

The Waihao River tragedy: when will they see the error of their RAMS?

By Pete McDonald

On 16 June 2000 the Waimate coroner finds twelve reasons for the deaths of Hamish Neal (15) and Glenn Jopson (13) at the popular Black Hole swimming spot on the Waihao River. He makes seven detailed recommendations. On 22 June *The Press* carries an article headed 'School-trip policies muddled', based on a consultant's report commissioned by the board of trustees. Behind the scenes, confusion and controversy continues. I am not surprised. We have a teacher who fills in a Risk-Analysis-and-Management-System (RAMS) form before the trip ... then two deaths ... and then a coroner who recommends that the 'use of the ... RAMS should be mandatory in every case before the event'. What are we to make of this riddle?

Unreliable

To understand where the form-filling breaks down, you have to imagine Fred Busy-Teacher, in Run-of-the-mill High School, a long way from Waimate, a few years from now. The school has an annual outdoor day, a feature of its programme for many years. Fred B-T plans a visit to a swimming spot at a local river. A senior member of staff thrusts a blank RAMS form into his hands. Fred grabs a spare minute to fill it in. Will Fred recall the twelve reasons that contributed to the Waihao drownings? Unlikely. Fred is not, after all, a specialist outdoor educator. His school, like many New Zealand schools, does not have a specialist outdoor educator. Will he recollect the coroner's six detailed recommendations? No. Will he, even more crucially, appreciate that some children with special needs can be unpredictable, not reacting sensibly or rationally in risky places? No, he won't. I myself have seen two such children fighting – rolling around – on the lip of a cliff-top. A ratio of 1:4 can be a handful. I learnt that from years of experience.

The RAMS is unreliable when used by people who are not trained outdoor educators. The form-filling can even lead to overconfidence. Part of the muddle in Waimate High School's risk management, identified by a consultant, is not local but national. We are over-relying on written risk management, especially when the paperwork is delegated to teachers who have no background in outdoor leadership. There is a knack to looking for danger and anticipating nasty combinations of circumstances, and you don't gain this self-preserving doubt overnight. My impression is that neither the coroner nor the consultant acknowledged this weakness of the RAMS, though I have only read press reports.

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Obligatory qualifications needed

Safety in outdoor leadership comes from experience and, when appropriate, from technical knowledge and from qualifications that incorporate sufficiently extensive experience. The nature of the activity in the Waihao tragedy – ‘a wild swimming hole’ – is likely to obscure the wider issue of safety in outdoor education. For any more-general discussion, the example of flat-water kayaking is more productive. The leader should be qualified for this activity. If he or she is not, they shouldn't be doing it. It's as simple as that. If this means an immediate and substantial reduction in schools' kayaking, so be it. If, applied across the board, an insistence on compulsory qualifications temporarily decimates schools' outdoor education, so be it. New Zealand has

to learn to pay for its outdoor education. If parents, schools, and the Ministry of Education are not willing to pay for qualified teachers of outdoor education, then they must either end outdoor education or accept more-frequent accidents than need be the case.

The RAMS was concocted by highly qualified expert outdoor educators, leading authorities. They developed it in good faith. But for ten years now, people have misinterpreted it and overemphasised it. We need to put the emphasis back where it belongs. There is no substitute for experience.

Qualifications don't of course guarantee safety. At the time of the UK's Cairngorm Tragedy (November 1971), in which six teenagers died, Ben Beattie, the leader, was one of only 160 people in Britain with the Mountaineering Instructor's Certificate. The deaths resulted from the cumulative effect of a number of miscalculations. The most contentious issue, on which expert witnesses disagreed, was whether the school party should have been up on the Cairngorm plateau at all.

But the exception doesn't make the rule. I'd still rather my own kids were taken flat-water kayaking by someone with NZOIA Kayak Instructor – Flat Water, someone who at least knows the importance of well-maintained buoyancy, rather than by some enthusiastic and well-meaning dad who's a great guy and who has filled in a RAMS form but who has never heard of boat buoyancy. Don't pretend that the latter situation doesn't happen. It goes on more than people admit. Consider the following anecdotal statistics. Even if somewhat ambiguous and only rough, they still indicate a problem. About 68,000 pupils a year in secondary schools in New Zealand go on outdoor education experiences. About 7000 teachers are involved in this process. One authority guesses that 2% of these teachers have any sort of outdoor award or qualification. (Reportedly from Ministry of Education figures for 1997, and this is only for secondary schools, which tend to have more outdoor-qualified staff than primary schools.)

EDUCATION OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

GUIDELINES FOR GOOD PRACTICE

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Ministry of Education
1995

The Ministry of Education guidelines (1995) that strongly endorse the Risk Analysis and Management System (RAMS). You can find some sample RAMS forms in Appendix 7. The guidelines do not list any outdoor-leadership qualifications.

Note: in 2002 the Ministry of Education published new EOTC guidelines. See page 6, 'Update, 2002'.

New Zealand does have a knowledgeable base of excellence in outdoor leadership from which it can build. But this expertise is patchy in distribution. And I've now heard too many stories of suspect leadership. The tales are hardening my attitude. They are moving me towards an uncompromising 'Let's do it properly or not at all'. For many activities this means compulsory qualifications, and I don't care if I receive a deskful of hate mail.

Review under way

What does the Ministry of Education think about these arguments? We don't yet know. On 8 March 2000 twenty-five representatives from eighteen organisations met at a risk-management forum, convened by Water Safety New Zealand and the Outdoor Assembly. The meeting set up a working party to review risk management for education outside the classroom (EOTC). The working-party will report back to the forum, which will submit its recommendations to the Minister for Education.

For the time being, though, little changes. After the four drownings last summer, an Official Notice in the Education Gazette (20/3/2000) reminded boards of trustees of their responsibilities for student safety, particularly in education outside the classroom. If we take the Notice literally, we can read into it that the possession of qualifications is already mandatory for leading or instructing definable activities such as kayaking and tramping: 'Minimum standards of instructor competency ... have been established for outdoor pursuits activities by the New Zealand Outdoor Instructors' Association.'

But later the Notice reminds us that the principal Ministry publication on EOTC is still *Education Outside the Classroom – Guidelines for Good Practice*, 1995. So we must assume that the Ministry still has confidence in this daddy of all documents and still trusts its general approach and emphasis. I cannot share that faith. The seventy-six pages of this bewildering instrument do not specifically name one outdoor leadership qualification; the Ministry adroitly passes the qualification buck to other bodies. Yet its guidelines harbour eleven pages of the RAMS, not to mention a couple of bamboozling models from the theory of risk

management. If these two diagrams mean little to me, an instructor of many years' full-time experience, what will they mean to most board members? Nothing.

I look forward to completely new Ministry guidelines.

Meanwhile, how should school boards deal with trips to the Black Hole swimming spot and to others like it? To satisfy legislation, schools must continue to undertake some sort of written risk analysis. But swimming in rivers is not an activity that is specifically covered by a leadership qualification, and so even careful and informed analysis would not in this case recommend that the leader hold a qualification, except a life-saving award. I think I would abandon all my principles and reinvest in a very old-fashioned device: a list of rules, to be applied rigorously. I can remember one such rule, from years ago. At the first outdoor centre I worked at, in 1968, at the start of each course all students took part in a swimming test in a lake. A sensible precaution. Old knowledge. We could learn something from that.

Acknowledgment

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Update, 2002 - *Safe As Outside*

Partly in response to the Waihao River drownings and to other recent outdoor tragedies, there is now a New Zealand web resource, *Safe As Outside* (www.safeoutside.org), providing advice about safety on outdoor activities. Also, in 2002 the Ministry of Education published new EOTC guidelines: *Safety and EOTC (Education Outside the Classroom): A Good Practice Guide for New Zealand Schools* (Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education, 2002).