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Death by GPS – how to get lost with pinpoint accuracy

You know your exact position…
but do you *really* know where you are?

Navigation in the Scottish Mountains can be challenging; particularly if the cloud comes down and visibility is lost. This is a time when many hill walkers will pull out their GPS, press a few buttons and confidently follow instructions from the small screen in front of them.

Heather Morning, Mountain Safety Advisor with The Mountaineering Council of Scotland, discusses whether that GPS 'safety net' is indeed the panacea to solving all our navigation and safety concerns or whether we as a hill walking community are becoming so reliant on modern technology that we may be actually losing a part of ourselves and our ability to 'see' the bigger picture.

It's an attractive thought to think that purchasing an electronic gadget is going to solve all our problems in the mountains and keep us safe from harm. However recent trends with mountain rescue call-outs suggest in fact that it is quite the opposite. Those electronic gadgets, designed to make our life easier and safer in the mountains are in some cases contributing to problems and even leading to situations where a 999 call has to be made.

Death by GPS describes what happens when our GPS fails us, not by being wrong necessarily, but by being too right. Our GPS will do the job it is designed to - computing our exact position and the most direct route from point A to point B, but what it can't do (and you can) is read the ground in-between. An example of this would be a crag or very steep ground on the line between A and B, which will be obvious on the map because of the tight contour lines and crag markings. But miss the detail, punch in A and B with no regard for the terrain marked on the map and our GPS will just blindly take us on the straight line between the two points.

Modern technology can fail us for a variety of pragmatic reasons, battery life and user error being top of the list. But Heather argues there is also something much more subtle going on.

She said: "Studies around the world have indicated that using GPS for navigation – even when it's done properly – can leave us with less knowledge of where we are, not more."

People subconsciously build up a mental map as they move around, but it seems to be that, when they are following directions from a GPS they are not registering their surroundings in the same way they would have to when using a map and compass.

One city-based study indicated that walkers using GPS had less memory of a route than those who had followed the same route using a map. And another study concluded: "GPS eliminated much of the need to pay attention."

Referring to the studies, Heather said: "It seems to be clear from these studies that people using GPS for navigation just aren't building a mental map in the same way you do in traditional map and compass navigation, where you are constantly relating the map to the terrain around you.

"That means if the technology fails for whatever reason, you are going to be a lot more lost than you would have been if you were using a map.

"It's not only relevant in nightmare scenarios either: it affects the satisfaction and pleasure you get out of any walk. Real navigation involves you in the terrain, both in your immediate surroundings and in the wider sense. Surely that's a lot more satisfying and intimate an experience than following an electronic arrow up and down a hill it seems you hardly pay attention to – that's just exercise.

"Letting the gadget do the work also allows any existing navigation skills to grow rusty."

The basic skills of navigation remain essential in the hills and mountains of Scotland. As part of its role in improving safety in Scotland's mountains, the MCofS offers a number of heavily subsidised navigation courses, which give walkers an easy to follow practical introduction to map and compass skills which will make them safer and more confident in the mountains.

Details are available at the MCofS website at http://www.mcofs.org.uk/navigation-courses.asp

There are also courses available commercially in the proper use of GPS devices.

Ends

Notes for editors

Images for this press release are downloadable here:

http://www.mcofs.org.uk/assets/media/GPS_device_in_use.jpg

http://www.mcofs.org.uk/assets/media/GPS_device.jpg

Images of a GPS device on its own and of one being used by a walker

www.mcofs.org.uk/assets/media/heather_morning_2012.jpg

Image of Heather Morning, Mountain Safety Adviser with the MCofS

Further information

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About the MCofS

- The MCofS acts to represent, support and promote Scottish mountaineering.
- The MCofS is the only recognised representative organisation for hill walkers, climbers and ski-tourers who live in Scotland or who enjoy Scotland's mountains.

- The MCofS is a membership organisation with over 12,000 members representing hill walkers, climbers and mountaineers.
- The MCofS also acts for 75,000 members of the BMC or British Mountaineering Council on matters related to Landscape and Access in Scotland.
- MCofS landscape and access work is supported financially by the Scottish Mountaineering Trust and the BMC
- The MCofS is a not for profit company limited by guarantee and incorporated in Scotland. Company number SC322717.
- The Mountaineering Council of Scotland, The Old Granary, West Mill Street, Perth PH1 5QP