

Responding to the Mangatepopo canyoning tragedy that claimed seven lives in 2008

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Background

Canyoning is an outdoor activity where people traverse canyons by using a variety of techniques such as abseiling, swimming, walking, climbing etc. It is an activity that combines rushing water, steep sides and has limited exit opportunities once a group has commenced. Currently in New Zealand no national qualifications standards or legislation exist for this activity.

On 15 April 2008 six students from East Auckland's Elim Christian College and a teacher died in the Mangatepopo gorge whilst canyoning. This tragic event thrust drowning and the activity of canyoning into the national spotlight. As a result of this incident several reports were completed by the New Zealand Police, the Department of Labour and by the Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre. Despite the validity of these reports it was evident to WSNZ and the New Zealand Outdoor Instructors Association (NZOIA) that canyoning was a relatively new activity to New Zealand that had a rising participation base but no set national qualifications or standards. As such it was critical to learn more about this activity with a view to assisting the industry make steps to ensure that incidents were less likely to take place in the future.

Methods / Implementation

WSNZ and NZOIA commissioned research to establish:

- What the level of canyoning activity in NZ was?
- Who was leading canyoning trips (schools, outdoor centers, operators)?
- What the environmental / terrain conditions that groups were active in?
- Where canyoning activity was occurring geographically and if distinct levels of activity were taking place?
- What qualifications and standards had been implemented by other countries?
- Did the scope of overseas qualifications (environment/terrain/activity level) have parallels with NZ?
- Is there sufficient activity to enable / justify the establishment of national standards in New Zealand with consideration given to if other solutions existed and if current qualifications should be adapted or supplemented by endorsements?

Both qualitative and quantitative research methodology was used along with interviewing major operators in the field. The research recommended:

- A canyoning workshop was supported;
- The forming of a national entity was supported;
- Daniel Clearwater was supported to produce a guidebook;
- The canyon web group was encouraged to become a member of Water Safety New Zealand (WSNZ);
- A web-based canyoning resource is established on a national outdoors organisation's website, eg WSNZ, Outdoors New Zealand;
- Early warning system information was collated for canyons;
- As part of training, a decision-making tool for recreationalists is developed along the lines of those being trailed in the avalanche-training field.

Following completion of the research stage a public consultation round was initiated to invite interested parties to make submissions on the report and refine the recommendations. As result of the submissions several recommendations will be accepted and completed prior to the Conference, with others rejected. Unfortunately at the time of writing this abstract it is not possible to provide this detail. However it will be available at the time of the Conference.

Acknowledgments

WSNZ, NZOIA, Active Voice

References:

1. Active Voice, Canyoning in New Zealand: A Report for Water Safety New Zealand and the New Zealand Outdoor Instructors Association, 2010

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