

Society's response to risk-taking

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Driving along a country road, I came across the sign that read Beware Elderly People Bite. A witty graffitist had added the last word. I spotted the old people's home on the right, but not one menacing senior citizen jumped out to attack me.

What a crazy sign! How totally superfluous and inappropriate it seemed to me. Do drivers really need to be reminded with a sign of every conceivable hazard on the road?

Near Mildura I once saw a meter square sign that read: Hazard warning sign ahead. And sure enough such a sign existed around the next corner.

Is our society becoming so paranoid about possible risks to life that people need to be wrapped in cotton wool to protect them from every conceivable danger? And this trend is also emerging in outdoor adventure.

Outdoor adventure is surely all about the adrenalin rush that comes from seeking the unknown, of being prepared to take some calculated risks in order to enhance the experience. Practising and perfecting moves on one section of an indoor climbing wall doesn't come close to scaling an untried sandstone cliff face in a precipitous mountain range where each hold and move is unique and a challenge. Or plodding along a machine-tracked ski trail where one's ski is firmly confined within the predetermined rut. This experience hardly equates to the exhilaration of gliding through pristine powder where one's route is determined by one's navigation skill and one's imagination.

I remember when I was in Year 12 and the second term holidays were in sight. I was desperate to escape the stress and to experience a 'real' outdoor adventure. None of my friends was interested in joining me, so I went alone. A week spent hiking through the high country was just what I needed. I revelled in the majesty of towering mountain ash and of dripping fern gullies. Of spider webs glistening in the early morning dew and the scent of eucalyptus after rain. Of 360 degree vistas across soaring mountain crags and buttresses. I saw a single wedge-tail eagle playing on the thermals high above me, seemingly unaware of my presence. It was the most spectacular and magical place I had ever seen. Sure I was scared I'd get lost, and I did lose my way once, but that made me more careful with my navigation. Yes, my sleeping bag got saturated one stormy night through my pathetic: nylon tent, but I got dry again. And I came away from that

experience feeling fantastic that I had done it on my own and survived. It made me more determined to seek adventure and I felt really strong and self-assured. I figured that I could do anything I set my mind to.

Why then is there a trend in our society to deter us from embarking on such journeys and to cosset and protect us from any possible danger? Look around. Signs are probably the most insidious and offensive distractions to the outdoor experience. On the Razorback near Mt. Hotham there is a sign warning skiers of dangerous cornices. In the alpine country one is urged to follow the snow-pole lines to escape from blizzard conditions. Huts have been constructed on every second mountain to protect us from the elements. Trail-head fees are charged to cover the expenses of providing ski trails. Why do we need them? They all distract the eye from the beauty and the natural experience. Can't we approach our journeys in such a way that we don't need to travel in storms, and can't we be self-reliant with our tents and cooking gear? Do we need a set trail to pre-determine our adventure for us?

At Wilson's Promontory walkers invariably follow each other along a pre-determined route around the isthmus. Campers must stay in designated camping spots, numbers are restricted, and one can only stay one night at any campsite. Camping permits must be paid for and must be booked well in advance for peak seasons. Rangers are out in force to make sure that the rules are followed. This sounds more like a bus trip than a spontaneous wilderness experience.

When I realised my dream of walking the Overland Trail at Cradle Mountain, I was really disappointed to see kilometres of duckboarding stretching before me, and newly-constructed huts every twenty kilometres. There were even privately-owned huts used by adventure travel companies in this World Heritage Area! The huts offered hot-water showers and comfortable living conditions to the well-heeled walker. Once a day our peaceful wilderness experience was shattered by the cacophonous sound of a light aircraft flying along the route with tourists on board. Was nothing sacred?

It seems that the few remaining natural places where adventure could still be experienced are being progressively altered and transformed into neat and safe environments. Why is this occurring? Well, firstly it is because there are now so few natural places to go to, and there are many, many people wanting to go to them. The

pressure of population means that damage through overuse is inevitable and popular spots are soon degraded. Wilson's Promontory is the most visited national park in Victoria and painful decisions had to be made about how best to protect the park.

At Cradle Mountain World Heritage Area, the decision was made that it was better to sacrifice some wilderness values in one area in order to protect the rest of the park. Walkers are restricted to a few trails only. Economics also plays an important part. Tourism is currently the biggest growth industry in Australia, offsetting some of the despair about the national debt. Many tourists like to see Australia's unique environment and not all of them are keen to backpack and adopt a minimal impact code of behaviour.

This also raises the issue of age and fitness. Some people argue that if one isn't prepared to do it the 'hard way', that is, to be self-sufficient, to walk, and to have a minimal impact on the environment, then one shouldn't be able to go to such places. This, however, restricts access to the young and the fit. The counter argument suggests that this view is elitist and discriminatory. Why should a granny or a disabled person be excluded from enjoying an adventure experience, albeit a fairly tame and pre-packaged one?

Then there is the media and the legal system. Whenever there is a disaster in a natural area - a climber falls while rockclimbing, a walker becomes lost and perhaps perishes, or a child is injured on a school camp - the response of the media is to present the accident in a sensational and alarmist way. People die in the streets and in the home every day but the media rarely find this newsworthy. The legal system reinforces this when negligence on someone's part seemingly has to be found. Teachers and adventure travel companies have faced litigation, and the inevitable response is to attempt to eliminate any possible risks from future experiences. Governments respond by imposing regulations, putting up signs, approving safety aids, and so on. Obviously some safety measures cannot be argued against, particularly where novices are involved. But perhaps we as a society need to think about the importance of outdoor adventure experiences to individuals in a society.

We predominantly live in urban, transformed, stressful, unnatural environments and adventure often is our only way of understanding our natural world and something about ourselves. It provides a very powerful personal experience. Perhaps we need to accept that some risk and an occasional disaster is an acceptable price to pay. We need to be better trained in how to cope in a natural environment; to navigate, to be safe, and to read the country, before we venture out.

Aboriginal people learnt such things through hearing the stories of how to move across country, of how to read the land, of how to survive in the natural environment, and of how to look after themselves and the land. They learnt such messages from their elders and passed them on through the generations. They didn't need signs and huts and regulations. We have much to learn from them.