

“Climbing Rescues in America: Reality Does Not Support ‘High-Risk, High-Cost’ Perception”

By Lloyd Athearn, Deputy Director, The American Alpine Club

Rescuers fighting against time, terrain and weather to reach climbers¹ in distress high on a mountain or rock cliff create a tension that is palpable. Media coverage of these rescues—often times on live television—brings public attention and scrutiny, and in some cases demands that climbers be held personally responsible for paying rescue costs since they are “risk-taking dare devils.”² Over the past decade, some states have passed laws allowing the recovery of rescue costs—in some cases prompted by high-profile climbing rescues. Lost in the dramatic coverage of climbing rescues is an accurate, thorough and dispassionate analysis of the underlying issue.

With this groundbreaking report, the American Alpine Club clarifies some of the common misperceptions regarding mountain rescues, climbing risks and the costs of rescue services. The report shows that climbers are not a significant drain on the public safety system, and it debunks many of the arguments used to support charge-for-rescue policies specifically targeting climbers. It also explains why turning a humanitarian public safety activity into a business service is an inappropriate response that may cause more harm than good, as well as open up government agencies to costly lawsuits.



An Air Force Reserve helicopter approaches an accident site on Oregon's Mount Hood. Photo © Matthew Weaver/Portland Mountain Rescue.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The fatality rate for climbing has dropped dramatically over the last several decades in the United States and at many popular mountains, refuting the commonly held perception that rapid growth in the number of climbers has translated into more rescues and more fatalities.
- Climbing and mountaineering rescues are limited in number and occur less frequently than seemingly safer activities like hiking, boating, hunting, swimming and motor vehicle use.
- The complexity of climbing rescues and the ability of climbers to self-rescue in minor accidents make climbing rescues more expensive on average than rescues of many other recreational groups, but the most expensive rescues are searches for lost persons.
- Most climbing rescues are performed by highly skilled volunteer rescue units who do not charge or by specialized park rangers whose costs are often subsidized by climbing use fees, making climbing rescues less of a drain on taxpayers than rescues of other recreational participants.
- Charging for climbing rescues runs counter to national search and rescue policies, opens government agencies up to costly lawsuits and tends to delay the call for help, putting rescuers and victims at greater risk.
- Though several states have laws allowing the recovery of rescue costs, most have been used in only the most egregious cases—and none has been used to recover costs from a mountaineer or rock climber. Federal regulations allow land managers to fine people who create hazardous situations.
- Mountain rescues, like all emergency response activities, involve inherent risks to rescuers. Volunteer and professional mountain rescuers have an exemplary safety record, especially when compared to fatalities for other emergency response providers.
- Taken together, these factors show that there is little justification for singling out climbers to pay rescue costs if other groups continue to be rescued without charge.



Founded in 1902, the American Alpine Club is the premier national organization of mountaineers and rock climbers in the United States. Through its 7,000 members nationwide, the AAC promotes climbing knowledge, conserves mountain environments and serves the American climbing community.

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CLIMBING ACCIDENTS AND FATALITIES ARE DECREASING OVER TIME

Mountaineering and climbing rescues focus attention on serious mishaps, but statistics show that these are decreasing over time even in the face of dramatic expansion in the number of climbers nationwide. Since most climbing occurs in areas that do not require registration or permits, or the agencies that collect voluntary permit data do not have the staff to accurately collate it, an accurate assessment of the total number of climbers nationwide is unknown. Nevertheless, some of the most popular mountaineering destinations where registration is required serve as vivid examples of this dramatic growth. The number of climbers attempting Mount Rainier increased from around 300 per year in the early 1950s to more than 11,000 per year early this decade. At Mount McKinley (known to most climbers as Denali), the number of climbers attempting the mountain increased from fewer than 50 per year in the 1960s to more than 1,200 per year in the first half of this decade.³

Despite the dramatic increase in the number of people climbing in America, the number of accidents, persons involved, injuries and fatalities reported annually to *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* has declined after peaks in the 1970s and 1980s. On an average annual basis, the number of fatalities peaked in the 1970s, while the number of climbing accidents, injuries and persons involved peaked in the 1980s (Table 1).⁴ These indicators show climbing accidents and fatalities to be progressively rarer in absolute terms, and dramatically more so when compared to the increase in people climbing during this period.

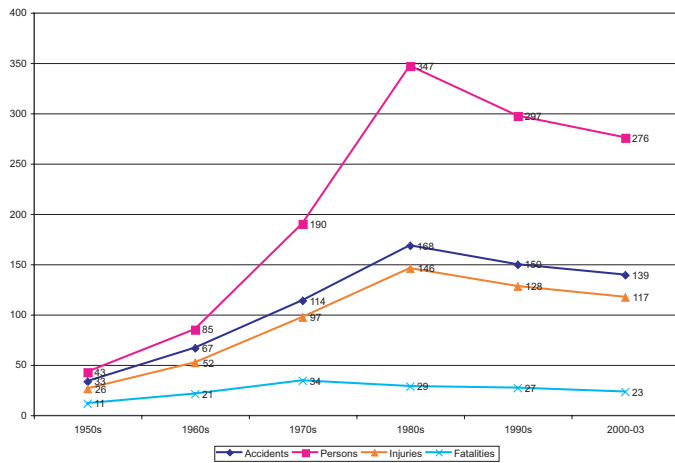


Table 1 The average annual number of reported climbing accidents, persons involved, injuries and fatalities peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, and has been on a downward trend since despite a surge in climbing activity in recent decades. Source: *Accidents in North American Mountaineering (1951-2003)*.

Even when one focuses in on the most hazardous mountains in America, the risk of dying has declined consistently over the last several decades. This has occurred because the number of reported climbing fatalities has remained relatively constant at the same time there have been dramatic increases in the number of people climbing. As an example, the fatality rate (expressed as the number of deaths per 100,000 climber attempts) at Washington's Mount Rainier has been on a general downward trend since the 1950s

(Table 2).⁵ The fatality rate increased during the 1980s due to the single deadliest climbing accident in U.S. history (11 fatalities).⁶ Several deaths on the mountain during the 2004 season, combined with a drop in visitation, caused the fatality rate to edge up again over the first half of this decade.

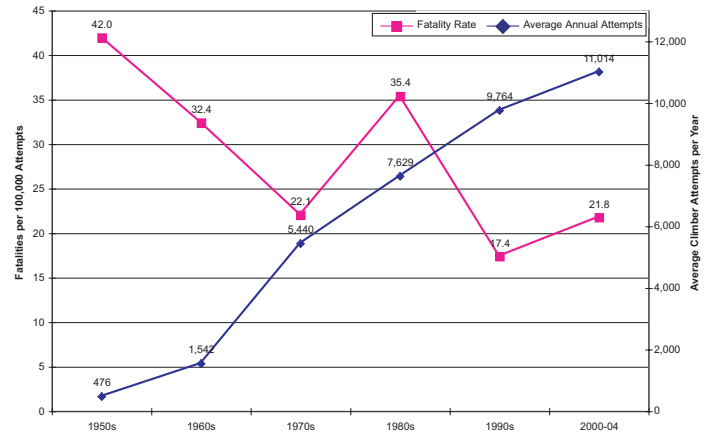


Table 2 The fatality rate per climber attempt on Mount Rainier has dropped over several decades as more people attempt to climb the peak while climbing fatalities remain relatively constant. Source: *Mount Rainier National Park*.

At Alaska's Denali, the downward trend since the 1960s has been even more dramatic (Table 3).⁷ Over the past five decades, Denali's fatality rate per climber attempt fell almost 99 percent and is now at a rate close to that of climbing Mount Rainier. Some of the recent decline likely stems from an aggressive safety education program initiated in 1995. The fatality rate in the nine years prior to that effort starting was 360.2, while the rate in the nine years after the program was instituted was only 116.4. Nevertheless, the declining fatality rate predates that campaign and was more significant statistically several decades prior. Since an ascent of Denali involves on average 17.5 days, while an ascent of Mount Rainier takes only 2.5 days, on a per-day basis the fatality rate associated with climbing Denali has dropped well below that of Mount Rainier.⁸

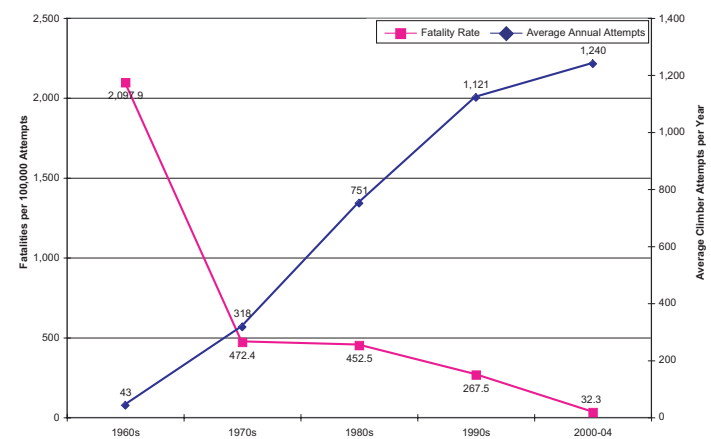


Table 3 The fatality rate per climber attempt of Denali has fallen almost 99 percent since the 1960s despite the mountain's formidable combination of high altitude, extreme climate and hazardous terrain. Source: *Denali National Park*.

While any climbing fatality is tragic and these accidents can tend to cluster for unknown reasons, all climbing accidents must be viewed in light of the overall trend of climbing becoming increasingly safer, at least as measured by fatality rate. More reliable climbing equipment, better knowledge of human physiology, improved climbing skills and education, greater knowledge of natural hazards, more professionalized rescue groups (including the use of high-altitude helicopters) and more people on the climbing routes have translated into fewer injuries and fatalities from climbing in recent decades.

CLIMBING RESCUES ARE HIGHLY VISIBLE, BUT LIMITED IN NUMBER

The perception that climbers present a significant drain on search and rescue services is not supported by national or state data. National Park Service data from 2003 confirm that climbing and mountaineering rescues, while highly visible, are less frequent than rescues of perceived lower-risk visitor groups including hikers, boaters and swimmers (Table 4).⁹ Human use of national parks is principally for recreation, though some recreational activities like hunting and motorized recreation that commonly occur on other federal, state and private lands are either prohibited or severely restricted in national parks.

Activity	All NPS Rescues
1. Day hiking	30.6%
2. Motorized boating	21.9%
3. Swimming	13.7%
4. Overnight hiking	10.4%
5. Non-motorized boating	5.7%
6. Unknown	3.7%
7. Rock climbing (all forms)	3.3%
8. Mountaineering (all forms)	1.8%
9. Equestrian/pack stock	1.7%
10. Motor vehicles	1.2%

Table 4 Rock climbing and mountaineering ranked low on the top 10 list of most frequently rescued groups within the national park system during 2003. Source: National Park Service.

Even at national parks with high-profile, internationally famous climbing destinations, such as Yosemite, Grand Teton, Devils Tower, Rocky Mountain, Joshua Tree and Mount Rainier, climbing rescues are generally dwarfed by rescues of day and overnight hikers. For example, at Yosemite National Park, among the top worldwide destinations for technical rock and “big wall” climbing, rescues of climbers made up 14.7 percent of all rescues between 1998 and 2004, while rescues of hikers represented 67.2 percent.¹⁰ Rescues of climbers exceed those for hikers in only a few remote, mountainous and largely trailless parks, including North Cascades and Denali.

Climbing also ranks lower than many perceived “low risk” activities on the list of most frequently rescued groups for the entire state of Oregon (Table 5).¹¹ A requirement that sheriffs report every search and rescue mission in the state—whether performed for a recreational participant, lost child or escaped criminal—allows the Oregon Office of Emergency Management to perform the most comprehensive analysis of any state in the country. Despite the high level of climbing activity occurring in the state, due to its numerous glaciated peaks and rock formations, climbing rescues ranked seventh in the state among all categories, representing a significantly smaller share of all rescues than common activities including hiking, motor vehicle use in the backcountry and hunting.

Activity	All Oregon Rescues
1. Hiking	18.5%
2. Motor Vehicle ¹²	14.8%
3. Hunting	10.3%
4. Wandering ¹³	8.6%
5. Boating (all forms)	6.0%
6. Fixed Wing Aircraft	4.1%
7. Climbing	3.8%
8. Mushroom Picking	3.3%
9. Snowmobiling	3.1%
10. Fishing	2.9%

Table 5 Climbing rescues represented an even smaller share of all search and rescue missions performed in the state of Oregon during 2003. Top 10 listed. Source: Oregon Emergency Management.



The NPS and the Oregon data show that climbing rescues, while dramatic and frequently covered by the news media, constitute a very small share of overall rescues regardless of whether they are compared primarily to other recreational activities in a national park or when compared to all the searches and rescues occurring in an entire state.

A Yosemite Search and Rescue team carries an injured climber to a waiting helicopter on the summit of El Capitan. Photo © AAC Member Lincoln Else/Yosemite Climbing Ranger.

CLIMBING RESCUES ARE MORE EXPENSIVE ON AVERAGE, BUT THE MOST EXPENSIVE RESCUES ARE SEARCHES FOR LOST PERSONS

Compiling nationwide figures for search and rescue costs is virtually impossible given the fragmented nature of search and rescue in the United States. Personnel hours spent and the associated costs would need to include federal agencies like the Coast Guard, National Park Service and military rescue groups, countless civilian rescue teams, and local law enforcement and emergency response agencies. Without a comprehensive picture, we must look at snapshots of data where they exist.

The National Park Service in 2003 spent \$3.5 million for personnel, supplies, aircraft and vessels to respond to 3,108 search and rescue missions, an average of \$1,116 per incident.¹⁴ These search and rescue costs represent a very small portion of the National Park Service's annual operating budget. For example, during the six-year period from 1993 to 1998, search and rescue costs system wide accounted for 0.15% to 0.2% of the entire NPS budget. This amounted to roughly 1.5 cents out of total costs of \$6 per visitor to run the National Park system.¹⁵

Within the NPS, where record keeping is detailed and thorough, national data are not reported in a way that facilitates easy comparison of rescue costs between different recreational groups. Nevertheless, a detailed analysis of rescue incident reports from 2000 to 2004 at Yosemite National Park, a major international destination for hikers and climbers, showed that more money was spent rescuing day hikers and overnight hikers than was spent rescuing climbers (Table 6).¹⁶ On a combined basis, all hiking rescues cost more than three times as much as all climbing rescues.

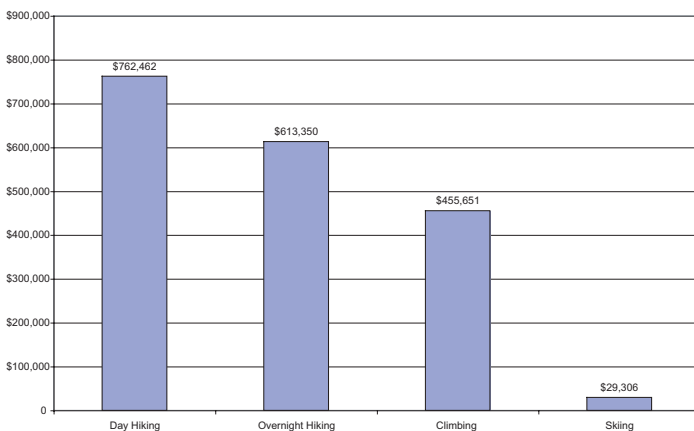


Table 6 More than three times as much was spent rescuing lost and injured hikers in Yosemite National Park than was spent rescuing climbers. Source: Yosemite National Park (2000-2004).

On an average cost basis, overnight hikers were the most expensive recreational visitor group to rescue in Yosemite National Park, followed by climbers, skiers and day hikers (Table 7).¹⁷ Two factors seem to contribute to the higher average cost for climbing rescues. First, Yosemite has some of the most technical climbing terrain in the world, including the sheer rock walls of El Capitan and Half Dome. Rescues in this environment are more technical, involve more personnel and have a greater likelihood of using a helicopter than, for example, assisting a day hiker with a twisted ankle on

a well-maintained hiking trail. Second, climbers are among the most self-reliant visitors, generally possessing the equipment and skills to self-rescue in all but the most serious incidents involving physical injuries or severe weather.

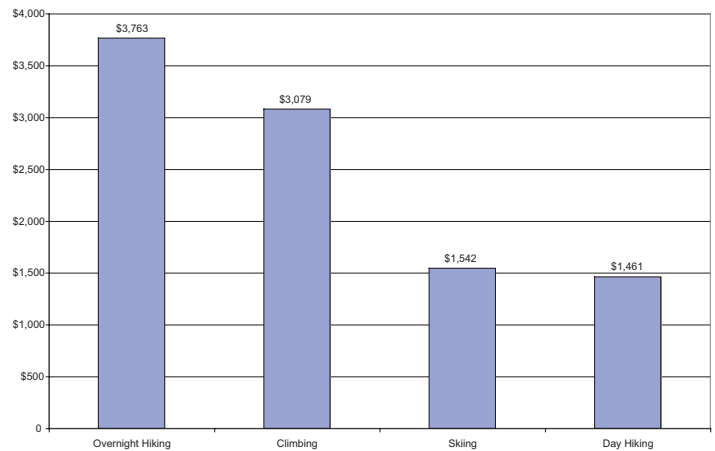


Table 7 Overnight hiking rescues were the most expensive on average in Yosemite National Park, exceeding the average costs for climbing, day hiking and skiing rescues. Source: Yosemite National Park (2000-2004).

Yosemite's experience confirms the national perception that the most expensive search and rescue incidents are searches for lost persons. Of the 10 most expensive rescues in Yosemite between 2000 and 2004, five were for day hikers and four were for overnight hikers, while only one was for a climber.¹⁸ Two hiker rescue incidents each exceeded \$100,000 in cost, with the most expensive being a \$123,699 unsuccessful search for a lost day hiker. The lone climbing rescue was 10th highest at \$23,264. While technical climbing terrain contributes to higher average costs, the known location of climbers, the experience of rescuing climbers from most routes in the park and the ability of climbers to self-rescue in less serious accidents all limit climber rescue costs.

CLIMBERS SHOULD A HIGHER SHARE OF RESCUE PERSONNEL COSTS THAN OTHER GROUPS

Dramatic mountain rescues often generate questions about the costs of providing rescue services. A Portland Oregonian headline following a Mount Hood rescue blared: "Who gets bill to save hikers? Some say costly search and rescue operations should be paid by climbers rather than the taxpayer."¹⁹ In reality, most of the rescue services provided to climbers comes from volunteer mountain rescue groups, military units that do not charge for their services or from specialized climbing rangers who are partially funded by climber fees. Thus, the perception that climbing rescues present a significant cost for taxpayers is not accurate. Climbers also pose less of a fiscal drain on the public than other recreational groups needing rescue, because their rescues utilize a much higher proportion of volunteer labor than do rescues for other commonly rescued groups.

Most mountain rescues nationwide are performed by volunteer rescue teams who do not charge for their services. Volunteers also play a significant role in rescuing climbers in major parks such as Denali, where the majority of all month-long ranger patrols are volunteers.

Military rescue units often provide helicopter evacuations on an optional basis as part of their mission, with these civilian rescues providing real-life training scenarios and helping meet their annual training requirements. Eliminating civilian rescues would not reduce taxpayer costs since military units must obtain this training in simulations if not in actual rescues.

Several parks and forests with significant climbing destinations have climbing rangers who provide services including climbing management, resource protection and rescues. Climbers often pay fees ranging from \$15 to \$200 per climb to fund these rangers, fees that are in excess of general entrance fees.²⁰

The only part of the search and rescue system that relies primarily on taxpayer funding is local governments—usually county sheriffs, but in some areas state fish and wildlife agencies or local fire departments—which either directly perform or oversee rescue operations as part of their public safety mandate. Thus, only a small portion of mountain rescue services are funded by the general public, and these services are similar to local law enforcement services provided to taxpayers without charge.

Oregon search and rescue data from 1997 through 2003 show that, of the 15 most frequently rescued groups, climbing had the second-highest average contribution of volunteer rescuer hours in comparison to paid government rescuer hours (Table 8).²¹ For every paid hour of time spent searching for or rescuing a climber, volunteer mountain rescue groups provided 5 hours and

42 minutes of free rescue services. The only group contributing more volunteer labor per hour of paid rescue time was the fixed-wing aircraft community. Perceived lower risk groups, including boaters, fishermen, ATV and snowmobile riders, and hunters, actually placed a significantly higher proportion of their rescue personnel costs on the public than did climbers. For example, a boating emergency in the state of Oregon on average relied almost five times more on paid rescuers than volunteers when compared to climbing emergencies.

Volunteer Rescue Time Contributed for Each Paid Rescue Hour (H:M)

Fixed-Wing Aircraft	6:19
Climbing	5:42
Criminal	5:32
Mushroom Picking	5:14
Hiking	4:51
Hunting	4:21
Wandering	4:05
Suicide	3:39
Snowmobile	3:12
Motor Vehicle	2:51
Other	2:41
Swimming	2:17
ATV	2:13
Fishing	2:11
Boating	1:11

Table 8 Climbing rescues in Oregon utilized a much greater share of volunteer labor than did rescues for other groups, thereby reducing taxpayer-funded rescue costs. Top 15 activities listed. Source: Oregon Emergency Management.

Though climbers are often singled out as a group that should be required to cover the costs of their rescues, the reality is that they do more to provide for the expenses and personnel costs associated with their rescues than do other recreational groups. Even the general public safety expenses, such as time spent coordinating rescues, are no different functionally from attending to a traffic accident or responding to a lost child—services that generally are not billed to the public except in extreme instances.²²

An NPS rescue helicopter flies out the body of a hiker who died at the base of Yosemite Falls. Photo © AAC Member Lincoln Else/Yosemite Climbing Ranger.



CHARGING FOR RESCUES CONFLICTS WITH NATIONAL POLICIES AND CREATES A POTENTIAL LEGAL LIABILITY

Charging for rescues, while a seemingly simple and prudent policy, is actually quite complicated. The practice runs contrary to national government policies and the advice of virtually all rescue organizations, and it may end up being far costlier in the long run due to possible lawsuits.

The Mountain Rescue Association, an umbrella organization representing 90+ volunteer rescue groups in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, specifically opposes charging for rescue services, and no MRA-affiliated rescue team currently charges for rescue services.²³ The MRA believes lost or injured people will delay the call for help until the situation becomes dire if they believe they will be charged for rescue services—usually complicating the rescue and making it more dangerous to rescuers.

The United States National Search and Rescue Plan, which sets domestic and international rescue policy for federal agencies, specifically rejects charging for rescues. The document states that participating agencies, among them the National Park Service and U.S. Coast Guard, "...agree that [search and rescue] services that they provide to persons in danger or distress will be without subsequent cost recovery from the person(s) assisted."²⁴ At one point in the mid-1990s, representatives of the Air Force, Navy, Army, Coast Guard, Civil Air Patrol, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Federal Aviation Administration and the National Park Service voted to no longer participate in search and rescue missions for agencies that charged fees for humanitarian missions.²⁵

The National Park Service has a separate search and rescue policy that indicates it will not charge for rescues of any type within the national park system.²⁶ Since 1940 the NPS has studied the cost recovery issue on five separate occasions, each time rejecting the idea. The most recent report, which focused on climbing rescues in Denali National Park, was issued in August 2001.²⁷

Military rescue groups similarly oppose charging for rescues since the missions provide high-quality training. Lt. Col. Parkhouse, former commander of the Alaska Air National Guard's 210th Combat Rescue Squadron, told Congress, "I cannot think of better training for a combat mission than going out and performing actual search and rescue missions."²⁸ Training on civilian climbing rescues has translated into military rescue success for units in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq, including the 2003 Rescue Mission of the Year Award presented by the Jolly Green Association.²⁹

Of particular concern is the discretionary shield from lawsuits that may be lost if emergency responders charge for rescues. The 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 1991 ruled in the *Johnson v. Department of Interior* case that the representative of a climber who died in the Tetons could not sue the National Park Service for the way in which the rescue was performed. The court ruled, "No statute imposes a duty to rescue, nor are there regulations or formal Park Service policies which prescribe a specific course of conduct for search or rescue efforts. Instead, the decision if, when or how to initiate a search or rescue is left to the discretion of the SAR team."³⁰ Experts believe that charging for rescues may jeopardize this legal shield and imply a duty to rescue. If so, one successful lawsuit could easily exceed years of revenues brought in from charging for rescues.



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SOME AGENCIES ALLOW RESCUE COST RECOVERY OR FINES, BUT THE IMPACT HAS NOT BEEN SUBSTANTIAL

Despite the overwhelming opposition to charging for rescue, a handful of states have laws allowing the practice in certain instances, generally under the assumption that it will save taxpayer funds for rescuing people who exhibited irresponsible behavior. Oregon’s pioneering law, passed during the 1995 session, was precipitated by a climbing rescue on Mount Hood. The bill’s sponsor opened its initial hearing by announcing, “This bill is about those jokers up on the mountain.”³¹

Five states have charge-for-rescue laws on the books, including the states of California, Hawaii, Idaho, New Hampshire and Oregon (Table 9).³² The laws generally allow recovery of rescue costs when: 1) people violate applicable laws (Oregon), knowingly enter an area closed to the public (California and Idaho) or show reckless or intentional disregard for personal safety (Hawaii and New Hampshire) or 2) people do not exhibit “reasonable care” in their actions (Oregon, pending Hawaii SB 1222). These laws were often enacted by legislators who felt taxpayer funds were being spent to rescue irresponsible people.³³

County sheriffs and other emergency response agencies generally have expressed that, even with charge-for-rescue laws on the books, they do not plan to use them. Oregon sheriffs in 1995 said they were uncomfortable judging when someone used “reasonable care” prior to a rescue incident since the line between good and poor judgment can be quite difficult to establish. John Clark, the deputy fire chief for Honolulu, Hawaii, said regarding proposed changes to the state’s rescue cost reimbursement law, “If you are out there and you need help, we are coming and coming free... Our taxpayers pay for our services and part of our missions is performing rescues.”³⁴

Though a climbing rescue served as the catalyst for the first state charge-for-rescue law, these laws have been used sparingly—even those that apply to the lesser “reasonable care” standard—and never for a mountaineering or rock climbing rescue. In the nine years the Oregon law has been in force, there have been almost 500 rescues per year in the state, more than 20 total climbing fatalities and countless high-profile climbing rescues.³⁵ Yet the law has only been applied once, and that was to penalize boaters judged to be reckless.³⁶ The New Hampshire law, in force for six years, has been used eight times, primarily to charge inexperienced and unequipped hikers in late fall or winter who used cell phones to call for rescue when they got lost or caught out in inclement weather.³⁷

While the National Park Service will not charge for search and rescue services, authority exists to cite and fine an individual who “creates or maintains a hazardous or physically offensive condition.”³⁸ This has been used by climbing rangers in multiple national parks to cite climbers whose actions or lack of adequate equipment contributed to dangerous situations requiring rescue or putting other climbers at physical risk.

The ability to charge for rescue does not necessarily translate into additional funds to defray rescue costs. Oregon sheriffs have expressed little incentive to push for rescue cost recovery since the funds would go into the county general fund rather than their search and rescue budget.³⁹ And, courts have not always upheld Park Service fines for creating a hazardous situation, citing the lack of clearly defined standards and expectations for responsible and irresponsible behavior.⁴⁰

Charge-for-rescue laws, often justified as a way for cash-strapped government agencies to recoup funds expended in high-profile climbing rescues, have made little difference in reducing the

State	Effective	Standard	Maximum	Exemptions
California	2005	“intentionally, knowingly and willfully” enters an area closed to the public	\$12,000 per incident	Persons authorized to be in the closed area
Hawaii	1999	“intentional disregard for the person’s safety,” including “intentionally disregarding a warning or notice”	None beyond total rescue costs incurred	None. Also applies to person’s estate, guardians, custodians or other responsible parties
Hawaii Pending (SB 1222)	NA	Deletes “intentional disregard” standard and replaces with 1) “failed to exercise reasonable care” and 2) “violated laws against trespass” and “disregarded warnings”	None beyond total rescue costs incurred	None. Also applies to person’s estate, guardians, custodians or other responsible parties
Idaho	7/1/2002, Revised 7/1/2003	“knowingly enters” into any closed area	\$4,000 per incident	1) Persons under 18 years of age, 2) persons authorized to be in the closed area
New Hampshire	7/1/1999	“recklessly or intentionally creates situation requiring an emergency response”	\$10,000	None
Oregon	1/1/1996	1) “reasonable care was not exercised” or 2) “applicable laws were violated”	\$500 per person, total cost of rescue for group	None

Table 9 State laws allowing the recovery of rescue costs vary in terms of the amount that can be recouped and the standard that is applied.

actual public costs of providing search and rescue services. Non-punitive efforts to establish search and rescue funds, generally involving surcharges on hunting and fishing licenses, ATV and snowmobile registrations, voluntarily purchased “hiker cards” and encouragement of voluntary contributions from those rescued, have raised more money to fund search and rescue expenses than all the charge for rescue laws combined.⁴¹ However, the growing number of these laws may cause people who are injured or lost to delay the call for help out of fear that they will have to bear the cost of their rescue.

MOUNTAIN RESCUES POSE RISKS TO RESCUERS, BUT FEW HAVE DIED IN CLIMBING RESCUES WHEN COMPARED TO OTHER RESCUES

A day after the crash of an Air Force Reserve Pavement helicopter on Oregon’s Mount Hood, ABC News commentator Sam Donaldson asked, “When is it reasonable to ask rescuers to put themselves in harm’s way?”⁴² He went on to comment that activities like climbing are purely optional, and that “it is unreasonable for us to set about doing something potentially dangerous we don’t have to do...and then take it for granted that others should risk their own lives to save us.”

As has been noted previously, mountain rescues are performed primarily by volunteer mountain rescue units operating under the direction of local law enforcement, and by specialized climbing rangers and military search and rescue units. In all instances the personnel involved have volunteered for the missions, have undergone rigorous rescue training and are well aware of the hazards these missions present.

Despite the apparent risks, rescuer fatalities involving mountaineering and rock climbing rescues have been rare over the past 50 years.⁴³ The most significant incidents include:

- In 1980, a helicopter from the Whidbey Island Naval Air Station crashed near Mount Challenger in Washington’s North Cascades National Park while attempting to rescue a seriously injured climber, killing five of the seven rescuers on board.
- Two poorly equipped volunteer climbing rangers on Mount Rainier slipped and died in 1995 during a rescue.

- A Park Service volunteer climbing ranger fell to his death in 1998 on Denali while attempting to rescue a fallen climbing party.

Most of the mountain search and rescue fatalities during this period have occurred while searching for or rescuing lost or injured hikers, skiers and downed aircraft, not climbers and mountaineers. For example, of the eight aircraft crashes involved in mountain searches and rescues, five (11 total fatalities) were for lost or injured hikers, one (three fatalities) was for an injured backcountry skier, one (four fatalities) was for a downed private plane; only one was for an injured climbing party.⁴⁴

All emergency response activities put responders at risk of injury or death, regardless of whether the mission is searching for a lost child, rescuing a stranded boater, responding to a motor vehicle accident or putting out a house fire. For example, in the 22 years between 1980 and 2001, an average of six helicopter air ambulance crew members, 111 fire fighters and 172 police officers nationally died annually while on duty.⁴⁵ Sixty-four Coast Guard personnel were killed between 1960 and 2001 during search and rescue missions, generally performed for boaters who were missing or in distress.⁴⁶ The primary difference between these fatalities and those involving mountain rescue personnel is that non-climbers requiring emergency response generally are not blamed for putting rescuers at risk.

CONCLUSION

Charging for search and rescue transforms a public safety activity that is principally about saving lives into a business decision—with many unanticipated consequences. The agencies and individuals closest to the issue feel strongly that charging for search and rescue is unwise, creates added safety risks for victims and rescuers, and could open up government agencies to costly lawsuits. Contrary to popular beliefs, climbing injuries and fatalities have become progressively rarer in recent decades, climbers are not “risk-taking daredevils,” and climbing rescues are rather infrequent in comparison to rescues for other recreational groups. Though climbing rescues may be more expensive on average than rescues of many other recreational groups, climbers provide greater volunteer support and pay more directly to offset rescue costs than do virtually all other recreational groups. In those limited areas where charge-for-rescue laws have been established, they have done little to reduce public search and rescue expenses, and they have never been used to make a mountaineer or rock climber pay for a rescue. Thus, there is little justification to support discriminatory policies that would require climbers to pay for the costs of their search and rescue services while other groups would continue to be rescued without charge.



AAC member Mica Dash, a Yosemite Search and Rescue team member, assists a climber whose partner was seriously injured in a fall high on El Capitan. Photo © AAC Member Lincoln Else/Yosemite Climbing Ranger.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For the purposes of this report, a “climber” is someone on rock or glaciated terrain generally using a rope and climbing harness, and in some cases an ice axe and crampons. People hiking on trails in mountainous terrain are not considered “climbers” in this report.
- ² Examples of news coverage include: “Who should pay when high-risk climbing adventures go bad?” Seattle Times, June 1, 2001; “Chopper lifts 4 off Mount Rainier,” msnbc.com, May 31, 2001; “Let ‘em climb, but escrow \$\$ for rescue,” Seneca County Advertiser-Tribune, June 20, 2004; “Climbers, officials say keep rescue costs public,” Seattle Post-Intelligencer, June 1, 2002; “Who Should Foot the Bill? Some Say Climbers Should Pay for Their Own Rescues,” ABCNews.com forum, June 3, 2002; “Dangerous ‘recreation,’” Portland Oregonian, May 31, 2002.
- ³ Annual climber counts are posted for these peaks respectively at www.nps.gov/mora/climb/cl_stats.htm and www.nps.gov/dena/home/mountaineering/summaryreports.htm.
- ⁴ *Accidents in North American Mountaineering: 2004*, American Alpine Club, Golden, Colorado, pp. 89-90. The number of accidents reported in one year peaked in 1986 at 203, the number of persons involved peaked in 1984 at 459, the number of persons injured peaked in 1976 at 210, and the number of fatalities also peaked in 1976 at 53.
- ⁵ Mount Rainier National Park climbing summaries, fatality data and climbing records, some of which are posted on www.nps.gov/mora/climb/climb.htm.
- ⁶ If the 11 fatalities are discounted as an unusual event, the fatality rate for the decade of the 1980s drops to 21.0, which maintains a five-decade-long decline in Mount Rainier’s fatality rate.
- ⁷ Denali National Park climbing summaries, fatality data and climbing records, some of which are posted on www.nps.gov/dena/home/mountaineering/summaryreports.htm.
- ⁸ Denali average for 2001-2004 climbing seasons based on figures reported in the Annual Mountaineering Summaries posted at www.nps.gov/dena/home/mountaineering/summaryreports.htm. Mount Rainier average comes from *Mount Rainier: A Climbing Guide, second edition*, The Mountaineers Books, p. 20.
- ⁹ National Park Service Search and Rescue Report: 2003,” p. 4. Note: To simplify the chart, subcategories “climbing: technical roped” and “climbing: technical unroped” have been combined into “rock climbing (all forms),” while “mountaineering: roped,” “mountaineering: unroped” and “mountaineering: ski/snowboard” have been combined into “mountaineering (all forms)”. The definition of “climbing: scrambling” positions it as off-trail hiking. This has been added into the “day hiking” category.
- ¹⁰ Analysis of annual Search and Rescue reports. Some are posted on the Yosemite Search and Rescue website: www.nps.gov/yose/sar/.
- ¹¹ “Search and Rescue Annual Report” (2002, 2003) and supplemental communication with Georges Kleinbaum, State SAR Coordinator, January 2005. The “motor vehicle” category includes four-wheeling, motorized access for other recreational pursuits, traveling and sightseeing. The “wandering” category includes hiking and walking without a specific destination or route in mind.
- ¹² The “motor vehicle” category includes activities where driving is central (4-wheeling, driving around, traveling, sightseeing with a motorized vehicle), motorized access for other recreational activities and motor vehicle accidents. “Search and Rescue: Annual Report for 2003,” Oregon Emergency Management, p. 6.
- ¹³ Wandering is defined as hiking without a fixed destination or route per phone conversation with Georges Kleinbaum, State SAR Coordinator, January 2005.
- ¹⁴ “National Park Service Search and Rescue Report: 2003,” p.3.
- ¹⁵ “Rescue Cost Recovery: Denali National Park and Preserve,” Charley Shimanski, American Alpine Club, p. 13. Posted at www.americanalpineclub.org/docs/Rescue_Cost_Recovery_CS_2004.pdf.
- ¹⁶ AAC analysis of Yosemite National Park annual SAR cost report spreadsheets (2000-2004).
- ¹⁷ AAC analysis of Yosemite National Park annual SAR cost report spreadsheets (2000-2004).
- ¹⁸ AAC analysis of Yosemite National Park annual SAR cost report spreadsheets (2000-2004).
- ¹⁹ Portland Oregonian, March 1995.
- ²⁰ 2005 climbing fees: Mount McKinley and Mount Foraker: \$200 (+ \$10 park entrance fee); Mount Rainier: \$30, valid for a calendar year, (+ \$5-\$10 park entrance fee); Mount St. Helens: \$15 (4/1-10/31); Mount Shasta: \$15; Mount Adams: \$15 weekend/\$10 weekday (6/1-9/30).

- ²¹ “Search and Rescue Annual Report” (2002, 2003) and supplemental communication with Georges Kleinbaum, State SAR Coordinator, January 2005.
- ²² Some states, such as California and New Hampshire, allow public safety costs associated with drunk driving or hostage situations to be charged to the guilty party.
- ²³ Mountain Rescue Association policy statement posted at www.mra.org/pay_resq.html.
- ²⁴ “United States National Search and Rescue Plan: 1999” (updated 11/2/2002), posted at www.uscg.mil/hq/g-o/g-opr/nsarc/nsp.htm.
- ²⁵ “SAR and EMS IG Comments,” Attachment I to “Survey Report: Emergency Medical and Search and Rescue Services, National Park Service,” Report No. 96-I-806, June 1996.
- ²⁶ National Park Service Management Policy 8.2.5.3. Available at www.nps.gov/policy/mp/chapter8.htm.
- ²⁷ “Report to Congress: Analysis of Cost Recovery for High-altitude Rescues on Mt. McKinley, Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska,” August 2001. Available at www.americanalpineclub.org/docs/SAR_Final_Report_to_Congress.pdf.
- ²⁸ “Report to Congress: Analysis of Cost Recovery for High-altitude Rescues on Mt. McKinley, Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska,” August 2001. Available at www.americanalpineclub.org/docs/SAR_Final_Report_to_Congress.pdf.
- ²⁹ “400 Interior soldiers to be deployed,” Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, November 20, 2004; “’Tis the Season to Scale Mt. McKinley’s Pinnacle,” Anchorage Daily News, May 16, 2004; “Assignment: Kuwait: Life With the 322nd Air Expeditionary Group,” Christian Science Monitor, March 24, 2003.
- ³⁰ 99 F.2d 332; 1991 U.S. App. LEXIS 26805
- ³¹ “Jokers on the Mountain: When Politics and Mountain Rescues Collide,” Lloyd Athearn, Climbing Magazine #163, September 1996. Quote extracted from legislative audio transcripts.
- ³² Charge for rescue laws include: California Government Code Section 53155 and 53159 (effective 2005), Hawaii Revised Statutes 137-2 (effective 1999), Idaho Code Section 6-2401 (effective July 1, 2002; revised July 1, 2003), New Hampshire Code Title XII, Section 153-A:24 (effective July 1, 1999), Oregon Revised Statutes 401.590 (effective January 1, 1996).
- ³³ “Jokers on the Mountain: When Politics and Mountain Rescues Collide,” Lloyd Athearn, Climbing Magazine #163, September 1996. “Bill targets reckless hikers, swimmers,” Richard Borreca, Honolulu Star-Bulletin, March 2, 2005.
- ³⁴ “Bill targets reckless hikers, swimmers,” Honolulu Star Bulletin, March 2, 2005.
- ³⁵ “Search and Rescue Annual Report: 2003,” Oregon Emergency Management; tabulation of Oregon climbing fatalities taken from *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* (1997-2004), American Alpine Club.
- ³⁶ “Paying the Price for Rescue,” Bend Bulletin, 2000; information confirmed on 12/28/2004 by email with Matthew Marmor, SAR coordinator for the Oregon State Sheriffs’ Association.
- ³⁷ Letter and report from Cpt. Martin S. Garabedian, New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, April 26, 2005. Incident backgrounds obtained from archives of the Boston Herald and the Manchester Union Leader.
- ³⁸ 36 CFR Section 2.34
- ³⁹ Email from Wallowa County (Oregon) Search and Rescue Coordinator Matthew Marmor, December 29, 2004.
- ⁴⁰ Conversation with John Dill, Yosemite Search and Rescue, April 2005.
- ⁴¹ AAC analysis of New Hampshire Fish and Game rescue charges and donations.
- ⁴² “Who really pays the price for thrill seekers?” Sam Donaldson’s Daily Commentary, ABC News, May 31, 2002, printed from www.abc.news.com.
- ⁴³ Mountain rescue analysis performed by Charley Shimanski, MRA Education Director.
- ⁴⁴ “Accidents in Mountain Rescue,” Mountain Rescue Association, available at http://www.mra.org/Accidents_in_MRO2004.pdf.
- ⁴⁵ “A Safety Review and Risk Assessment in Air Medical Transport: Supplement to the Air Medical Physician Handbook,” Air Medical Physician Association, 2002, p. 40.
- ⁴⁶ “Fatal Coast Guard Accidents,” posted at www.check-six.com/lib/Coast_Guard_Aviation_Casualties.htm.