Predicting Lost Person Behavior

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Objectives

- Explain the relevance of lost person behavior to search planning.
- Identify those lost person behavior factors that should be considered in search planning.
- Describe common reactions to the experience of being lost.
- Describe some common types or categories of lost persons.
Questions Related to Lost Person Behavior

- How far can someone like this travel?
- How large an area should we search?
- Where should we try to confine the subject?
- How thoroughly should we search?
- What kind of clues should we be looking for?
- How difficult will it be to detect this person?
- Is it time to suspend the search?
Factors to Consider

- General state of health.
- Past experience.
- Effects of the environment.
- Circumstances under which the person became missing.
  - Equipment
  - State of mind
  - Unusual events
Reactions to Becoming Lost

- Shock and disbelief
- Irrational or fearful thoughts
- Embarrassment
- Feeling of urgency to find familiar surroundings
Behavior While Lost

- Failure to make shelter or a fire
- Discarding equipment
- Disrobing
- Failure to respond to searchers
- Failure to utilize travel aids
Lost Person Strategies for Getting “Unlost”

- Trail running.
- Travel a straight line.
- Direction sampling.
- View enhancement.
- Employing folk wisdom.
- Staying put.
Six Lost Person Categories

- Small Children (1 to 6 years)
- Children (6-12 years)
- Hunters
- Hikers
- Elderly (over 65)
- Miscellaneous adults
  - Berry pickers, photographers, bird watchers, other outdoor enthusiasts
Children (1 to 3 years)

- Unaware of the concept of being “lost”.
- Wander aimlessly.
- Seek out most convenient location to lie down.
- Very difficult to detect.
- Seek shelter in poor weather.
Children (4 to 6 years)

- Travel farther than younger children.
- Try to return to some familiar place.
- Drawn away by animals, or just exploring.
- Seek shelter at night and in bad weather
- Avoid strangers.
Children (7 to 12 years)

- Construct “Mental maps” of their environment.
- Often become lost taking a short cut to a familiar location.
- Become upset and confused when lost.
- Frequently resort to “trail running”.
- May act more maturely if accompanied by friend or sibling.
Youth (13-15 years)

- Frequently become lost in group of two or more.
- When in groups rarely travel far.
- Usually respond to searcher’s calls.
- Often resort to *direction sampling* looking for some familiar place or landmark.
Hunters

- Concentrate on game and not navigation.
- Tend to overexert themselves into darkness.
- Detectability?
- Usually respond/signal to searchers.
- May go to great lengths to walk out of the woods unassisted.
- The “typical” hunter will attempt to build shelter and walk out at daybreak.
Fishermen

- Shore fishermen become lost traveling to or from their fishing site.
- Boat fishermen become lost trying find a spot to launch their boat or land after dark in some unfamiliar location.
- Drowning is more a possibility for boat fishermen than for shore fishermen especially if alcohol is involved.
Hikers

- Trail-oriented, become lost by obscured trails or confusing intersecting paths.
- Tend to travel great distances using trails.
- Often less prepared and “woods-wise” than hunters and fishermen.
Skiers

- Mostly young and in fairly good physical condition.
- Usually well equipped.
- Most become lost because they took the wrong route, or misjudged time and distance.
- May be made immobile by injury and may be vulnerable to hypothermia.
- Usually highly detectable against the snow.
Climbers

- Usually are well equipped and self-sufficient.
- Tend to remain on or near designated route.
- A common factor for missing climbers is weather or hazardous conditions which limit their capabilities.
- Falling debris and avalanches are often important factors.
Many are inadequately equipped or clothed.

Frequently found near natural boundaries, such as rivers and lakes shores.

Many found away from trails, depending on the nature of the activity in which they had been involved.
Despondents

- Usually do not travel far, but find a place to be alone and possibility contemplate suicide.
- Frequently located at the interface between two types of terrain, and sometimes a scenic location.
- Often avoid or hide from search teams.
- Despondents rarely protect themselves from the weather, drugs or alcohol may be involved.
Walkaways

- Rarely understand that they are lost.
- Seldom are dressed appropriately
- Rarely respond to and often hide from searchers.
- May be attempting to return to a place they enjoyed being.
- The fatality rate for subjects in this category is extremely high.
Other Lost Person Considerations

- Gender Differences
- Multiple-Subject Searches
- The Elderly Lost Person
- The Bogus Search
Overview of Lost Adults

- Usually search for paths rather than places.
- Seldom bushwhack.
- Usually stay on trail.
- May climb a hill to improve view.
- Rarely travel in straight line.
- Rarely reverse direction.
- May apply “woods wisdom”.
Overview of Lost Children

- Have poor “mental maps” of surroundings.
- Search for familiar places rather than routes.
- Poor judges of direction and distance.
- Often become lost taking a “short cut”.
- Will often try “trail running”.
- May move randomly or unsystematically.
- Rarely answer searchers calling their names.
Preventive SAR (PSAR)

- Hug-a-Tree
- Find a Place Show Your Face
- Map & compass included in hunter safety programs
- Project Lifesaver (www.projectlifesaver.org)

Remember:

“The most successful lost person incident is the one you don’t have to conduct!”
Thank You

Questions?