



# Lessons Learned from a death on Dartmoor

by the Lessons Learned Group

## THE ISSUE

**I**n March 2007 a 14 year old girl from a nearby independent school drowned while trying to cross a swollen stream on Dartmoor on the second day of a training expedition for the 'Ten Tors Event'. Until now legal proceedings have prevented the publication of lessons which can be more broadly learned from the tragedy.

The weekend had been exceptionally wet and windy. Watercourses were in flood, overflowing and swiftly moving, although within expectation for this time of year on Dartmoor.

Many teams had withdrawn or amended their plans, but others persevered in the difficult conditions. One group of 11 students, mostly 14 and 15 years olds, carried on. The leader of the supervisors with this group was relatively inexperienced, as were his two assistants, all teachers at the school. The group itself had undergone a condensed training schedule. They were, however, accompanied for most of the first day by a more experienced person who held a mountain leader award, and had been appointed by the school to support the team leader. A second team of adults from the school would join them for day two to assist with supervision.

Most of the first day had been devoted to training. This included the topic of river crossing: essentially the group were told emphatically to avoid crossing rivers or streams.

It was agreed that after the night's camp one member of the team would not continue. She had struggled during the day and had slowed the group significantly. As a result the next morning's arrangements to monitor the group, while they now undertook unaccompanied legs, were partially revised. After a wet night and an early start, the first leg went as planned with the group rendezvousing with the leaders at the agreed Tor. At this point the three supervisors accompanied the girl who was withdrawing off the moor. Meanwhile the second supervising team were to converge on the second rendezvous from a different road point.

The students, without their slower colleague, walked a lot quicker than estimated for this particular leg, and reached the rendezvous point much sooner than expected. Meanwhile, in the poor conditions, the two staff due to meet them there failed to find it. The back-up arrangements were to use mobile phones but these proved very problematic in the conditions.

While the group of students did not find their own supervisors at the rendezvous they did encounter a supervisor from an unrelated team. Various mobile



member of the group fell over and, while still wearing her own rucksack, was swept away. Despite frantic efforts to get her out of the water she was swept ever further away and could not be located despite an extended search by the group as well as others they encountered. She was eventually found unconscious, evacuated by helicopter, but died later in hospital.

A subsequent civil case was unsuccessful and HSE decided not to prosecute either the school or any of the supervisors.

## THE LESSONS

This tragedy was the outcome of a chain of human errors and coincidences, the absence of any one of which may have prevented the tragedy.

1. The competence of staff, leaders and assistants, should be verified. In particular, personal claims of navigational ability should be substantiated.
2. Relying on, and trying to communicate by, mobile phone appears to have led to at least some confusion, and at least some of the subsequent difficulties. Mobile phones can be very useful but their effectiveness, especially in remote mountain or moorland areas, should never be assumed in the leader's plan for remotely supervising groups. Network coverage can now easily be verified through such web sites as <http://ukmobilecoverage.co.uk>
3. The confidence to cancel or revise a venture, either from the outset or whilst in progress needs to be a principal part of a leader's confidence as well as overall planning. Having a well embedded 'Plan B' to address foreseeable contingencies makes this option considerably easier.
4. The setting up of an emergency camp is a component part of other schemes' training for this sort of venture. Ironically the group had everything with them that they needed to secure their safety at the planned rendezvous. Alternatively, the group could have carried light weight 'group shelters'. These can be quickly and easily deployed, providing shelter for five or six people, and can be used for everything from providing some shelter at lunch time or for short breaks, to an emergency situation such as this. Significantly they provide shelter without the mental barrier associated with setting up an emergency camp.
5. The decision to cross the stream need not necessarily have led to tragedy. The final contributing factor seems to be that at least some of the group were still wearing their rucksacks at least while preparing to cross the stream. It is standard practice to undo waist straps and slip one arm free in these situations so that the rucksack can be easily dropped if required, as here. ■

phone conversations, with varying clarity and success in the difficult conditions, took place between this person, the students' own lead supervisor and the supervisors who were to rendezvous with them. After waiting for quite some time, during which the group were becoming progressively more cold and wet, they looked at the start of their next leg but rejected it on the basis that it involved crossing a swollen stream, which would have been contrary to their training, and reinforced by the lead supervisor by mobile phone. They consequently returned to the rendezvous point where the other leader was still waiting for his group to arrive. An alternative, but significantly longer, 'dry' route was identified and this appears to have been agreed with their own leader, and the two missing supervisors who were to return to the road. By this time the group were generally tired, cold and quite dispirited.

It is not clear what caused the leader from the other group to agree to lead the students across the stream. (He very sadly died, quite unrelatedly, before giving his evidence to the inquest.) What is known is that he himself had only recently crossed the stream on the way to the rendezvous. At this point the watercourse was split into two by a small island. The group, assisted by the adult leader, safely jumped across the first part but while throwing rucksacks across the second part the last

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