may falsely assume that similar situations are always without hazard." (Graydon and Henson, 1997, p. 443) We miss an important teaching opportunity if we do not share the reasons for risk management decisions with students while leading them. Obviously, not all risk management decision processes need to be, or should be, shared with students. However, as we have shared *appropriate* decision making with students, we have found that students become more competent, skilled and reliable. For example, working with the students through a structured decision making tree while deciding on the next days activities in a village helps the students to know more about what is going on, and to understand how to make decisions when they are on their own. Within an international setting, this can be especially important as it is an opportunity to discuss and deal with student preconceptions and potential bias. Villagers are not "quaint" or "idyllic"—they have real lives and are often struggling to survive in a very challenging environment. How we, coming from a relatively more privileged position globally, impact those situations are important to talk through with students.

Both participants and instructors can get into, and out of, potentially dangerous situations. And, as a result of no harm coming to them, it can be difficult for program leaders, to know what is, and what is not, a dangerous situation. Over time, this increases the risk exposure of a program. "You can be misled into accepting dangerous levels of risk by simple phenomenon that might be termed nonevent feedback: nothing bad happened last time; therefore, nothing bad will happen this time. Nonevent feedback occurs when we do not experience the potential consequences of our actions" (Graydon and Hanson, 1997, p. 443). Nonevent feedback usually is applied to situations where someone engages in dangerous behavior and gets away with it, such as crossing an avalanche-prone slope, but not triggering an avalanche. Each time there is a "nonevent," the person is lead to believe that the behavior is safe, when in fact it is not. People abroad often are part of nonevent feedback loops, where they unknowingly engage in behavior that is dangerous, but for some reason nothing happens. Opening up the risk management process to students by debriefing, especially after a "critical incident" where something has gone wrong or there was a near miss, is crucial to helping students overcome the dangers of the "nonevent feedback" that they often experience. Including local people in debriefing and evaluation sessions can help participants and instructors understand better possible "nonevents" that were in fact near misses. One reason this is important is that local people may be looking out for groups without the group knowing, from clearing the path of dangerous snakes to choosing a "better" beach to camp at when the real reason is avoiding a coming storm.

Sharing the risk management process with participants has helped them to understand how to assess risk, develop contingency plans, make good decisions, and how to learn safely and effectively in a new culture. We work on this with students throughout the semester. When the end of semester break comes, we require students to apply what they have learned: they are mentored by our field staff and are required to write risk-management plans for when they are on break. For example, students planning to travel to Southern Thailand by boat had to think through, and write up, what they would do if the boat was over-crowded, how they would check for life jackets, and what they would do in an emergency. On their return from break, students excitedly shared how their risk management plans kept them from getting into possibly dangerous situations, and how the plans made their travels easier, since they didn't have to "make things up on the spot." Instead they were guided by their planning. This experience

positively impacted the students' academic program. In the second semester, when these students started their internships, they were well prepared to be independent and responsible learners.

CONCLUSION

Many people perceive rock climbing as a high-risk activity. However, as borne out in accident statistics and analysis of person-hours per activity, there is a much higher risk of being killed or injured on the drive to the cliff than during the actual climb. We perceive traveling at high speeds in vehicles as "low risk" because we do it every day as a necessary part of our lives, with nonevent feedback reinforcing the idea that cars are "safe." Rock climbing, however, is not a routine activity for many people, and for someone unfamiliar with the modern safety and protection systems that are a part of rock climbing, it seems like a dangerous thing to do. So too with going abroad. Some people perceive that *any* trip abroad is "dangerous," while ignoring the high levels of crime in many regions of North America.

The dangers are not necessarily *from the* culture, but mediated through culture. That is, culture insensitivity won't (necessarily) put you in harm's way from people, but can lead to not knowing important contextual and/or environmental facts. Local people are key, and have lived and worked in these environments for years. Good and sensitive relationships can be your key to managing risk—from learning local weather patterns and seasonal variation, to specific animals and other hazards. "Culture" is not just something you have to deal with on the way in or out of an international wilderness expedition. Culture has shaped the landscape, as the environment has also shaped the culture in turn. An appreciation and understanding of the local context and culture is the key to international risk management. Risk management in an international setting is more than just checking the government warnings about a country or picking up a travel guidebook. Cultural competence, local relationships, and deep contextual knowledge are as important as appropriate equipment, technical competency, and a detailed risk management plan.

NOTES

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Some of the specific examples are composites or modified to preserve confidentiality.

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APPENDIX A: International Program Risk Management Questions

The following are a non-inclusive list of questions that programs with an international and/or cross-cultural component may need to consider. This is intended as a starting point for reviewing risk management issues in an international context, as each program will need to add to or delete from this list as fits their specific context.

One way to use these is to take your existing risk management plan and list each component on a flip chart or large whiteboard. Then determine what each component depends on, including what those things depend on—working backward in a "chain" of assumptions. Try and be focused (one component per session, for example) and exhaustive (be detail oriented). Once you have the chain of dependencies worked out, you can determine if those factors exist in the international or cross-cultural setting you will be working in. For example, medical evacuations generally assume that more competent medical professionals will come to assist in the evacuation. What if they don't exist in the country you are operating in? What about when the patient gets to the hospital? What do you assume will happen then? (and so on).

The following questions are designed to help in that process, and help you being to review and revise your risk management plan for an international setting.

Context changes

- What language is used in the country? Are there different dialects in each region? Are your local contacts fluent in the language(s) necessary to operate there?
- Do your local contacts understand what you are saying and communicating (written or spoken)? How are you going to ensure that you understand each other?
- What language is used by the emergency services in the country? Do you have someone who can translate technical words into the appropriate language (e.g. in the case of reporting a medical emergency over the radio)?
- What differences are there in terms of legal expectations and norms? What differences (if any) exist in laws and duties? For example, while the "good Samaritan" law protects people who stop to help an injured third party in some countries, do those laws exist in the county were you will be working? What are the laws regarding medical care? Is your WFR trained instructor going to be put in jail for giving a sick villager an aspirin?
- What differences are there in terms of time expectations? How precise do you have to be? What are the local norms for "acceptable" lateness, etc.?
- List, as much as possible, common expectations you have in your current risk management plan. What *unstated* expectations are there in your plan? Do you expect that houses have electricity and phones? That hospitals have doctors? Next, examine those expectations in your country of operation. How many apply there? If they do not, what are you going to do about it?
- What key differences are there in terms of infrastructure? What are the roads like? Are they seasonal? What type of phone system is used? Can you get a cell phone? Is it legal

to own and/or operate a radio in the country you will be in? For example, are the "Talkabout" short-range radios your instructors use to communicate with each other really legal or not? Does it matter?

- Does an infrastructure exist for rescue and/or evacuation? What sorts of equipment are used? What types of radios? Do you have to register with local authorities or not?

Cultural shifts

- How is risk defined in the place you are working? Do local people, including local professionals, use the same language you do? Do the same words mean the same thing?
- How can you define "risk" in a way which all parties understand what it means?
- What is considered "normal" or "everyday" risk in the host country?
- How is "wilderness" defined? When places are translated in English as "national parks" or "forest reserve" what does that mean? Are there the same expectations regarding access and use?
- What unique risks (human and otherwise) exist in the populated wilderness? Are there unique "user groups" of people (villagers, hunters, etc.) who you might be interacting with?
- How do local people describe distances and directions? If you need to evacuate someone, for example, how are you going to get directions in and out of the area that makes sense to local people?

Other questions

- How can you break apart the risk equation (severity, probability and time) to use in an international context? What parts of it change (if any) in the new context?
- What assumptions are there in your own and your new culture about how things happen in terms of fate, agency, and how things happen? How can you compensate or bridge any differences in understanding?
- What extra protocols or safety standards do you need to add to your documentation and trip review (e.g. checking for seatbelts, etc.)?
- How skilled are your instructors in cultural competency? How much do they know about the local language and culture? How important will that knowledge be in a crisis? How can you compensate (manage the risk) of the "specific competencies" needed in the international context you are working in?
- Do technical skills need to be augmented with any site specific factors? For example, will bear canisters and/or food hangs be effective against tigers or other animals?
- Do you have bi-cultural and/or bi-lingual staff where necessary? Do your instructors and/or leaders have the necessary meta-skills (general cultural sensitivity) and specific competencies (knowledge about the specific culture) to act in appropriate ways with various people they might come into contact with, from villagers to government officials?

- Are your risk management plans taking into account time away from the “main” activity? How will you ensure your group is safe as it gets to the trailhead in the international setting? Have expectations regarding culturally appropriate dress been made clear to the group so that they can maintain a low profile? What other factors need to be considered?
- How do the leaders of your program deal with ambiguity? How can this be strengthened or developed more in your instructor training and orientation programs?
- Do you need to do a pre-trip reconnaissance? What important information can you get online or from books (such as US State Department Travel Advisories)? What do you need to go and see for yourself (ground check)?