

Profiling victims lost in wilderness

There's a good reason they're usually referred to as 'he'

Some time ago, an interesting question was put to me: Why do I usually use the term "he" when referring to a survivor?

The answer is simple. Almost 70 per cent of all victims lost in wilderness areas are males; hence, the usage of the pronoun. To clarify a few other issues related to this topic, today's entire piece is dedicated to establishing a profile of the lost victim.

This article is designed to complement one of my previous units entitled "Behaviour of the Wilderness Survivor." The two pieces support each other. Gathering the required data was a tedious and lengthy process that took several years. It was the basis of my doctoral dissertation.

Some of this information is almost predictable, while other statistics are quite surprising.

Based on 1,200 cases, 56 per cent of all lost people are hunters (672); 24 per cent are anglers (288); trappers (144) make up 12 per cent of the list; and finally, eight per cent are park patrons (96).

It's understandable why hunters might lose their way. While tracking

game, they're concentrating solely on the animal. Adrenaline is flowing and no thought is given to changing weather conditions, time spent in the bush, or the approaching nightfall. Suddenly, it's dark . . . and the individual is lost. Anglers fishing in areas such as the 30,000 Island region sometimes lose their way . . . from a distance, one island looks like another . . . and, while attempting to navigate through a myriad of channels, they're lost.

Today, most trappers use snowmobiles, not dogs, as a main form of bush transportation. If their machine breaks down and they have not returned to home base, they're technically "lost." Park patrons, the smallest proportion of victims, are individuals who use park systems a great deal; these are hikers, picnickers and backpackers. If they've taken a wrong trail and have not returned to a pre-determined meeting site, so they're reported as lost.

On another study, I randomly selected 704 cases, gathered over a nine-year span and attempted to establish how long a victim is lost. Here are the results:

- 298 were lost 10 hours or less (42.3 per cent)
- 175 spent one night in the wilderness (24.8 per cent)
- 150 were stranded for 2 to 3 days (21.3 per cent)

This statistic clearly illustrates that the vast majority of victims, 623 cases

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or 88.4 per cent, were lost for three days or less. To continue, 46 were out four to seven days (6.5 per cent); 29 were lost for eight to 13 days (4.1 per cent), and only six (.85 per cent) were stranded 14 or more days.

As to their behaviour while lost in the wilderness, I analyzed 167 randomly selected cases. You'll see why some of this information is useful to a search and rescue party:

- 85 per cent walked downwards (142); 11 per cent stayed at the same elevation (18); only four per cent walked uphill (7).
- Age bracket of survival victims ranged from 15 to 35 years.
- 85 per cent were in fairly good physical condition (142).
- 33 per cent were experienced hunters (55); slightly more than 66 per cent had a limited knowledge of the bush (110); only 65 per cent, or 109,

were properly equipped and prepared for a wilderness journey.

- In flat terrain, 89 per cent were found three to eight kilometres from the point where they were last seen (149). If mobile, they walked in circles. Interestingly, most walked at a pace of three to four km/hr.

Of these 167 cases, 83 per cent were detected due to their bright clothing (139).

While conducting another study using a random selection of 650 cases, a solid profile of the victim emerged:

1. Usually male (68 per cent). 57 per cent were 16 to 35 years of age, while 33 per cent of all individuals were in the 10 to 15 year old bracket. All were composite outdoorspeople, that is, they had some knowledge of several outdoor skills, but were masters of none.

2. Almost all were novices at their activity, had the time and financial resources to spend on extensive outdoor recreational activities, traveled long distances for these seasonal sessions but drove too far and too fast to acclimatize to their new surroundings.

3. Most (82 per cent) were urban residents.

4. Most survival victims placed too much faith in their material goods such as backpacking gear and survival kits; often, this equipment focused on style over function. Most did not protect, conserve or utilize fully what was on their person. 62 per cent had improper

wilderness equipment/clothing specific to their activity.

5. Many ignored signs of weather changes and environmental hazards. Generally, all were in good physical condition; however, in the field, they tended to downplay body indicators (thirst, hunger, headaches, minor injuries) in their quest to complete a pre-determined goal or reach a specific destination. They also badly misjudged time and distance while traveling in the wilderness.

6. By far, human error was the main reason given as to why they became disoriented in the bush. Most cited having poor map/compass navigational skills. When lost, 73 per cent of hikers and 67 per cent of children made use of "travel aids," that is, pathways, logging roads, game trails, streams and clear cuts that offered the lost victim a sense of direction and a path of least resistance. Finally, 94 per cent of children wandered less than three kilometres from the point where they were last seen.

When this data was presented at a search and rescue symposium quite a few years ago, it was cutting edge research. Today, in most search and rescue organizations, this information is common knowledge. In any case, understanding when and where to look for a survival victim could conceivably lessen his stressful stay in the wilderness.