



PHOTO Can your clients use a map to get help? © Karl Midlane

**Picture the scenario: a young couple on holiday in the Lake District. Although fit, they have little mountain walking experience. Not feeling confident enough to do it themselves they hire the services of a mountain leader to take them to the summit of Scafell Pike.**

After leaving the summit the cloud descends and it starts to rain. The leader slips, bangs his head on a rock and is knocked unconscious.

Whether we are guides, instructors or leaders we should all feel confident that we can look after our clients when we take them into the hills and mountains. But have you ever thought about how they would cope if for some reason you were not able to care for them? Would they have the necessary skills, information

larger group on a charity challenge.

The experience, skill level and expectation of the clients could differ vastly from "Lead me around the Yorkshire 3 Peaks route" up to "I would like to lead Tower Ridge in winter."

Regardless, our duty of care remains the same. Looking at the literature available there is a great deal of information on the recommended kit for individuals to carry and party management for leaders. It would seem

# Client safety

WORDS BY STEVE OWERS



**Steve Owers**, North-Pennines Navigation  
Steve Owers works as a freelance Mountain Leader and runs North-Pennines- Navigation providing navigation courses in the North East of England.  
steve.owers@tiscali.co.uk  
0787 6132 030

and kit to be able to fend for themselves, get to a place of safety or call for help?

Working in the outdoors we value the ethos of self reliance and try to instil this principle in to our clients, however we do have a duty of care to clients and as part of a safety management system should we be asking the question "What will happen if I am not there to look after my client?"

Working with clients can take many different formats, from instructing a single client on a particular skill to leading a much

there is an assumption that either the person or organisation a) has the kit, b) knows how to use it or c) that there is someone to show them. What happens if that someone, the leader, is not there? There appears to be very little guidance given in this circumstance.

This can happen in two main ways, a serious accident or illness to the leader or the leader and client become separated. As part of a safety management system we, as mountain professionals, should be looking at these types of situations and putting



LEFT PHOTO Using a bivi bag to make a phone call. © Steve OWERS TOP RIGHT PHOTO Whistle and headtorch.  
RIGHT PHOTO Using a group shelter on the Glyderau. © Alex Messenger



simple practical measures in place to reduce the risk for ourselves and our clients. These measures need to be appropriate to the activity level and location.

Suggested safety equipment carried by a leader on a mountain walk which the client may be able to access in the event of the leader being incapacitated:

- Mobile phone
  - Is it switched on? Is there a pin code? Does the client know how to contact the Emergency Services?
- Group shelter
  - Do all the clients know what one is and how to use it?
- First aid kit
- Map and compass
  - Is the route marked? Are possible escape routes marked?
- Headtorch
- GPS
  - Could your client use it to obtain an exact location to pass on to Emergency Services or to navigate to safety with map?

Suggested equipment carried by clients on a mountain walk in the event of the leader and client becoming separated:

- Client's own mobile phone
  - Do they have the leader's mobile number? Does the client know how to contact the Emergency Services? Is the phone protected from the weather?
- Whistle
  - Does the client know the international distress signal?
- Bivi bag
  - Do all the clients know what one is and how to use it?
- Map with route and escape route marked
  - Limited use if client cannot navigate using a map
- Grid Location App downloaded onto smartphone e.g. Gridpoint, OS Locate.
  - Could your client use it to obtain an exact location to pass on to Emergency Services or to navigate to safety with map?
- Headtorch

Briefing of clients before we set out for the day is something we all do routinely. An extra couple of minutes explaining what to do in the event of finding themselves on their own is time well spent. To reinforce this briefing I have found it useful to produce a small

laminated card to remind clients what to do if they find themselves in an emergency situation. Information on this card varies but could include:

- What to do if you become separated from your leader?
- How best to contact the Emergency Services and what information to provide?
- International Distress Signal for whistle and torch
- How to protect yourself with a bivi bag?

I often loan a simple emergency pack to my clients consisting of a plastic bivi bag, whistle and a "What to do in an emergency" card. This can be put together for less than £5 per pack. In the event of an incident it will tell the client what to do as well as giving them a means of attracting attention and of protecting themselves from the wind and rain.

During the day it is good practise to point out to clients where they are on the map even if it is not the "aim" of the day. It can also be useful to get out a group shelter and show them how to use it. It is surprising how many clients have only ever seen one in its bag in a shop. A short discussion at lunch on how would the client should deal with a particular emergency will also help to get the safety message across.

Fortunately incidents involving mountain professionals and clients are rare, but a recommended read for anyone working in our industry is the Fatal Accident Inquiry Report resulting from an accident on Skye in 2012 (Mountain Training website – Blog – Fatal Accident Inquiry Skye).

**We would be naive to think that nothing can go wrong when we take clients to the hills and mountains**

but by thinking about what could go wrong and putting simple measures in place it will not only benefit the client but in the unlikely event of any legal proceedings, it will help to demonstrate our commitment to the highest level of duty of care to our client.

So going back to the start of this article, if the young couple were your clients would you be happy you had done everything "reasonably practicable" for them to be able to resolve the situation for themselves and you in a safe manner? ■