

Land, Water and People

Snowy Decisions

Visiting our mountains in the winter is a truly special experience. The snow makes everything different. It forms soft, flowing snow sculptures on the trees and rocks, and glitters in the sun. The movement of hares, squirrels, marten and lynx are easily observed in the tracks they leave behind. And it is just so fun to glide, slide, stride and ride on top of the snow.

There is definitely risk associated to recreating in the mountains in the winter. Besides the obvious risks associated with cold temperatures, whiteout conditions and equipment failure, there is also the potential for avalanches.

Over the last decade there has been an average of 25 avalanche related deaths in the U.S. per year and hundreds of reported and unreported non-fatal, human triggered avalanche incidents. Interestingly, these incidents have involved more than just skiers, snowshoers, snowmobilers, climbers and snowboarders. Some accidents involved people driving in their cars on highways, tubing on packed slopes and even standing under snow loaded roofs.

Most avalanche accidents occur when there are obvious clues to the hazard—clues related to terrain, snowpack and weather. This might lead one to believe that most people who get caught in avalanches don't have any avalanche training. This is not the case as there have been many avalanche savvy victims over the years. Instead, there appears to be breakdowns in decision-making that has nothing to do with analyzing the physical avalanche hazard.

In many cases, winter backcountry recreationists make mistakes because they are too familiar with an area. They become complacent and don't pay attention to the clues. Most accidents occur on slopes that are familiar to the victims.

Social factors may also lead to bad decision-making. For example, there is the “follow-the-leader” mistake, where one person decides to make tracks on a slope, so everyone else in the group follows without considering the risks themselves. Quite often a slope doesn't slide from the first person traveling on it, but instead releases on a later user.

Another common error is the commitment mistake. This happens when someone makes a commitment to reach a certain destination or use a specific slope and either disregards the hazards or pushes on in spite of the hazards. The commitment mistake can happen to anyone, but is most popularly associated with mountain climbers.

There are many other reasons people may make poor decisions while recreating in the mountains, including the usual suspects of fatigue and being in a hurry. Understanding the causes for making poor decisions is the first step to preventing possibly fatal mistakes, but it takes more than mere awareness. People also have to work hard to develop habits of the mind to always consider the avalanche potential and analyze the reasons behind their “go/no go” decisions.

The fact that avalanches occur in the mountains is no reason to completely avoid visiting the mountains in the winter. Instead, it is a reason to understand the basics of assessing the avalanche hazard, practice good route selection, and use solid decision-making skills.

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