

The Devil's Canyon Wilderness Program and Safety

In the Devil's Canyon Wilderness Program, one of our main goals is to teach students how to experience varying types of wilderness activities safely and responsibly. Thus, safety is our primary concern. The activities we offer—rock climbing, caving, mountain biking, kayaking, surfing, hiking, and backpacking — all entail some degree of risk. In all of these activities there is the possibility for serious injury and even death. The following is a description of some of the risks that any participant of these activities faces. Please note that it is not a complete inventory of all the potential accidents that could happen and that in any wilderness situation, even something as basic as hiking can involve risks, because events in the natural world cannot always be predicted or avoided. Please read this carefully before signing the DCWP's liability waiver.

Rock Climbing

Although we work hard to reduce the risks, here are a few of the examples of the kinds of risks rock climbers face:

- Falling due to technical difficulty.
- Falling due to natural hazards such as holds breaking, falling rock, or equipment dropped by other climbers.
- Hazards of weather and lightning.
- Equipment failure.
- Belayer errors such as failure to catch a person's fall or lowering a climber off the rope.
- Falling while setting up a climb at the top of a cliff.
- Failure to place harness on or to tie into the rope correctly.

As teachers in this program, we spend most of our time training students how to be competent and safe in rock climbing. We have students practice climbing techniques under controlled and safe circumstances in our gym before going out to real cliffs. Students learn how to belay another climber and how to rappel. More advanced students learn forms of self-rescue

We seek, as much as possible, to reduce risks to students. We require students to wear helmets at the top and bottom of all climbs. We teach students to always double-check to make sure knots are tied correctly and harnesses are correctly worn. Students belay each other in our program. For the past five years, new students go through "belay school" in which they have to pass a test to prove they know how to belay correctly before they can belay other students on their own.

We do not allow students to engage in "lead climbing" out of doors. Lead climbing is a term used to describe a type of climbing in which one starts from the bottom of a climb and places protection as she ascends. If a fall should occur while doing this kind of climbing, the force of the fall can be so great it can lead to injury and even death. While the staff of the DCWP often have to lead climb to set up climbs for students, this is not an activity that students engage in an out of door setting. With our most advanced climbers, we do teach them how to lead climb on our climbing wall in the gym. In this controlled setting with floor mats and bolt hangers for anchors every four feet, the chance for injury is greatly reduced.

Despite our efforts to reduce risks and promote safety, there are some things that cannot be controlled or predicted, such as a rock breaking loose from the cliff face and other types of rock fall, including a student accidentally kicking a rock loose while climbing.

Caving

We as a staff have worked with the students teaching and re-teaching vertical rope work, and have talked about the dangers and risks in caving. Like rock climbing, caving is an inherently dangerous activity.

The University of Texas Grotto club notes that the risks include:

- Running out of light
- Getting lost in the cave
- Getting lost on the surface
- Hypothermia
- Histoplasmosis (can result from exposure to bat guano)
- Falling (a small fall can cause a big injury and a big fall can cause death)
- Rock Fall (a rock fall from above can cause injury and death)
- Drowning (some caves flood)

As teachers in this program, we spend most of our time training students how to be competent and safe in caving. Many of the caves we go to are vertical caves that require rope work to explore. We spend most of our training time teaching students how to climb rope using vertical ascending gear, how to descend a rope by rappelling, how to switch from one rope to another when crossing a re-belay, how to climb past a directional or deviation in a rope, and how to pass a knot in a rope. We have students practice the techniques under controlled and safe circumstances before using the gear underground. We also take advantage of local cavers with many years experience caving in Mexico and other locales who help train our students.

When selecting caves to explore with students, the program has traditionally gone to caves that have been explored before and where there is knowledge of most potential hazards. For instance, if there is a cave that is known to flood when it rains, we would not take students into that cave when it's raining. If there is a cave known to have large deposits of bat guano, we would avoid that cave because of a potential exposure to Histoplasmosis.

There are many things that we as leaders can usually control: not getting lost, making sure that each student has enough batteries and an emergency light, making sure that each student has a "fireman's belay" at the bottom of every drop so that a person rappelling will not get out of control.

There are some things that cannot be controlled or predicted, such as a rock breaking loose from the roof of the cave and other types of rock fall, including a student accidentally kicking a rock loose while climbing.

Mountain Biking

Mountain biking is an activity students engage in both on and off dirt roads and trails. Thus, there are potential traffic hazards on paved roads from automobiles, as well as hazards on dirt trails. Students can fall from bikes and there is a potential for serious injury. We require that students wear helmets to reduce the chance of head injury. Instructors also teach bike safety and make students aware of the dangers associated with biking and how to avoid them. While students typically ride with instructors and in groups, there is a potential for students to ride alone at times or in groups not directly supervised by adults.

Water Sports

The DCWP also offers some water-based activities such as kayaking, surfing, and canoeing. Obviously, anytime one is in the water there is a potential for drowning. In canoeing and kayaking situations, students will wear life vests. On surfing trips, there will be adult supervision, but none of the staff has a lifeguard certification for ocean water. Because of the force of the waves and the mass of a surfboard, there is a potential for injury related a board striking a student. Also, in the ocean there are some dangers associated with aquatic life (sharks, sting rays, etc.).

Flexibility When Traveling

Because of safety concerns and the unpredictability of the natural world, we will sometimes be forced to change travel plans or scheduled activities at the last minute. Over the past nine years I've worked in the program, there are have been times when we have had to come home early because of bad weather and other situations in which bad weather forced us to stay an extra day in the field. Again, we will try to avoid taking unnecessary risks, but there could be potential situations in which weather conditions or other field conditions will force trip leaders to make decisions in the field that deviate from our original trip plans.

High Expectations

Because of the types of risks described above, two of the most important characteristics we look for in students is maturity and accountability. We use discretion when selecting students for various trips. There are some students with three years of rock climbing experience and some with none. A student's competence in controlled practice sessions, as well as the staff's judgment of a student's maturity are important factors in decisions about what trips to which a student will be invited. If we learn of a student engaging in behavior that poses a risks to himself/herself or to others, we will take steps to remove that student from the group and send that student home if we are on an off-campus trip. We have removed students from our program for seemingly minor reasons, such as repeatedly not walking on the trail after we have asked them to stay on the trail. A student's inability or reluctance to comply with direct requests by a teacher raises large questions about whether or not we could trust that student in a wilderness situation. Even though students may be competent belaying and climbing, our understanding of their level of maturity through observation in training sessions will affect their level of participation on off campus trips.

As a program, we provide the students with a great opportunity to learn about and experience the wilderness. However, the students have to assume the responsibility to learn and follow the correct procedures both in terms of technical work on rope, as well as following our instructions, and heeding warnings about safety. For every rock climbing or caving trip, the DCWP aims for a high adult to student ratio to make sure that students are being monitored and observed. In wilderness situations, however, it is impossible to monitor every single movement of a student. Thus, there are situations when students have to follow what we have taught them, exercise common sense and be on their own in terms of making sure that they have followed the proper steps and belay correctly. That is why we meet and have regular training sessions.

This letter is not intended to scare off anybody from any of the sports that the DCWP offers. It is intended to communicate the nature of the risks that are involved and to give parents a better sense of what the DCWP does in terms of preparing students the various trips we lead. If you have questions or more specific concerns, please call Mike Davis.

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