

Safety In The Back Country

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OUTLINE:

- Safety is our responsibility, both for ourselves and others
- You don't know what you don't know
- Education
- Standards
- Risk management
- Summation

Safety in the backcountry is my responsibility. It's your responsibility. It's our responsibility. Whether we're riders who enjoy less company rather than more, or commercial operators sharing the wilderness experience with clients, we have a responsibility to be as safe as we can be.

Being safe is more than an awareness and avoidance of danger. It's about having an attitude that is open to learning, an awareness that learning is a continual process (hopefully a continual progression) and a commitment to put into practice what we have learned.

We learn by examining concepts. When we accept concepts as truth they become convictions and when we have confidence in our convictions they become principles. For each and every one of us our lives are guided by our principles. How we conduct ourselves in the backcountry is best based on sound safety principles.

You don't know what you don't know! Yes, it's obvious. But how do you find out what you don't know? I find out by being involved in seminars and clinics. In attending conferences and associating with people likely to educate me - people who are educators.

I'm a Wilderness Guide, certified by the Certified Horsemanship Association. They have a Trail Program that certifies Instructors in different levels of competence. CHA's web site is www.cha-ahse.org. They are the largest certifying organization in North America with over 4,000 Instructors in their Standard, Trail and Disabled programs. The head office is in Tyler, Texas so they are based in the US but operate in Canada as well. BC and Alberta are in Region 6 along with the northwestern states.

I've learned a lot about safety by hard experience – the experience of being in wrecks. There's a better way!

Education is a formalized process of acquiring knowledge. It's more than just learning, and it's the key to furthering safety in the backcountry. I learned through experience (and a few wrecks) – there wasn't any "education" program available to me 30 some years ago. A similar situation existed with horse training. Now look at the programs available!

Trail horsemanship has a burgeoning interest amongst riders. It's a growth industry – current riders and new people to the sport of trail riding have a need for an education program that they can participate in with the assurance that they are learning current standards with an emphasis on safety.

The Back Country Horsemen BC have been developing just such a program. It offers a 4 level program in skills and safety knowledge. A step by step progression through a syllabus of topics specific to trail horsemanship, it's a program that can help to retain membership and attract new members. It's a program that can assist in keeping riders safe in the back country.

The program relies on both volunteers and certified instructors. The skills can be gained in any way from anyone. The evaluation is done by CHA certified Instructors to ensure standards are uniform. Participants can achieve the four rider levels and have an achievement award issued by a CHA certified Instructor – or they may just want to take some of the courses for other reasons without being involved with the awards. As you can see from what I've covered up to here my belief in the advancement of safety lies in education for the future.

It takes organization to develop and deliver an education program. In the horse training 'arena' there are many right ways of training being offered under different names. Standards are not constant and complimentary in all programs. Trail Horsemanship may go the same way, with many different hands holding the reins.

Various packing schools and trail riding instruction programs offer instruction, but with varying recognition of their awards. We need industry wide standards both for recreational and commercial instruction. A program that is open to all who desire to either learn or instruct safety in the back country.

It is my hope that the program BCHBC is trying in a couple of its' chapters will grow and become provincial. It will grow and become a standard for safe trail riding in other provinces and states. A copy of the draft syllabus is included for your information.

Standards are continually changing. In the 'good ol' days' a map, compass and axe comprised a pretty good safety kit. Now a safety kit may also include a satellite phone, GPS, emergency transponder, flare gun and pepper spray. The times they are a'changin'.

It's interesting to consider how standards are determined. Partly it's "What are the other guys doing?", partly it's "What is it possible to do"? though mostly it's "What is it reasonable to do?". As yet we don't have very defined standards for safety practices in the back country. Common sense and horse sense have served back country riders well but as more new riders hit the mountain trails there is a need for a more organized approach.

My daddy grew up with horses, buying his first tractor in Vermillion in the fall of '39. My generation grew up with cars – though it seemed like most rural back yards had a cow or horse – animals of some kind were common in our generations' up bringing. In my kids' generation there were fewer people being raised in contact with animals other than household pets. For my grandkid it's computers. Many new riders don't have a background of horse experience before they start riding the trails. Horses are viewed as warm fuzzy animals, rather than big, strong and

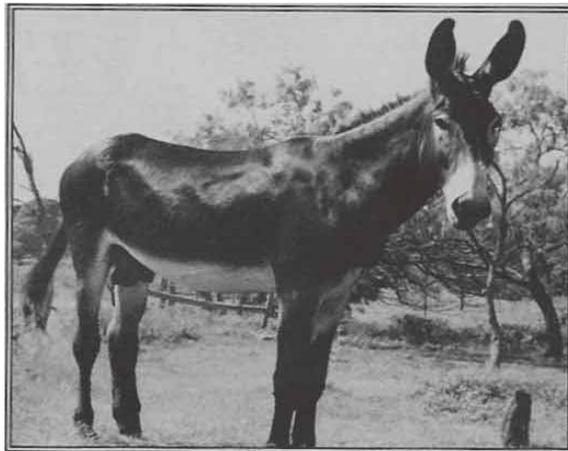
Safety standards, or safety practices that are generally accepted will play an increasing role in any future education program – and more people are going to need education in the future.

Recreational riders have a much different standard of safety practices than does a commercial operator. Recreational riders involved in club sanctioned group rides may find their responsibilities very similar to commercial operators. When you accept responsibility for others you also assume liability.

Government agencies impact our backcountry use through regulations. In my experience their focus is more on environmental issues than safety. When bureaucracies are motivated to action it can be pretty scary. If the governing agencies regulating our backcountry use ever consider safety in a manner similar to conservation, we had better be prepared.

Insurance underwriters, on the other hand, are adding more and more rules to policies. They are really our safety regulating agencies. Now, you may not have insurance for your riding activities, but more and more people do. It's why Horse Council BC now has some 19,000 members. There is a perceived need for insurance.

Instead of working with certifying programs in order to improve safety practices underwriters are adding rules in response to incidents. I guess it works, but it's a limited way to enhance safety and lower their liability profile.



Risk management is an important tool in preventing incidents. It involves many procedures and requires diligence and dedication. Some risk management considerations are:

- the right horse for the right job - in age, training and disposition
- an annual tack maintenance and safety check
- tack fitted for the horse and suitable for the activity
- halter and lead rope on under the head stall or use a combo.
- knowledge of first aid
- periodic review and practice of emergency safety procedures (do you carry a buddy rope on your saddle?)
- emergency communications updates (phone numbers, personnel)
- cinch checks during the ride
- stopping and perhaps dismounting to put on additional clothes (i.e. rain gear)
- no taking pictures with auto advance cameras while horseback
- don't tie a ponied animal hard and fast to yourself, saddle or horse
- don't let pack animals run loose on busy trails
- keep a safe distance between riders and stop the creep at stops
- ride with people you are comfortable with, in pace and degree of difficulty
- ride to the level of the least able rider in the group
- And the list goes on and on.....

A good source of information for risk management can be found at www.capri.ca/horse .

Riding in a group has its' own challenges in keeping everyone safely comfortable. A club sanctioned group ride puts a lot of responsibility on the ride leader. It's a big job and there are many guide lines to assist the people in charge so that when everyone is waving good bye after the ride they are using more than just one finger! Some of these guidelines in addition to those already listed are:

- a designated lead and drag rider
- ride to the least ability
- no one passes the lead rider and the drag rider passes no one
- the lead rider keeps the spacing even by rating their mount
- "ready to ride" times are set well ahead of time
- a buddy or mentor is assigned to new riders in the group
- the lead rider retains the right to excuse people from the ride
- I like the no dog rule (except for MY dog!)
- And this list too can go on and on.....

In Summation, safety begins and ends with US. It's our responsibility, and our attitude towards learning is a good indication on how safe we are. Happy Trails, Jim

