



# Risk management in Youth Work with nature

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## **Introduction**

When doing activities in a natural habitat, the comfort of our normal lives is no longer there. In its place we find a whole new world of sensations and experiences. However, many of these new experiences can be challenging and produce feelings of anxiety or rejection among the participants towards elements that don't need to be scary. At the same time, some participants may not recognize real risk when they encounter it due to inexperience. The youth worker should be mindful of both challenges and lead their participants towards a better understanding of their relation to nature. In order to do that it is important to understand that fear is not something to be rejected, but rather trained. A well developed fear is a protection factor that can save our lives, just in the same way that a non-adaptive fear can freeze us in the wrong moment and become a danger factor\*.

## **Risk definition, types of risk**

In a natural habitat there are social risks, environmental risks, and psychological risks.

Risk is a word full of meanings. It starts meaning the potential for loss, as there is in health risk. But risk also means the conscious decision to chance loss in order to achieve a result. Risk is somehow always there, but in adventure programs risk is such a key factor that it deserves its own section. The objective of this section is to study risk, both understanding how it works, its values and how to prevent it.

Risk has an inherent value in itself, as it provides more value to the experience than if it had been without risk. On some occasions, risk is the key factor of the adventure, such as when rafting. When rafting, falling in the water is a desired part of the experience. The cold water shakes the participant and brings over the thought: "I fell, but nothing wrong happened, this is enjoyable". And part of the experience is coming back on the raft and seeing how nothing wrong happened. Failure, when there is a life line, it's as necessary in nature programs as risk. Failure allows different understandings and behaviours. On top of it, it gives the opportunity of learning and seeing that achieving is not the only way forward. When climbers face a project, they fall/fail tens of times, and often they will fall a few metres and smile, since they got a bit further than last time or maybe they just enjoyed the process. This experience is something unique of education in nature, as it takes risk as a given and prepares for it at the same time as accepting failure.





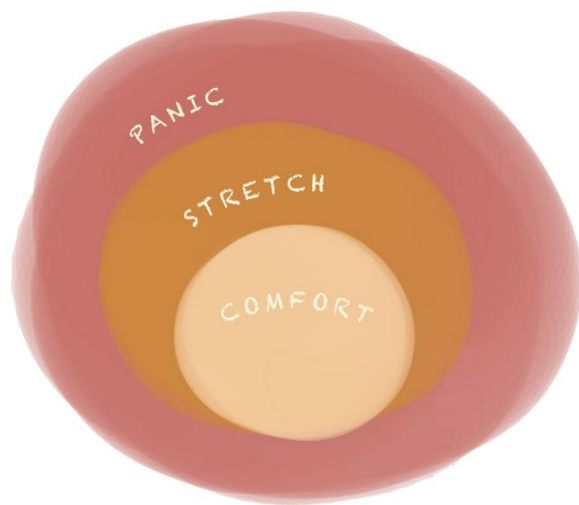
Hazard is the possibility of a danger, the potential that if a human were in that place at that time or in such a way, they would be harmed. An example of a hazard is an avalanche happening on a slope. Risk is, once being in that situation, the possibility that the hazard or harm will come into effect and harm the human. The avalanche in a far away mountain is a hazard, but it does not represent a risk unless there is a village on the way or some humans are walking on that mountain. There is a hazard of a fall on a steep hill, there is a risk that this specific human will fall if he walks on it without tying their crampons. This distinction is useful to know for the youth worker that is assessing which path to take, since a hazardous path inevitably means risk.

When approaching an environment in which the person is not familiarised (or too familiarised), they may have a big offset between real and perceived risk. Real risk is the chance that a harm will happen to the person given the current circumstances. Perceived risk is the realisation of this risk, either through fear, anxiety, dissociation or any other way in which this may happen. A person that is climbing for the first time, on a secure rope with an instructor securing/belaying them, has a very low level of risk, but their perceived risk may be very high. Someone that has been skiing steep slopes their whole life may not have the perception that he is at risk, however they may very well be at risk. There is a connection with confidence in this topic, the more confidence a person has, the lower their risk perception will be and vice versa. The youth worker has a role promoting the most balanced real/perceived risk perception among their youth.

Objective risks are those that happen independently of human interaction, for example avalanches or rock falls that aren't human triggered. These depend on the environment and may or not be relevant. Subjective risks are those in which humans have an influence, such as a distraction while securing a partner, or having a panic attack in the middle of a river crossing. It's important to remember that objective risks may trigger subjective risks, setting the group in a more dangerous situation than if only one had occurred.

A good rule of thumb to always have in mind when inviting someone to leave their comfort zone is the next figure. In it it's shown how there are 3 concentric circles, the first englobes the comfort zone, which is at the centre. This is the area that offers limited possibilities for growth and learning. The outside zone is the panic zone or panic zone. It's a zone so far from the comfort of the person that they move into an acute stress reaction and cannot learn. There is a delicate place between the two which is the stretch zone. It offers optimised learning experience, for some people it's wider and for some people it requires fine tuning due to its thinness. This figure should be considered as a mental representation, each person has a different way of experiencing comfort, learning and stress. A professional youth worker should be able to apply this rule of thumb in an individualised manner, understanding that different individuals will have different zones.





The stretch zone experiences say that most of the learning occurs when there is more disequilibrium than in the comfort zone but not so much that the person is in a high stress situation. Education in nature has an easy time providing these stretch zone experiences. For example, during a skiing afternoon some people in the group want to stay on the easy slopes because they feel comfortable there. It's then the job of the youth worker to assess when is it time to extend their

experience by encouraging a steeper slope. However, it must be one in which while their experience is extended, it's not yet in the panic zone of stress, as in a slope so steep that they would freeze.

### **Risk Management plan**

Every outdoor with a risk factor should have a risk management plan. The plan should go forward only if those risks can be successfully managed. By risks we mean the objective as well as the subjective risks. A risk management plan should have an overview of the risk factors that can happen and a prevention and damage response.

The risk management plan should consist of a document with a series of sections:

- Objective hazards: The objective hazards that are likely to be encountered in the route. How the objective hazards will be assessed if encountered: In case the group encounters those hazards, how to face them.
- Subjective factors that may come up: Another of the sections should consider the subjective factors such as distraction or overconfidence. How to deal with specific hazards: once the hazard has been encountered, either objective or subjective, how to deal with it or mitigate it in order to prevent the risk to the minimum.
- Emergency plan response: The emergency plan response is key, since it provides an answer to what to do if the risk actually happens. It can be done with a matrix specifying types of danger, risk level, prevention plan and response plan.

### **Risk calculation table**

A simple risk calculation table that can due to simplicity be done on the field with no need to use pen and paper is a simple matrix where x is consequence and y is probability. This table is particularly useful in the field, since it does not require complicated calculations and it offers a





good intuitive measure of the risk at hand. You assign a number from 1 to 5 depending on the probability or the consequences in case it happens, being 1 the lowest value and 5 the highest. Then you multiply those values and you get the risk rating. The youth worker should be always mindful of how high is the likelihood and how likely is the severity and make a guess of what should be the highest risk value they are willing to take. This will depend on the group, the conditions of the trip, the proximity of help and other factors that should be considered at the moment. If there is a doubt between which value to assign, (is climbing this tree a 2 or a 3 on likelihood of fall) the highest number should be applied. The severity value should be especially considered and evaluated. In this handbook we recommend a maximum of risk value 3, anything over it should be immediately prevented, whether done as a group or by some individual taking particular actions (such as climbing the tree).

		CONSEQUENCE				
		Negligible 1	Minor 2	Moderate 3	Major 4	Catastrophic 5
LIKELIHOOD	Almost certain 5	MODERATE 5	HIGH 10	EXTREME 15	EXTREME 20	EXTREME 25
	Likely 4	MODERATE 5	HIGH 8	HIGH 12	EXTREME 16	EXTREME 20
	Possible 3	LOW 3	MODERATE 6	HIGH 9	HIGH 12	EXTREME 15
	Unlikely 2	LOW 3	MODERATE 4	MODERATE 6	HIGH 8	HIGH 10
	Rare 1	LOW 1	LOW 2	LOW 3	MODERATE 4	MODERATE 5

Illustration 2: risk taking table.

Some examples: The group may start walking on a ridge, the path is clear and there are little chances of falling, so it can be given a value 2 in likelihood; however there is a steep fall and the severity is a value 4. This gives a risk value of 8, which means it's too high and we choose a different route, maybe even come back if none can be found. However, next year we come back and we see that on the path a rope has been attached that can serve to hold when walking. Then the likelihood lowers to 1 and the risk value to 4, so the path can be followed.

**How to respond to risk at the moment/Strategies on risk management**

All tables and strategies are great to do before and to have a plan, but what happens when you are at risk or when the risk has occurred?

Paul Petzold, one of the landmark mountaineers and creator of the North American mountaineering school wrote: "Whenever there is an emergency, the first thing I do is smoke a





cigarette and think things through.” Whenever we humans perceive risk, our fight-flight response takes over, and while this system is great if you need to run from a beast, it’s very unlikely that it will be the best reaction in the kind of stressors that we tend to find. There should be a series of steps:

First: calm down and make sure that you and those with you are safe. The priority of safety should be in first place oneself, second those that are already safe and then whoever is at risk. Even if it may seem shocking, it’s the best way to prevent having more casualties. The reason for this is that the youth worker/guide/facilitator is a key participant, the welfare of the group depends on them. Then it’s important to check the safety of the group, they should be in a place where no harm may come to them, since multiple rescue scenarios tend to be much harder than these with a single person.

Second: think of a plan, organise if you have peers in your group. The plan should not require anyone to be at risk. The simpler the plan is, the more chances that it will be successful. The group can help, but always within the range of their skills and supervised by the person in charge. Everyone in the rescue team should have a specific task that they are competent at doing. While time may be a factor, this is the most important part to spend time on in order to come up with a plan that will keep the group safe and bring the victim to safety.

The third step is to execute the plan while preventing any more risk. Focusing on efficiency and the welfare of every team member will be key. Depending on the situation, time may be a factor, that’s why time efficiency may help with the situation.

The fourth step is taken when the risk situation has passed and everyone is in a safe zone. The experience may have been traumatic for some, and they may need support. The youth worker should lead a reflection activity with the objective of letting the common understanding help with the process; the recommended one is setting groups of two or three people and giving simple instructions such as “this is a moment when you can talk about what just happened”. After such experiences a certain bonding is formed and the group will naturally express what they have been through in what could be considered a therapeutic process. After twenty minutes or the topics of conversation change, the facilitator should close the conversations. While this is very effective, depending on the level of risk and the situation faced, it’s possible that some people in the group may need further support. If this is the case, a therapist should take over the case.

