

# Can We Still Ethically Adventure?

## A philosophical look at Adventure in NZ

By Mark Jones

This presentation will look at the historical basis for adventure in NZ, explore the current climate of risk aversion and where I think it is taking us, suggest some reasons for our changing attitude to risk, and cast an eye toward the future.

### So why is adventure important anyway?

*“The civilised society exhibits five crucial traits; art, peace, beauty, truth and adventure; without adventure civilisation is in full decay”*

Alfred Whitehead, the noted Cambridge philosopher, articulates a fundamental truth about the value of adventure to society. I would guess most of this audience see adventure as a natural and vital facet of their lives. We don't question the value of adventure. Its value is self-evident from our own interactions with the wilds, the things we learned, those mysteries uncovered of the landscape, and of the soul. Though this truth will be intuitively understood and accepted by those who do adventure, those who don't may take more convincing

Goethe wrote “Man can withstand anything, except a succession of ordinary days” Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe lived around the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Extraordinary days made the treadmill tolerable then as they do now. But adventure is more than a fancy, more than a diversion, it is a basic human need. Journeys beyond the road's end leave us changed and can give us a tremendous feeling of wellbeing.

The special benefits to adventures in wild places are well documented. And Brownowski identifies 3 defining characteristics of nature that make adventuring in it a valuable thing. The first is **balance**. Literally everything in nature, on a macro and micro scale is in balance. They have to be for the world to work, or function efficiently. This includes a human being. It is a clear fact that modern societies operate contrary to this law, and anxiety, mental illness, and unhappiness are characteristics of the malaise. Through interactions with nature we feel more centred or balanced. We are able to focus more fully, are more productive, and we feel more positive about our ourselves.

The second characteristic of nature is **uncertainty**. Everything in nature is dynamic, in a state of flux. It is this uncertainty that gives us the potential for risk and risk is key of growth. Many of history's great thinkers have spoken of the value of risk taking. According to the psychologist Abraham Maslow there are two forces, pulling an individual in opposite directions. One force makes people cling to safety and defensiveness out of fear, making them regress backwards, the other impels individuals forward toward wholeness and uniqueness of self, self-confidence, and the full functioning of all their capacities. The force which makes us cling to safety can at times deter us from growing. In the hills and on the sea, we learn how to risk. We discover the rewards that can result from wagering, and that our failures can teach us as much as our successes. Risk is a crucial trait if one is to grow. If we are to become better at our professions we must try new things; we must take risks. In overcoming fears, we move closer to our potential, both personally and professionally.

The third Characteristic is that nature is **holistic**. While industrialised societies seem intent on treating themselves as separate from nature this is an unhealthy and in the long term

an unsustainable notion. We are part of nature. We discover truths in the hills that are harder to find in the clutter of a city. This idea is fundamental to adventure education programs, such as Outward Bound that use adventure to foster personal and social growth. Students are faced with challenging situations that ask of them resolution, courage, perseverance, self-control, etc.

Colin Mortlock who has shared many insights about adventure from his own long involvement with the outdoors writes that “the most important journey is the journey inwards.” The endurance, the hardship, the facing of dangers, these are merely means, they are not ends. Wisdom, enlargement of the spirit, discovering life’s truest values for oneself, these are what the wilderness can teach. These are outcomes that we can never disdain.

Never disdain maybe, but measure with difficulty. It’s not easy to quantify gains in wisdom, and personal growth, and in endurance and resilience and all these other things that anecdote and intuition tell us are products of adventure experiences.

The benefits of adventure may be intangible, but they are no less real for being hard to measure. They help us grow, they give us energy, they make us more productive, more creative, more interesting people. And they make us more able to contribute fully to society. We live in a world where if it can’t be measured then it isn’t acknowledged, and we need to promote a recognition of the importance of these intangible rewards that can be gained from the adventuring.

We have a long history of putting our making icons of our adventurers. People who have adventured greatly in this country are also linked with enterprise. People like Sir Edmund Hillary and Sir Peter Blake and Graham Dingle, and numerous others, who have achieved remarkable feats and inspired us to look to our own possibilities-. These people who have put a great deal into adventure have also had a lot to offer back to society. Lack of adventure on the other hand is a form of poverty of the spirit. I believe this results in a lower quality of opportunity and of life.

So, is adventure an essential element of the human spirit that we tamper with at our peril? Do we risk the future quality of society by avoiding risk? I believe we do.

### **The current climate of risk aversion**

In years past, adventure was a basic requirement of living as a pioneer in NZ. Flooded rivers needed negotiating, the unmapped landscape required discovering, communication was achieved by travelling to visit folks, often vast distances across hostile terrain. People didn’t need to seek adventure or to commune with nature, it was part of daily life

We now live in an era where state of the art technology is affordable, the landscape is essentially “explored” and perhaps most importantly to this paper, we live in a culture where safety is embraced and ever increased at all costs; and there are costs, not just financial but I believe a social cost to society in the long term of people who are risk illiterate.

To venture out into the wilderness without communication is increasingly being considered an act of hubris, not a choice people have. We have authorities that concern themselves with people’s personal recreation choices, such as Huka Falls descents that somehow end up involving the police and Harbour Master. We have rock climbing areas being purchased and sanitised so that they resemble more, in spirit if not in appearance, outdoor gymnasiums- rather than crags, where people choose to be challenged by the rock.

Liability looms large in the imaginations of bureaucrats, and councils feel they are somehow responsible for the decisions each of us make. By the law of common sense they are not. New Zealand citizens have freedom of choice and we choose. We have fought hard to preserve that freedom; and we choose, to do or not do. In the wake of the recent local body attempts to regulate the activities of surfing and boogie-boarding by imposing restrictions it would appear that councils would like us not to have that choice. In other words they would like to regulate our recreation to keep us "safe". There are many examples of the erosion of the responsibility we are expected to take for our own actions, and a corresponding erosion of our rights to act as we please in our recreation. This is a trend that must be reversed.

My grandfather would have laughed at the thought of motorcycle helmets being compulsory. My father in his youth would have laughed at cycle helmets being demanded by law. I, likewise chuckle at the thought of surfing helmets being made compulsory, but perhaps it is not far off. Now, helmets may be a good thing, but I would still like to retain the right to choose to wear one or not to wear one as I see circumstance suggest is appropriate.

### **Reasons for our intolerance of risk?**

We live in a culture of fear where media latches onto and inflates anything that approaches danger- be it about food, medicine, technology, crime, environment, and especially children. They seem intent on inciting an obsession with safety and a fear of risk rather than portraying living as the relatively incredibly safe experience that it is, by in large.

Perhaps this very media response is a product of how safe society is. "Boredom is the awful reward of the careful" and there appears to be a need to make the world a more dangerous and hence exciting place than it actually is. Adventure attracts disproportionately negative press. People die every day in the world by tragic but mundane means and we never see a word written about them. Libby Perves mentioned some UK examples in an address there. 20 people are electrocuted by their bedside lamps every year, 20 are killed when they fall over getting out of bed, and 30 people drown in the bath each year. Every year. Yet there are no calls to regulate baths, or beds.

Another reason is What Dr Frank Furedi write of in his book "Paranoid Parenting" He identifies several themes which help illuminate adult anxiety toward child safety. Here are 3 of them:

1. Societies tendency to inflate dangers which I already spoken of.
2. The erosion of adult solidarity. By that he means that the relation of trust between parents, teachers, nursery workers and carers has become highly ambiguous. Instead of regarding other adults as a source of support in the task of child rearing they are regarded with a degree of suspicion.. "Stranger danger" can foster a concern for children that borders on pathological.
3. Childhood has been redefined in light of the above whereby every child is viewed as "at risk", from everything. "I could not live with myself if something happened to Johnny" Is an expression of the consciousness of how adults feel about themselves. Sadly, this problem becomes a burden on children.

Our aversion to risk is becoming institutionalised. It is built into legislation in the form of OSH, ACC and insurance companies have a vested interest in promoting safety rather than calculated risk. Schools find it increasingly threatening to have programmes that acknowledge the place of

risk. Yet risk is an important and integral part of the adventure education methodology- risk may have to take place for the outcomes of such programmes to be achieved.

Beauraucrats seem to have an obsessive desire to plan and shape every possible outcome. I think we should be in the business of trying to take down those structures that have been gradually created over time.

**The future if we persist the way we are going:**

What we risk through having an objectionable attitude to adventure and to risk is a generation who are risk illiterate. A generation so bereft of common sense that they will need signs to warn them that wet floors are slippery and hot things burn... Oh, we have that now, right. Well imagine the signage of the future world. "Beware of the sea and beware of this sign". "Caution pedestrians, cars have right of way".

A DOC sign up in the Waipoua Forest states: "Beware of falling branches.You enter this forest at your own risk". Which I though was interesting because I wondered who had been accepting the risk for me going into forests up to that point. Have we created a climate where people think someone else is responsible for their actions even in wild places like our own native bush? This is sad if it is true.

It was not long ago that we witnessed the successful suing of Life Saving Australia by a member of the public who dived into the shallows between the flags and broke his neck when he hit a sand bar. Several million dollars it cost them for not having erected a sign saying "Caution: Look before you leap". That sort of thing used to fall under the catch all of personal responsibility, but such a quaint and antiquated notion has since been superceded by the far superior blame culture where someone else is always accountable for your actions or lack of them.

I would suggest there is a strong link between good judgement and common sense and a broad base of experience. And by inference the less young people experience life the less common sense they will have. In years to come when we find the accident rate has not changed, will we wonder whether our efforts would have been better spent fostering good judgement, common sense and the management of risks rather than trying to make the world safe by avoidance. Wrapping our kids in cotton wool will not serve them well. It will not prepare them for the real world, where real dangers exist and where real decisions have to be made that cannot be avoided.

Does our aversion to risk actually lead to an increase in accidents as common sense gets replaced by signs and policy? Only time will tell.

Risk Homeostasis is the brain child of Gerald Wilde.

It postulates that we each have a level of risk we are comfortable with and indeed there is a level of risk we each need to have in our lives to feel comfortable. We will do things to create this level of risk if it does not exist. We must offer our youth opportunities to adventure in ways that are socially acceptable, otherwise they will pursue their own ways of increasing risk in their lives that may not necessarily be deemed desirable.

"The art of life is not to reduce the risk to zero, but to take the right amount of risk"

-Professor Gerald Wilde of Queens University

I believe risk is an essential element of personal growth. And an ability to take calculated risks is a valuable attribute. Is it any wonder in NZ, where adventure playgrounds are an increasing

rarity in schools, or any other public land for that matter as they are dismantled through fears of liability, that entrepreneurs are hard to find- People prepared to stick their necks out. Bold people. People prepared to recognise the risk, calculate the odds and go for it. Those adventure playgrounds of our youth were a great metaphor for the risks of life. There was no safety net. You couldn't back out and slump onto a safety rope halfway through an element. You finished or fell. It felt great to finish. It was scary to fall. In facing real risks and succeeding you learned something of immense value. Dangers need not necessarily be a barrier with good planning, skills and determination.

David Lewis wrote the urge to compete in the 1960 Atlantic Yacht race, which he completed despite a broken mast,

“Why should I, a staid general practitioner, venture out, at the cost of not inconsiderable discomfort and expense, over a predictably stormy ocean? It seems to me that there must be some outgoing imperative, a sense of wonder at the world around us, a curiosity manifested in research, art, philosophy, or in just the simple urge to find what lies over the ranges, that is an essential part of the human spirit.”

Let's not breed that out of humanity or institutionalise it out of our society. Let's promote a balanced attitude to risking and to adventure, so we will never have to question our right to either.

## **A Day at the Crag by Mark Jones**

(a cynical look at the future of adventure recreation)

Helmets had long been compulsory, so that was easy to remember, but mechanical prussiks had only just been made a mandatory piece of kit for recreational climbers. I dared not forget them, the crag police were quick to slap an instant fine and one-week suspension for such a transgression of safety regulations.

I thought I might head to one of the more obscure crags this weekend. All crags were pay to enter, but the less popular ones were cheaper usually. It was also a crag I'd not been able to climb at before, only just having passed my Level 3 Bolted Crag Certificate. I aspired to one day gain my Trad Crag Clearance, enabling me to place some of the high-tech wizardry I'd seen on the harnesses of more experienced climbers- The Climbtech expansion locker for example or the microhexocams made by Mr Vertical. But that was a long way off. I hadn't even passed my Rock-Chemistry prerequisite yet.

I walked up the paved track to the crag with Mike my climbing buddy. Mike only held his Learner Cert for lead climbing. He could only second routes and belay unless he was on top rope. I swiped my climbing card through the "Crag Manager" and keyed in four routes, thinking that would be plenty for the day. The amount owing came up on the screen, I punched in my pin number and out spat my day pass. I clipped this to my chalk bag and went through the turnstile. Mike did the same and we soon stood at the base of the wall on the bed of rubber rings that had become the norm several years earlier for forming an ankle-safe zone beneath crags.

We were fairly early so there was only a short queue on the most popular route "Cyberspace, The Final Frontier". We watched as the climbers ahead of us clipped into the 10 or so stainless-steel ring bolts using triple lock binas. Anything lesser would cop a fine these days, as would the old-fashioned practice of using only a single lead rope.

The leader reached the belay station, a steel platform bolted to the cliff face at 15 meters. He obviously didn't have his level 2 height endorsement allowing him to continue to the next belay stance. He clipped his ropes through the 2 quicklock rope brackets and using his wrist com communicated to his belayer his desire to be lowered.

Progress sure had brought a lot of changes to climbing since the reckless era of the previous century. New equipment, new safety standards, annual warrant of fitness checks for harness and ropes... I looked quickly at the stamp on my harness card with a sudden pang of fear, but it was OK, I still had a month before the renewal was required. But as I looked at the concrete composite face in front of us, I wondered what it must've been like to climb on real rock. Climbers must have been a wild and crazy breed in the previous century, before the safety thrust of the new millennium, before recreational regulations came into force.

I almost felt like finding a piece of virgin rock, to find out what it felt like to climb in the old style. But no, a man could come to serious grief if he strayed from the regulations laid down by those who know best. And they do know best, surely. Don't they?