Risk Lessons from a Wilderness Survival Expert

By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: Facility, Program and Transportation Safety

Recently I hosted wilderness survival expert Laura Handley while she was in town guiding a crew of day campers in a program sponsored by the nonprofit land trust in my village. Handley is a writer, hiker, and forager who once hiked to the highest points in 38 states in a four-month period. One evening during her stay, I had a chance to ask Laura about the genesis of her interest in survival skills and her perspective on risk.

Melanie: **How did your interest in wilderness survival skills come about?**

Laura: I've always been interested in nature. I was quiet as a kid; nature was a refuge for me. As I got older, I started hiking, beginning with trails in Blacksburg, Virginia, when I was attending Virginia Tech.

When I was 20, I impulsively bought a bunch of camping gear. It was a huge investment at the time, but since that purchase, I've used the gear I bought on so many trips—it's really paid off. I started off with simple trips, like overnights to nearby mountains, and then throughout my early 20s, I stepped up to more and more logistically challenging trips. On one of those trips, to Mount Mitchell (NC), I met someone who introduced me to 'highpointing'–hiking the highest points in the US states.

That meeting inspired me to take a summer to go highpointing. My mom was freaked out about my going to all of these places alone. So I had to do a lot of expectation management and convince her that I had failsafe mechanisms to handle whatever might happen: skills, gear, and backup plans in case things got too dangerous to continue. On that trip, I started with the highpoints close to my home (Virginia), then I continued west. The last mountain I did was also the most challenging: Borah Peak in Idaho. It required a long section of scrambling, which is easy rock climbing, but on a part of the mountain so exposed to falls (hundreds of feet, in this case) that there's no room for error. I don't know that I could have handled the mental pressure of that scramble at the start of my trip, but I'd been building my skills all summer long, and I made it through.

What's the biggest risk you've ever taken in your career… or in the great outdoors?

I've ended up in some tricky situations on mountains. Sometimes a route was harder than the guidebooks made it sound, and sometimes the mountain was just dangerous that day. When you're planning a trip up a mountain, you have to consider both the technical difficulty of your route and the objective hazard, which is any risk you can't mitigate, like bad weather or loose rock. I myself try to avoid objective hazard: I don't like the idea that you could do everything right and still have the climb turn out badly.

What lessons about embracing or managing risk are useful when you're hiking, camping, foraging, or guiding digital natives in day camp?

The digital natives have been pretty engaged with the camp this week; they're interested in the outdoors in part because it's so different from what they do in their everyday lives.

The biggest lesson I've learned about risk is that you have to consider it step by step. You can't let every risk in your plan weigh on you all at once; you have to start with the first step, ask if you can do it, handle that step, and then start worrying about the next. Doing that will not just keep you sane, it'll let you enjoy the beauty along the way, like the view from the summit of Borah Peak. I was far from home safe at that point in my trip—I still had to climb down all the tricky terrain I'd climbed up to get there—but I'd learned to release that future fear until the moment I needed it. You can think of it as "chunking" the steps in your plan: worry only about the current step, which is the only one you can influence in the moment.

What wilderness-related risks do you wish more people would embrace?

Some people are really into pushing themselves to the limit of their endurance: how far they can hike, how hard they can climb, and so on. But a lot of people avoid that stuff entirely: they don't want to get tired. Which is perfectly fair—life is tiring enough without volunteering for extra physical challenges. But I've always thought that everyone should at least try an endurance challenge, like a long hike or camping alone with minimal gear. It might give them confidence to know where their physical limits are—and they're probably further out than they'd thought!

Learning survival skills has also shown me that I can get by without modern conveniences if necessary: I can meet all my physical survival needs with a backpack full of gear and materials found in the woods. Knowing that you have a backup plan to keep yourself alive and deal with contingencies is a huge confidence booster both in the wilderness and in everyday life.

What have you learned about embracing risk?

One thing I've noticed as I've explored the world of survival is that people's perceptions of risk are often based more on their fears than on any objective measure of likeliness or harm. A good survival class can help with that by letting students voice their fears in a small-group, informal setting, almost like a bunch of friends sitting around a campfire. And once their fears are named, we can examine them realistically and give students the information and skills they need to mitigate them. I started helping teach survival classes (at a school called Advanced Survival Training in Fauquier County, VA) just before the pandemic hit. Every class we taught that year had a huge impact: our students came in worried, we gave them an outlet for their fears, and they left with a sense of agency.

Paul J. H. Schoemaker writes that "Experience is inevitable. Learning is not." As I spoke with Laura Handley about her experiences hiking, foraging, and teaching others, I was impressed with her passion for learning. With every step she takes and every new highpoint she conquers, Laura learns, builds her skills, updates her knowledge, and imagines ways to share what she has experienced and learned with others. Risk leaders should bring a similar zest for learning and sharing to their work to increase their impact on the missions they serve.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She would love to hear about your wilderness survival stories or answer any questions about leveraging risk at your nonprofit. Reach Melanie at melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.