

Glenridding Beck – Investigation Report

Drowning of Max Palmer in Glenridding Beck 26 May 2002

PART A. PLUNGE POOLING AND RELATED ACTIVITIES

These pages look at the type of activity that the party was doing at Glenridding Beck. The lessons learned cover particularly the need:

- to ensure leader competence, particularly for activities for which there are no specific national qualifications
- for LEAs and others to have policies in respect of activities for which there are no specific national qualifications
- for leaders to base risk assessments on a thorough understanding of the variables and how they may change with time

The left hand column sets out some facts and the right hand column provides comment and further sources of information.

Note: Comments in *bold italics* draw particular attention to points that those involved in educational visits and adventurous activities may need to consider.

This Part has three sections:

- Types of activity
- Assessing leader competencies
- Understanding hazards and assessing risks

It ends with a summary of the key points.

Facts

Types of activity

1. Plunge pooling involves jumping from a height into a natural pool, often in a mountain stream.
2. Activities such as plunge pooling and ghyll scrambling/gorge walking/canyoning (ascending or descending a mountain stream) are known as “combined water/rock activities”. They are part of a growing number of “hybrid” activities, so called because they require more than one outdoor skill.

Assessing leader competencies

3. There are National Governing Bodies (NGBs) for sports/activities such as mountaineering, caving and canoeing. They have structured programmes for the training and assessment of instructors. There are no such programmes in respect of hybrid activities, mainly because of the range of possible combinations of activity.

4. A typical NGB - approved programme for a trainee leader would involve a residential course followed by a requirement to keep a logbook of relevant activities for a minimum period or number of trips. This would be followed by a formal assessment.

Comment

There were no formal standards for hybrid activities, but the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA) had produced guidance for its inspectors. This document “Collective Interpretation 6.6: Combined water/rock activities” is now on the AALA website <http://www.aala.org/guidance.html>.

This and other “Collective Interpretations” on the website provide invaluable practical guidance on managing outdoor activities. There is also a useful paper “Good Practice in Adventure Activities Within the Education Sector”.

HSE has produced an Information Sheet “Combined water and rock activities: Guidance for providers”. A download is available at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/etis13.pdf>

The plunge pool activity would not have been licensable by AALA if offered by a commercial provider. Combined water/rock activities which involve climbing are licensable.

In the absence of formal qualifications for hybrid activities, it is good practice for leaders to hold qualifications in closely-related activities. For instance, for plunge pooling or gorge walking, qualifications in caving (a gorge is a cave without the roof) or mountaineering plus white water canoeing may be appropriate.

In the absence of NGB awards specific to combined water/rock activities, in-house approval following appropriate training, assessment and certification by recognised technical experts would be appropriate. It is particularly important that the leader understands the relevant hazards and risks and is able to implement effective rescue procedures. Given the nature of the competencies required, many schools will use licensed outdoor centres.

The level of the qualification required needs to be matched to the levels of hazard and risk. Combined water/rock activities should always be treated in the first instance as high hazard. Only when proper risk assessments have been done can the necessary understanding of the hazards, risks and precautions be gained.

The NGB assessment of a trainee leader is likely to cover technical competence in the activity, including the ability to assess and control risk. Some NGBs use the following statement: “It is a combination of technical competence and leadership skills supported by a wide range of experience that forms the basis for effective group management. The scheme addresses all these elements. However, the employer or operating authority must ultimately decide whether a leader possesses the personal attributes needed to take responsibility for a particular group of people”. Head teachers and other senior managers should be best placed to consider whether a member of staff has appropriate leadership skills, experience and other personal qualities needed to run a particular visit.

Understanding hazards and assessing risks

5. Conditions in mountain rivers can change immensely over short periods. Heavy rain can quickly change a shallow warm stream into a raging freezing torrent. A person proposing to lead an activity such as plunge pooling would need to understand the significance of a number of variables (**hazards**) which could give rise to danger (**risk**). These include:

Water depth
Water flow
Water temperature
Water currents
Air temperature
Rocks and other physical features
The ability/make-up of the group.

6. Many outdoor activity incidents occur when a leader, who has done an activity in good conditions attempts to repeat it in poor conditions with little thought that anything can go wrong. Because they have not personally experienced the range of conditions at the site nor sought local advice, they may be unprepared for the effects of more extreme conditions e.g. wind/water/cold.

7. The overall risk assessment for an activity such as plunge pooling would need to cover:

Generic risk assessment - The risks inherent in the activity (written)

Site-specific risk assessment - Particular risks associated with the site e.g. water depth, ease of exit, difficulty of rescue (written)

Dynamic risk assessment - The risks at the time, taking account of, for instance, the changing conditions and the fitness of the party to undertake the activity (physical, mental and attitudinal)

Dynamic risk assessment should continue throughout the day/activity to take account of any changing circumstances

The variability of the environment and the lack of formal qualifications and standards for hybrid activities means that leaders require a high degree of skill and judgement. Head teachers need to consider whether the school should provide water/rock activities and, if so, whether it has the resources to provide them safely in-house, or whether they should approach a licensed provider. If such activities are to be provided by school staff, the head teacher should seek independent verification of the suitability of the venue and the technical competence of the proposed leader(s) to provide the activity at that venue. The fact that someone has led an activity before does not, in itself, mean that they are competent.

It is good practice for LEAs to have a clear policy and provide guidance in this area.

It is good practice for the generic and site-specific risk assessments to identify "cut-off" criteria which can be used as reference points for the dynamic risk assessment. These might:

- ***Be absolute e.g. "we don't do the activity if the water is above this level"***
- ***Identify additional precautions e.g. "wet suits are essential if the water is colder than...."; "buoyancy aids if the depth of the water exceeds... or the group includes poor swimmers"; "helmets if there is a risk of contact with rock"***
- ***Set a minimum age or skill level required to undertake the activity safely in particular conditions.***

DfES publications on educational visits, particularly "[Standards for LEAs in Overseeing Educational Visits](#)" and "[Standards for Adventure](#)" provide much useful practical guidance including information on risk assessment and leader competence. The Scottish Executive provides guidance "Safety of Pupils on Educational Excursions"

Note: Risk assessments are a leader's fundamental intelligence on health and safety. They are the route to identifying the right control measures, not an end in themselves. They need to be fit for purpose. If the assessment paperwork is seen to be more important than the control measures, the system is probably too complex.

Key points

Nobody should lead adventure activities unless they have been assessed as competent, understand the full range of hazards and risks and can implement rescue and emergency procedures (Para A 3).

Head teachers need to consider whether the school should provide water/rock activities and, if so, whether it has the resources to provide them safely in-house, or whether they should approach a licensed provider (Para A 5).

If such activities are to be provided by school staff, the head teacher should seek independent verification by a competent person of the suitability of the venue and the technical competence of the proposed leader(s) to provide the activity at that venue (Para A 5).

“Head teachers and other senior managers should consider whether the proposed leader(s) have the appropriate leadership skills, experience and other personal qualities needed for a particular visit, in addition to the technical competence required.” (Para A 4/5)

The fact that someone has led an activity before does not, in itself, mean that they are competent (Para A5).

There is much useful technical guidance on the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA) website (Para A 2).

LEAs should have a policy on the provision of combined water/rock activities (Para A 5).

Leaders must be competent in dynamic risk assessment for the activity, so that they can continuously evaluate the implications of changing conditions. Dynamic risk assessments will need to take account of any generic and site-specific risk assessments and good practice (Para A 7).

Risk assessments should be fit for the purpose (Para A 7).

The comments in Part A are applicable to many other potentially hazardous activities.