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Trek Safely: A Guide to Unit Trek Planning

Young people today seek increasingly challenging activities, many of which involve trekking in backcountry or wilderness areas. Treks can include such high-adventure activities as backpacking, canoeing, caving, horse packing, kayaking, mountain biking, mountaineering, rafting, sailing, and skiing. While some treks are as short as overnight, others last a week or two. Trek Safely, the Boy Scouts of America's recommended procedure for organizing BSA outdoor treks, applies to overnight treks of any duration. By being aware of the seven points of Trek Safely, youth and adult leaders will be better prepared for a safe trekking experience.

Backcountry accidents are more likely to occur if trek planning is inadequate. For example, a unit may overestimate its ability to complete a long or difficult trek. It may encounter unanticipated dangers such as high winds, lightning, flash floods, wildlife, extreme heat, drought, or prolonged rain or snow.

While Trek Safely is designed to help Scouting groups to be fully prepared for a backcountry trek, it also will help every youth and adult leader recognize situations that may develop where the group should stop and make camp or turn back. Reasons for altering the itinerary include adverse weather, difficult terrain, fatigue, impending darkness when trekking, inadequate time to complete the trek as planned, and low morale or dissension among crew or patrol members. The sooner a decision to stop or turn back is made, the better the chances for a favorable outcome. It is better to err on the side of caution and return for a future trek than to proceed under adverse conditions.

Knowing the members of the crew is one of the most effective ways for avoiding conflicts and other problems. Spending time together on preparatory outings helps crew members get in shape, practice new skills, and bond. Participating in Project COPE activities as a patrol, team, or crew helps build a team that communicates effectively and functions harmoniously.

Leaders should consult current BSA training materials and literature on trekking for additional guidance. Among the many training sessions and resources that can help leaders plan and prepare for a trek are the following:

- Trek Leader section, National Camping School
- Aquatics section, National Camping School
- Climbing section, National Camping School
- Horsemanship training, Philmont Scout Ranch
- *Passport to High Adventure*, No. 4310
- *Fieldbook*, No. 33200
- *Principles of Leave No Trace*, No. 21-105;
<http://www.scouting.org/boyscouts/resources/21-105>
- *Okpik: Cold-Weather Camping*, No. 34040
- *Topping Out: A BSA Climbing/Rappelling Manual*, No. 3207A
- *Guide to Safe Scouting*, No. 34416C; <http://www.scouting.org/pubs/gss>

- *Backpacking* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33232
- *Camping* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33256
- *Canoeing* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33305A
- *Cooking* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33349A
- *First Aid* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33301A
- *Horsemanship* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33298
- *Orienteering* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33385
- *Personal Fitness* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33286A
- *Snow Sports* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33365A
- *Weather* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33274A
- *Whitewater* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33405A
- *Wilderness Survival* merit badge pamphlet, No. 33265A

Each of the following elements plays an important role in the overall Trek Safely procedure. Fun and safe overnight trekking activities require compliance with Trek Safely by both adult and youth leaders.

1. Qualified Supervision

All backcountry treks must be supervised by a mature, conscientious adult at least 21 years of age who understands the potential risks associated with the trek. This person knowingly accepts responsibility for the well-being and safety of the youth in his or her care. This adult supervisor is trained in and committed to compliance with the seven points of the BSA's Trek Safely procedure. One additional adult who is at least 18 years of age must also accompany the unit.

The lead adult is responsible for ensuring that someone in the group is currently trained in first aid appropriate to the type of trek and the environment. American Red Cross Wilderness First Aid Basic (a 16-hour course) and CPR are recommended. A signed [parental informed consent form](#) for each participant under 18 years of age may be used for adventurous activities such as whitewater, climbing, and horse packing treks.

2. Keep Fit

Require evidence of fitness with a current BSA Personal Health and Medical Record—Class III form, No. 34412A. A regular fitness regimen is recommended for trek participants. They are urged to start slowly, gradually increasing the duration and intensity of their exercise. The adult leader should adjust supervision, protection, and planning to anticipate potential risks associated with individual health conditions. Neither youth nor adults should participate in a trek or activity for which they are not physically prepared. See *Passport to High Adventure*, No. 4310.

3. Plan Ahead

Planning a trek includes filing a tour permit application with the local council service center at least a month before the departure date. If travel of more than 500 miles is planned, submit the National Tour Permit Application, No. 4419B. For activities off the local council property and within 500 miles of home base, submit the Local Tour Permit Application, No. 34426B.

The trek should match the maturity, skill level, and fitness of unit members. A youth or adult leader must secure land-use permits to use public land or written permission from the owner to cross or use private land. It is also crucial to learn about any requirements and recommendations from the local land

manager. Find out about the terrain, elevation ranges, trails, wildlife, campsites, typical weather conditions, and environmental issues for the period of the trek.

Training in Leave No Trace using the *Principles of Leave No Trace*, No. 21-105, and the *Leave No Trace Training Outline*, No. 20-113, is crucial. Units should anticipate a range of weather conditions and temperatures and develop an alternate itinerary in the event that adverse conditions develop.

4. Gear Up

Procure topographic maps, as well as current trail maps, for the area of the trek. Take equipment and clothing that is appropriate for the weather and unit skill level, is in good condition, and is properly sized for each participant. A qualified youth or adult leader ensures that participants are trained in the proper use of specialized equipment, particularly items with which they are not familiar, such as climbing ropes, ice axes, crampons, watercraft, bridles, saddles, and cross-country skis and poles. A shakedown must be conducted to be sure each person has the right equipment without taking too much.

Crew equipment includes a first-aid kit stocked with current medications and supplies. The leader reminds youth and adults to bring and take prescribed medications. Every crew must have the means to treat water for drinking by boiling it, treating it with chemicals, or using an approved water filter. When ultraviolet light (sunlight) is prevalent, it is critical that participants have adequate sun protection, including broad-brimmed hats, sunglasses, and sunscreen.

5. Communicate Clearly and Completely

Communication is one of the keys to a safe outdoor adventure, and staying in touch with home base is the first step. A youth or adult leader should complete a trip plan and share these details of the trek—including time of departure, overnight stops, the time of expected return, the trailhead (where vehicles will be parked) and the itinerary and alternate itinerary—with a contact person in the home area. At any time the itinerary changes, one of the leaders relays the changes to the contact person, who in turn relays them to the Scouts' parents. A plan for communicating with each parent is developed before the trek.

A means of electronic communication—with backup power—may be helpful should an emergency occur. The leader should carry the telephone numbers or contact information of medical and emergency services in the area of the trek. Before calling for emergency assistance, the exact location and nature of the patient's injury or illness should be determined.

Youth and adult leaders are responsible for making sure that everyone knows what to expect and what is expected of them. Leaders should communicate with each other, as well as with the entire crew, to avoid unpleasant surprises.

6. Monitor Conditions

The leaders are responsible for making good decisions during the trek, conservatively estimating the capabilities and stamina of the group. If adverse conditions develop, the group is prepared to stop or turn back. The unit is responsible for monitoring weather conditions and forecasts before and during the trek—a small National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) radio is helpful for learning current weather forecasts. Leaders continually assess conditions, including weather, terrain, group morale, food and water supplies, group physical condition, and other factors to determine the difference between what is difficult and what is dangerous. Dangerous conditions are avoided.

7. Discipline

Each participant knows, understands, and respects the rules and procedures for safe trekking and has been oriented in Trek Safely. Applicable rules should be presented and learned prior to the outing and should be reviewed with participants before the trek begins. When participants know the reasons for rules and procedures, they are more likely to follow them. Adult and youth leaders must be strict and fair, showing no favoritism.

Last Updated: 20 MAR 2002

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