Accidents in Mountain Recreation —
The Experiences of International
and Domestic Visitors in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT: An important component of recreation in mountain areas is the experience of
risk. Visitors to such places may be seeking the challenge provided by risk, but they may also
experience the negative side of risk — accident and injury. International and domestic visitors
to mountain lands may have differing experiences of risk. Indeed, it has been suggested fre-
quently in New Zealand that international visitors face considerably more danger than do
New Zealanders in mountain recreation. This view is pursued in an examination of one of the
negative outcomes of risk — fatal accidents.

Coroners’ reports form the basis of a comparative study of such negative outcomes for the
two groups. Patterns and trends are elaborated in an exploration of the number, location and
cause of fatalities, and the activity of the deceased. Differences between the two groups
are discussed, as are some reasons why the impression that international visitors face more
danger exists.

A series of events early in 1988 sparked another round
in a controversy that has often arisen in New Zealand. In
late January in the mountains an Australian boy died of
hypothermia, a British tourist drowned, and two Ameri-
cans and their British climbing partner disappeared. Within two weeks two more British climbers fell to their
deaths and two Koreans, believed to be missing, reappeared. All these events received nationwide newspaper
coverage in the daily papers, generally on the front page.

In the resulting debate, risk managers were divided. The Mountain Safety Council — an educative and train-
ing body — believed there was nothing to substantiate
the idea that climbers from overseas faced a greater
chance of negative outcomes. Indeed, the Council stated
that domestic climbers were statistically more prone to
accidents or becoming lost in the mountains, and that
international visitors were usually better prepared for a
mountain trip (The Press 1988a). However, a staff
member at Mt. Cook National Park (where all but the
first two of the aforementioned incidents occurred)
suggested some reasons why international visitors may
be prone to accidents (The Press 1988b). First, they have
a limited amount of time, and so might proceed in con-
ditions which are marginal. A New Zealand climber is
without this pressure of time, and can return to the area
when conditions are better. Second, snow conditions
differ from those in Europe, and it would take some
time for an outsider to adjust. This latter point was
echoed frequently in interviews with climbers under-
taken by the author. The climbers suggested that inter-
national visitors did not understand or appreciate the
snow, rock and weather conditions of New Zealand. Conse-
quently, they found themselves in trouble. One
climber summarised an accident to an Australian:

It's no wonder that he fell . . . He had such limited percep-
tion of the danger. That’s just crazy. That’s why those
Australians come over and die in New Zealand. They just
have no clue. New Zealand mountains are really dangerous.

This paper explores the suggestion that international
visitors are exposed to considerably more danger than
are New Zealanders by examining the accident
experiences of these two groups in the mountain areas of
New Zealand. As such, this study forms part of the
growing research into comparative aspects of inter-
national and domestic visitor behaviour. This particular
component of tourism behaviour has been somewhat
neglected by geographers (exceptions are Foster 1985
and Waldichuk 1987). However, it constitutes a signi-
ficant part of the tourism experience for many people,
and involves considerable management efforts in many
countries.
Most visitors to mountain areas do not venture far beyond the landscaped gardens of hotels and visitor centres. This is especially true for international tourists who generally follow a well-defined circuit on a fairly rigid schedule. However, a significant proportion of visitors — mainly domestic travellers and independent international travellers — actively participates in outdoor recreation. About 20% of international visitors to National Parks in New Zealand in 1985/86 reported participation in active recreation, while for domestic visitors participation is much greater (Pearce and Booth 1987). These people are involved in traditional land-based activities in the New Zealand mountains: tramping, climbing, skiing, hunting and day walking. It is this group that is the focus of this research.

Aukerman and Davison (1980, p. 1) “define mountain lands as any terrain of high relief and valleys enclosed therein” and this definition is used in this study (Fig 1).

Visitors to mountain areas do not desire or expect to have accidents, but they sometimes happen. Accidents are one possible negative outcome of risk in the mountains, and they accompany a sought-after possible positive outcome — satisfaction of motivations. Risk can be a motivation for recreation (Allen 1980; Johnston 1987). Indeed, for some people the risk element that can be realized in certain activities and environments is the ultimate attraction. For others, risk is accepted as a necessary condition of such recreation in particular environments. And some others remain totally unaware of the risk element until they experience it by chance.

**Risk in Mountain Recreation**

It is important to explicitly include in any definition of risk the positive and negative aspects, as both are significant in recreation activities. Positive outcomes may be sought and negative outcomes may occur. Allen (1980) has suggested that recreationists see the positive side of risk as challenge, and the negative as danger. The dividing line between them is not based on outcomes, but rather on the level of control that recreationists are able to exercise over their mountain experience. The risk that can be controlled is challenge, while the risk that can not be controlled is danger. Recreationists work towards attaining a level of risk they find acceptable based on their ability and motivation. In circumstances where this target level of risk is not perceived as being met, they will take corrective action to increase or decrease the risk experienced (Wilde 1982).

However, individual recreationists are not the only people concerned with risk experience and setting target levels of risk in the mountains. An unacceptably high number of fatalities and injuries (negative outcomes) also causes reaction from groups involved with risk: the recreation subculture, the wider public and the risk management bodies. This reaction often takes the form of apportioning blame. It has been noted elsewhere (Johnston 1986) that the climbing subculture tends to blame an unpopularly high number of accidents on a particular group or type of participants. In the 1930s in New Zealand this was the new generation of incoming enthusiasts who climbed without the traditional guiding services. In the mid-1950s it was the Australians, who as a group had begun to make an impact on the accident statistics because of substantially increased visits to New Zealand mountains. While such apportioning of blame may reflect patterns in the accident statistics, often it is based on misconceptions about the frequency of accidents involving particular groups.

**Accident Statistics**

In addition to qualitative material, which illustrates elements in the debate, we can examine quantitative evidence about accidents to international and domestic visitors. The two main sources for this paper are coroners' reports on fatal mountain accidents, and a que-