

Group Walks Case Study – Snowdonia



Overview

During the summer of 2009 an incident occurred on a Ramblers walk in Snowdonia National Park, North Wales. Whilst it must be recognised that the walker died of a heart attack, which may have occurred at any time, due to the circumstances surrounding the death an investigation was carried out by the Ramblers. This case study provides a brief review of the incident and the associated learning points for the organisation.

Details of the incident

Prior to the walk information had been sent out to walkers which comprised of a number of information sheets including a route description and walkers advice. Once off the coach and before setting off the leader followed normal Area guidelines in calling their group to assemble. The leader then introduced them self, the back marker and briefed the group on the walk. A head count was also taken before setting off.

The party then set off for the summit of a 3,000ft plus mountain on a linear walk. On leaving the drop off point they were unaware three walkers had got off the coach but not joined the party as it set off. The party continued to the summit.

Meanwhile the three walkers realised the group had set off without them. They decided to try and catch up and set off up a path. Approximately two-thirds of the way up two decided to push on towards the summit, leaving the third walker behind. The two walkers met the rest of the group on the summit and made themselves known to the leader. Whilst on the summit a helicopter rescue was seen taking place approximately where the third walker had been left.

Upon arrival at hospital the third walker was pronounced deceased. He had been seen collapsing by members of the public who alerted the rescue services.

Analysis

A number of factors appear to have contributed to the way the incident unfolded. A number of areas are worthy of consideration:

Registers

Current Ramblers policy is that registers are considered good practice, they are however not compulsory. Had a register been taken prior to the walk, on the coach for example, the three walkers may not have been left behind. This does not have to be an arduous task and there is a template available on the Ramblers website. The minimum detail required may just be the names of all walkers, although further information, such as a contact number, is advised. It is recognised this may be time consuming for a large group, but a sheet handed out to walkers as they arrive and then regular head counts before, during and after the walk may suffice.

Communication

It also appears that there was a lack of communication between Ramblers members during the walk, particularly on the summit as events started to unfold. There appears to have been some confusion as to whether the third walker was planning to continue to the summit, or return to drop off point. It also appears that concerns were not raised and there was little discussion between key individuals to develop a plan in relation to the third walker. Communications during any walk is important but especially when incidents like this start to unfold. Good communication, combined with leadership skills and decision making will enable a coordinated plan of action to be developed in order to best manage the situation for particular individuals concerned and the party as a whole.

Walker's responsibilities

It also appears that the three walkers failed to take responsibility in reading the literature that had been sent to them prior to the walk. They were unaware which path to ascend or descend and that the walk was linear. They also had no contingency plan if the third walker did not join them on the summit.

Organisational learning

The Ramblers liaise regularly with our insurance providers and in future it may be that certain procedures are prescribed to our policy. The investigation highlighted a number of possible future actions that will be considered. These include:

- Co-ordinated national training opportunities for Ramblers Walk Leaders, including specific training for remote and challenging walks. A survey was conducted in early 2010, with more than half of Groups responding, which established, for the first time, how many people lead walks for the Ramblers nationally. This will be used to inform plans for the development of training.
- The walk leader's checklist now includes first aid and emergency incident information. The supply of 7,500 checklists was exhausted and an update is due for publication in autumn 2010.
- In addition to the information displayed at the bottom of every walk on Walks Finder, further dissemination of information to walkers is being considered. This may for example include their personal responsibilities to the leaders and group, safety information, clarification of the insurance cover, and general advice on walking.
- Ramblers will continue to promote the use of register as best practice.