

Turtle Tips #3 – Leadership 2013

Overview: This Turtle Tip will deal with backpacking leadership. While the Turtle is a relatively controlled environment, it is a good chance to develop the skills necessary for a wilderness trip.

The text of these Turtle Tips and associated lists will be posted on the District Web Site (<http://www.SKCBSA.org/buckeye>) shortly after they are delivered.

Advice: I would like to start by giving two pieces of advice:

First, for the sake of the boys, you must believe that Scouts can be seriously injured or killed while doing backpacking. If you don't believe this, it will be difficult or impossible for you to take the risks seriously enough.

Second, for your own sake, you must believe that the experience for the Scouts is worth the risk. If something bad happens, this can get you through it and help you continue.

If you cannot subscribe to these two tenets, I would strongly suggest that you not participate in backpacking with Scouts (or any other venturesome activity).

Leadership: I would suggest that the two main jobs of a backpacking leader flow directly from this advice:

First, the leader should keep the hikers safe and minimize their risk of serious injury.

Second, the leader should insure that every hiker has a great experience.

We will now explore some of the detailed ramifications of these principles for backpacking.

One Leader: Like most activities, there should be one leader and all who participate should recognize the leader and agree to follow his or her direction. A wise leader will involve others in decision making but the final decision is that of the leader. It is important to have one person who is looking at all aspects of the activity, knows the condition of each hiker, and knows the status of all supplies. If it is a group responsibility, there is no one who is responsible. Also, there is no need for several people to watch the same things.

This is not to suggest that there is not a place for others to take responsibility for individual tasks like getting a meal ready or determining the route. A good leader will delegate but retain overall responsibility.

I have found that the difficulty is with other adults, not with the Scouts. It is sometimes difficult for adults to take you seriously when you give advice or directions. Also, it may be difficult for you to watch over other adults and make suggestions or give them directions. Resist the natural urge to respect their autonomy and make sure that they are doing things that will make them and the group successful.

Where to Lead: In order to lead, you must know what is going on with the group. The fundamental task is to know where all of the members of the group are at all times. This usually means that you should hike as the last member of the group. In addition, you must make and enforce rules that prevent the group from getting spread out. For groups of more than 10 or 15 hikers, it may be best to split the group into crews with a qualified leader for each crew. However, you should usually take the leadership of the last crew and make sure that no one is left behind. Also, there should be a clear understanding where and when the group will rejoin.

While there is little chance for getting separated on the Turtle, it is always a real possibility on a wilderness trip. I suggest that the problem is getting the group split, not getting lost. If you are lost, you still have your food, equipment, and leadership. The lost part is soluble. However, if the group is split, part of the group will be without food, equipment, and leadership. Also, there is not a map that shows where the other part of the group should be.

My experience is that it takes at least two hours and walking an average of 5 miles to put a split group back together. And that assumes that both parts of the group stop and stay in one place as soon as they recognize that they are separated. Make sure that all members of the group understand that they must stop and wait to be found if they get separated. If they are still separated four hours after first light the next morning, they can consider making their way out as a group. Make your rules before starting and make sure everyone understands.

Scouts (and sometimes adults) that get ahead of the group are often a problem. There are always plenty of excuses. However, it is a dangerous situation. You must make some rules and enforce them. I always told my Scouts that they must be able to see the leader at least every 5 minutes. If they could not, they must hike back until they find the leader. As a leader, I continually counted the hikers in front. If I found someone out in front, I

would usually call for a rest break until the speedsters get back. Having to hike over the same trail several times sometimes makes the point. I also used that time to transfer some of the load from the slower hikers to the faster hikers.

On one of my wilderness trips, I had one Scout get angry and hike out of sight for over two hours. At a pace of about two miles per hour this represented more than sixteen square miles that the Scout could have gotten lost in. I was seriously worried during the process. I can assure you that after our discussion, he never tried that again. (He also washed dishes for the rest of the trip.)

Watch the Group: When you are at the back of the group, you can observe the hikers, particularly those who are having the most difficult time. Watch for dragging feet and tripping. This can indicate dehydration, low blood sugar, heat exhaustion, or hypothermia depending on the situation. If you see it, fix it. In some cases, this is just a matter of having the hiker eat or drink while continuing to hike. Other times it may require stopping or more aggressive intervention. However, don't let it continue. It will get worse and bring the entire group to a halt to say nothing of the quality of the experience for the hiker in trouble.

Also, I would like to talk about "walking into the wall". If a hiker uses energy (food) faster than he can replace it, he will start depleting his natural reserve. This is fine for scrambling up a creek bank. However, if this persists for a significant length of time, the energy reserve will be depleted. At that point, the hiker "walks into the wall". He is unable to continue. He may feel like he can't get his breath. He may show heat exhaustion symptoms. After resting, starting again will bring the problem back quickly. He will need to rest, drink, and eat snacks just to get going again. However, it may take a full 24 hours before he is back to normal. Hot conditions often encourage this. If it is cold, it will lead to hypothermia. This usually happens to inexperienced adults who are carrying heavy in hot weather. The best treatment is prevention. Help the hikers understand how to feel the effects (out of breath) and slow down so they only use energy as fast as they produce it. One rule is to slow down if you don't have enough breath to talk easily. Also add snacks so there is plenty of food available.

Watch Yourself: An exhausted leader is a poor leader. You will make bad decisions and fail to see others in the group who are getting in trouble. You will not be able to be the cheerleader when it is needed. You will not be able to ensure the safety and positive experience for the group. Don't let yourself "walk into the wall". Don't carry more than you can handle. Hand some of the load off if you need to. If you start to get into trouble, stop early or take a long lunch break with some hot food. If you cannot get out of trouble, terminate the trip or hand off the leadership to someone else who is qualified.

Rules and Procedures: I find it useful to establish few rules or procedures that are expected of all the hikers. These help make the trip a positive experience for all and try to avoid serious accidents. I use the "tent on the pack before any breakfast", the "no pouring hot water into a cup being held", and the "no sitting on a table with a pot on a stove" rules. We have also discussed some rules for keeping the group together. Let me suggest another that I find useful:

"No walking barefoot beyond your tent or ground cloth." It doesn't take much of a cut on the bottom of a foot to make hiking a literal pain (or impossible), particularly if it gets infected.

There are two things that make safety issues different for backpacking trips. First, it may take a day or more to get a serious injury to a doctor or hospital. Secondly, hikers must be 100% to do the hike and carry the load. What would be only a minor injury on a camping trip may prevent a hiker from finishing the trip (with the associated issues of getting him back). This means that you should avoid rough activities and horseplay that have potential for even minor injuries when possible (i.e. no football or capture the flag on the trail).

Shakedown: I strongly suggest that you schedule some shakedown hikes before the trip. Have the scouts and adults carry weight similar to the trip. After some shakedowns, the Scouts and adults that should not participate will usually self select. Adults often assume that if their 11 year old can do it, it will be a piece of cake for them. It is often not the case. A good shakedown may help convince all to take the trip seriously.

Younger Scouts: I have always had 11 year olds on my wilderness backpacking trips. You just need to split their share of the load with older scouts and adults. On a weeklong trip with my family, we even hiked with an 8 year old.

Hike safe, have fun!