Risk – A philosophical approach

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We've all been asked at some time or other "isn't caving dangerous and risky?", and no doubt many cavers have a stock answer to this question. Risk is often seen as a bad thing, however I think the opposite. I aim to stimulate your thinking and relate this to what we REALLY do when we go caving.

The definition of risk- according to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1)

Risk: A situation involving exposure to danger:

The possibility that something unpleasant or unwelcome will happen:

A possibility of harm or damage against which something is insured:

Expose (someone or something valued) to danger, harm, or loss:

Expose oneself to the possibility of something unpleasant occurring:

However I like the following phrase which relates to caving type activities:

At one's (own) risk: *Taking responsibility for one's own safety or possessions.*

We will return to that later.

I have no doubt most cavers have been asked when someone finds out you're a caver: "Isn't caving dangerous?" I'm sure we all have some sort of answer to that.

My stock answer to the danger of caving questions is "YES, caving is very dangerous, because I have to drive in a car to the cave". Maybe some think that's facetious, but think about it, do these people ever consider the relative risk in their everyday lives?

I'm a careful driver of big solid four wheel drive, in good condition with airbags around me and lots of high-tech crumple zones, driving along at 110km/hr.; I have total control of my immediate environment. However I have no control over someone coming towards me at the same speed: none what-so-ever, and this driver has an enormous influence over how safely we pass. I find that pretty scary.

Most 'accidents' in life are not really accidents, they are human error whilst driving a car.

We blame a wet road, alcohol, speed, inattention, and call them road accidents: these are still human error. We or someone else chooses NOT to drive to the conditions, or to consume alcohol.

Where-as, in the bush or in a cave we have control over the majority of risks.

The chances of some things happening outside our control, like the roof falling in for instance, are infinitesimal.

I consider risk or danger is NOT a bad thing. If anything, I see it as a good thing, but I will explain further later.

Let's look at one of the great adventurers to influence Australia: Captain James Cook.

Much of the globe was unchartered or poorly chartered when Cook set off on his first of three voyages, ultimately aiming for the Pacific in 1768. Cook's seamanship, exceptional surveying skills and cartography, courage and ability to lead men in adverse conditions achieved a tremendous additional to our knowledge of the planet. These three trips, into the unknown required incredible planning. Most would know that scurvy (caused by the lack of vitamin C) was a major issue for all sailors at the time. Cook is renowned for insisting on adequate fruit intake and ensuring such supplies were replenished on his voyages. The risk of such voyages was huge; relatively small wooden ships, unknown territory and extremes of weather just to name a few. Clearly by managing most of the risks of his voyages well his expeditions contributed greatly to the knowledge of the world. (2)

Another risk manager that clearly stands out is Ernest Shackleton, particularly his 1914 expedition on the Endurance to Antarctica. Shackleton had considerable Antarctic experience already and had learned

much from Scott, Amundsen and others. He was known as a great organizer and leader of men and understood the risks involved in such an expedition.

In brief, his ship was trapped in ice flows for 281 days before it was crushed and sank. All 28 men sailed their life boats to Elephant Island which was the first land they had been on for 16 months. A small group then sailed the 800 miles to South Georgia Island and finally Shackleton lead 2 others over quite treacherous mountain ranges some 17 miles to a whaling station, with the top priority of rescuing the men they had left behind. All 28 men survived. In a hostile environment that he had no control over, Shackleton's planning and decision making involved great leadership, with an incredible result. (3)

Contrast this with the climbing of Mt Everest. Until about 1990 Everest was the domain of the experienced, well equipped expeditioner. However about 1990 commercial operators commenced taking "tourists" albeit wealthy, fit & motivated individuals climbing the mountain. The death rate soared for ten years as a percentage of climbers (for both Sherpa and 'expeditioners'), however it then dropped in the next decade. (4)

Factors like the weather, the terrain, the altitude did not change: these are risk factors that no climber or company has any influence over.

The reasons are most likely for a halving of the death rate are:

1. Standards being set by companies (it's not a good look if your death rate is higher than other competing companies)
2. Better gear and gear technology
3. Increased use of Oxygen and better delivery systems
4. Understanding weather patterns and improved forecasting
5. Perhaps fixed bolts, although these have been used for some time

My point is that Climbing Everest would be considered by most to be a risky undertaking, but it took some time for commercial companies to "manage' that risk more adequately.

No matter what is done to manage risks, climbers on Everest will still die. There will always be risks like the recent avalanche into base camp that climbers, Sherpas and companies cannot 'manage' or predict.

Why have I mentioned these feats? Because good planning, an appreciation of the risks than you can control or minimize goes a long way to a successful outcome- everyone returning home safe.

Some would have said the undertakings of Cook, Shackleton, the Apollo missions and similar were too dangerous, too risky. But by pushing our boundaries and striving to manage known risks human kind has massively extended our knowledge. Climbing Everest was once seen as an ultimate goal for mankind; it has now become a personal, life goal for a number of people, however with over 4000 having been to the top now, its specialness is diminishing and many are questioning why a majority of deaths are the Sherpas. In the views of some, the commercialization of Everest has resulted in more risks to the Sherpas who are invariably in the advanced parties setting up camps, fixed ropes and crevasse crossings. (5)

Earlier I mention risk or danger as being a good thing: Risk or potential danger forces you to plan.

It is how you assess the risk, and what you do about it that determines your safety. Experienced cavers are inherently risk managers.

The awareness of risk or danger causes an experienced caver to PLAN and MANAGE their trip to minimize this risk. PREPARATION is the most important part of any activity. NO risk can be totally eliminated, but good planning is far more likely to result in us all returning home safe. Returning home safe should be the paramount aim of every caving activity. Completing a survey or exploring that side passage should never take greater priority than returning safe. I personally have seen the excitement of finding a huge new passage at midnight after 15 hours caving over-ride the safely getting home principal. The leader was so caught up on adrenaline he compromised his own and the party's safety. (6)

I believe it a reasonable assumption that very few experienced cavers will have looked at the Australian Speleological Federation (ASF) Cave Safety Guidelines, or Risk Management Policy in say, the last two years?

These Guidelines and Policies are predominantly for those new to caving, and external interests like Land Managers and Insurance companies. They demonstrate that our National Caving Body, ASF has standards. However the mere existence of Policies and standards does nothing to manage risk. It's what YOU as a caver actually DO to manage the risks that matters.

An experienced caver should know and appreciate the risks involved in a caving activity. They may not follow all guidelines to the letter, because risks vary depending on the area and all risks are relative.

For instance: the need to have a sleeping bag outside the cave is not necessarily appropriate. In northern climates hypothermia is often not an issue even at night, in Tasmania often your car is nearby with warm clothes.

Risk and the perception of danger is associated with fear. But why? Part of human nature is to fear the unknown, and society seems to have an irrational fear of the unknown. Any different activity outside general society's comfort zone is judged by some as too dangerous to undertake.

Many of the general public are highly critical of 'adventurers', often because of the sensational news when a rescue is undertaken with the resultant cost. This is not always balanced by the successes featured in publications like National Geographic and Australian Geographic and Wild Magazine.

No-one complains about the costs of rescuing victims of car crashes.

As opposed to this irrational fear, for those involved in an activity, the rational approach is to assess the risks and manage what risks involved.

Caving is outside most people's comfort zone, but well within ours.

We cavers need to continually manage our risks: asking ourselves "can I do this safely"? is there a safer way? As I'm sure all would appreciate, the consequences of an adverse event requiring an extraction or even self-rescue can be enormous. Most extractions from a cave are extremely difficult and in fact sometimes impossible. So it is not just the risk of an adverse event we must consider but then the consequences such an adverse event.

For instance: carrying a first aid kit does nothing to manage the actual risk of an accident, but it may help manage the result. Carrying a climbing tape may make that climb much safer.

Now let's examine the concept of a **team** and **leadership** whilst caving.

I see no problem with asking for help from someone else in the party.

One view may be: "he's just an old fart caver….he is passed it." Maybe before entering the cave this caver's fitness and ability should have been assessed? But he's here in the cave, and asking for help.

In caving the team shares the risk. By assisting, this risk is lowered for the whole party. If someone is not comfortable, like doing a climb, and assistance of rigging a tape means no adverse event, then we all return safely.

Contrast this with a party member who needs assistance on most of the challenges- the leader should have assessed this before-hand and recommended more training, perhaps fitness. Most leadership positions enable the exclusion of someone who may add risk to the group.

We all must have confidence and competence but not be blasé due to our familiarity with the cave environment.

The leader does not necessarily lead from the front, but is usually the most experienced member of a party, based on their knowledge and skills. I believe this person's people skills are just as important; a good leader keeps a close eye on the rest of the party.

Many caving club trips have no specific leader- joint decisions are made by consensus; with no major risks beyond what the party members are familiar with; there may be little need for a leader, but with increased risks a leader becomes more important.

Each member of a party is responsible for the whole group's risk management. A caver should never be offended if someone wishes to check their harness or how a rope is rigged: it has to be right.

I am concerned about society's more recent approach to risk, particularly the advent of what some of us call the 'cotton wool' approach.

We've seen the advent of increased insurance premiums and the insistence of risk management tools for most business activities and across much of society. But the problem I have with some of this development is that such standards are sometimes being written by people who don't understand the risks, often over-state them and sometimes in their insistence on certain actions actually increase the risk. The other aspect is the "dumbing down' of risk management so we're all treated like idiots.

It could be argued that catering for the lowest intellect is social engineering directly against Darwinian principles, that is, even the most stupid survives and can take litigation. We now have a plethora of rules

and regulations catering for people's stupidity and lack of common sense. Instead of dealing with the isolated problem, legislators ensure we all suffer with more regulations.

Examples that I have noted:

1. I've now twice seen at the bottom of a set of stairs signage stating: "Mind the step".
2. Recently on a building re-fit I was forced to install tactile mats on a floor of an area leading into a non-public part of the business. This actually increased the trip hazard for the staff.
3. Some time ago the travel insurance I obtained for a caving expedition is the USA stated I would NOT be covered if climbing with a rope: frankly I consider free climbing to involve much greater risk!

The Tasmanian environmental group Karstcare conduct working bees in caves. Many of these caves are managed by the National Parks Service, however they both lack the resources and often the skills and knowledge to do this type of work. Such managers concentrate much of their efforts on Job Safety Assessments (JSA), managing the risks, and rightfully so, however sometimes I'm very amused at being presented a JSA with some actions that actually increase the risk, (such as recommending steel cap boots standing in freezing cold water),because the person in head office has not truly understood the environment or even what the job entails. (7) Cavers are comfortable working in a cave environment, and because of our experience and skill set, we can work more safely than non-cavers.

Earlier I mentioned in relationship to the definition of risk the phrase:

At one's (own) risk: *Taking responsibility for one's own safety or possessions.*

That is the crux of it- individual responsibility. It is your planning and preparation and assessment of risk that is the critical factor in determining a good outcome. It is not standards and guidelines from external bodies- these are important, however it is what YOU do that matters.

The ASF Safety Guidelines specifically state, *"Risks can be reduced to acceptable levels but never eliminated. The way to minimise risks is to undertake caving with an attitude of self-reliance, responsibility and preparedness. In practical terms this means careful planning, competent organisation, appropriate provisioning and thorough training."* (8)(9)

We cannot risk manage for every contingency.

For instance: a lightning strike…..but it has happened.

A group of cavers reported being struck while holding a metal tape in Luddington's Cave USA, whilst surveying. The passage was given the name Lightning Bolt as a result of the incident. (10)

Conclusion

Risk is not a bad thing; it adds to the adventure of caving. It is part of what makes it so special. Going where no human being has been before is quite an incredible feeling, seeing something beautiful that nature has produced for the first time is so exciting. I have argued that risk is actually a good thing. By considering the dangers involved and managing them, a caver is far more likely to have a successful trip and return home safe.

Our legislators and insurance companies have got it wrong; the principle of individual responsibility seems to have been abandoned. Certainly those new to an activity such as caving need education and training in their approach and techniques to ensure safety, however the management of risk is still up to the individual. Risk management starts with you. You cannot abdicate it to other people, the rest of the group or external authorities.

Many risks are not within your control. If such risks are also outside your comfort zone, then don't do it!

I wish to leave you with one final phrase: No matter how well prepared you are, sometimes…

References:

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