

Risk management in the El Chaltén Massif

Some considerations

The huge number of accidents that have been happening in comparison to the number of users is worrisome. The experience of some of the climbers relative to the objectives they choose is concerning. Each good weather window there is at least one serious accident. Because the rescues are done on a volunteer and good samaritan basis, at this pace the pressure on the local community is unsustainable.

Climbing in such a serious wilderness area, where the rescues are done on a volunteer basis and where it is not possible to carry out wall rescues (other than self-rescue not a single wall rescue has ever been successful), requires that we learn to choose objectives that correspond comfortably to our skill level. Adequate risk management is essential. It is mandatory to behave in a self sufficient manner.

Some of the questions that climbers should ask themselves before attempting a route are the following:

- Are we in a physical and mental state that is conducive to the ascent we plan to do?
- Do we know the technical, physical and experience level of our partners?
- Have we chosen the objective based on our current condition, the conditions of the mountain and the weather conditions or are we following a plan devised months ago?
- Is the objective we have chosen a logical progression when compared to our previous experiences or is it a significant departure?
- Do we have group, cultural or personal pressure?
- Do we feel compelled to have a certain result?

- Do we have the technical level that the route requires?
- Do we have enough experience to find the ascent and descent routes?
- Do we have the gear that the route requires and that corresponds to our level of skill?
- What is our ascent plan?
- How many hours or days will we need to pull it off?
- If our progression does not correspond to what we have planned, will we be willing to turn around?
- Will we encounter many situations or difficulties that are unfamiliar to us, that will require improvisation?

- Do we know the escape routes that our ascent line offers?
- Can we recognize if a rappel station is safe or not?
- Do we know how to improve an existing rappel station?
- Do we know how to set rappel stations in virgin terrain, in rock, snow and ice?
- Do we know how to recognize a good and a bad piton?
- Are we aware that half of the climbing deaths in this area have occurred while descending?

- What is our plan in case of an emergency or accident?

- Who will we contact and how?
- Do we have the physical and technical skills to carry out self-rescue?
- Do we know how to do crevasse rescue in a fast and efficient manner? Have we practiced this enough to be able to do it under stress?
- Do we know how to build a snow anchor to do crevasse rescue?
- Are we aware that 20% of the fatalities in this area have been the result of unroped glacier travel?
- Are we able to put our partner on our back and rappel multiple times until we reach the ground? Have we practiced this enough to be able to do it under stress?
- If our partner falls leading and is unresponsive, are we able to climb up to him, assist him and lower him back to the belay station? Have we practiced this enough to be able to do it under stress?

- Are we familiar with wilderness first aid?
- Do we know how to diagnose and treat hypothermia, fractures, bleeding wounds, concussions and other?
- Do we carry the implements required to stabilize such situations?
- Do we know how to confirm if someone is dead?

If we plan on being on snow:

- Do we know how to recognize the signs of avalanche danger?
- Do we know how to manage a group in terrain that is potentially dangerous for avalanches?
- Are we aware that these considerations are not only for winter but for all year?

- Do we know how to choose an objective based on the conditions on the mountain and the weather forecast?
- Do we know how to dress accordingly?
- Do we know what weather conditions we are able to climb in?

- Does our ascent involve objective dangers?
- Do we have the ability to take the forecasted freezing line into consideration when evaluating the risks that we will encounter?
- Can we identify the areas of the mountain that will become dangerous if the temperature raises?

If we find bad conditions on the route we planned to climb, or if there are many people on the climb:

- Do we have a plan B?
- Can we recognize the types of routes that become too dangerous when there are too many rope teams on them?

- Can we recognize the positive and the negative aspects of climbing in a large group?
- Are we aware that self-rescue will be far more viable if we are a team of three or more people?
- Are we also aware that group mentality can lead to a false sense of security?

- Are we able to retreat without over dramatizing and perceiving it as a defeat?

- Are we aware that retreat can often times be a sign of human and sporting maturity that deserves the utmost respect?
- Are we aware that we don't have to risk our lives only because there is good weather, even if good weather is rare?
- Are we aware that, in case of needing a rescue, we will be forcing many people to leave behind their plans and potentially put their lives at risk?

Safe climbing.

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