

Route Cards

The Pros & Cons of leaving detailed information about an intended hill walking and mountaineering 'expedition'

The Ethics of Mountaineering Freedoms

Route cards are often seen as helpful for facilitating rescue by Police and Mountain Rescue teams but many hill walkers and mountaineers reject the formal route card as a constraint on their ability to change their plans and cope flexibly with prevailing conditions. Such a reporting system is seen as conflicting with the 'open ended' nature of some mountaineering expeditions as people sometimes prefer to head off into the hills without a predetermined objective. Mountaineers, while planning and taking all prudent precautions, commonly wish to test themselves and take on challenges, the outcome of which will be in doubt. Mountaineers often do not want the Police to be alerted unnecessarily if there are no life threatening circumstances.

The ethos of Scottish Mountaineering incorporates the ideology that mountaineers should be independent, self reliant and able to look after themselves.

Hill goers should not be encouraged to feel that they have a right to be rescued by volunteer rescue teams or that their safety is ultimately guaranteed by the emergency services.

A late return, a benightment, a forced bivouac, are all situations for which a mountaineer should be prepared, and do not necessarily justify alerting the mountain rescue.

The imposition from outwith the mountaineering fraternity of an obligation to complete an over-elaborate route card for every expedition however mundane is not acceptable to many mountaineers. Such a requirement implies that hillgoers are in some way accountable to officialdom. This conflicts with the ethos of mountaineering.

However, the act of letting friends know where one is going is traditional and common practice. It is regarded by the public at large as common sense in a wide variety of circumstances not just hill walking.

Leaving information about the day's plans is a 'custom and practice' of the sport rather than a social obligation in any wider context.

In principle therefore, leaving a route card and reporting back does not conflict with the ethos of mountaineering and is widely regarded as good practice.

The effectiveness of the voluntary mountain rescue teams is greatly facilitated if a reasonably accurate description of a hill walker's/ mountaineer's plans is available.

Who Should be Advised to Use Route Cards

Leaders who owe a duty to an employer or a duty of care to party members. Leaders of parties who owe a duty to employers or voluntary organisations are normally obliged to conform to a reporting system to enable those on whose behalf they are acting to know what they are planning to do and when they plan to do it. In such a situation an expedition would not be open ended and the range of information recorded on a route card may be extremely elaborate and dictated by the employer.

They should not be used as models for recreational mountaineers.

Prudent behaviour for Scottish mountaineers. Experienced hillgoers undertaking expeditions in areas with which they are unfamiliar or in usually severe conditions might consider leaving a simple route card. Hill walkers and mountaineers who are going to attempt something at the margins of their ability might also consider letting somebody know what they are planning to do. Any hillgoer would be well advised to leave a route card during the winter months. Such a precaution seems to be common sense.

In principle the person holding the route card should be a family or club member, a friend or associate.

Visitors to Scotland. Hill walkers unfamiliar with Scotland, visitors from far afield or people who are alone could be advised to leave a route card. Such a population, while they are not accountable to anybody, might feel more confident if a 'pastoral' service of this sort was available and not solely in relation to mountain based activities. Such a 'reporting' service may be offered by some accommodation providers in the context of the Walkers Welcome Scheme for B&B's, Hotels and Guest Houses in Scotland and forms part of the 'quality' standards monitored by the Scottish Tourist Board. It is presented as a service to visitors is not in any way intended to constrain their activities or frighten them off the hill and only if both parties to the service are happy with the arrangements.

Many of the private bunkhouses and hostels in Scotland may be more willing to offer this service as they are more likely to be mountaineers themselves, have a more detailed knowledge of local hills and therefore better able to make decisions.

Route Card Design and Associated Information

A formal Route Card/ Reporting Back scheme and any associated information should be targeted at those most at risk or at least likely to have friends or relations nearby to monitor their return and act on their behalf.

Safety leaflets for visitors unfamiliar with Scotland should advise them to plan the route from the map in advance and estimate how long it will take. The leaflet could describe a quick and simple method of doing this. The leaflet should advise that they get a weather forecast and indicate how this can be done.

An equipment list should be included to act as a check list /tick list and make explicit what 'proper' clothing and equipment actually means.

It could also include information about ticks, sunburn/heat exhaustion, exhaustion/exposure and safety of water supplies. The explanatory leaflet should not over emphasise the dangers and refer to deaths and by such means act to dissuade people from going on the hill.

Any route card aimed at tourists should properly explain how it is to be used, particularly the obligation to report to whoever holds the card as soon as they return from the hill or arrive at the destination. It should be presented as the walkers responsibility to indicate on the route card the time at which the police should be alerted if they have not reported themselves as having returned.

It should inform the visitor of the police responsibility and the 999 Emergency Number. This would assist a friend or associate to function as the card holder. It could also point out that Mountain Rescue Teams are made up of volunteers and the Emergency Services should only be alerted in the event of a life threatening circumstance.

Who Should Hold the Route Card

There is a great onus of responsibility placed on the holder of a route card, particularly if that person has no personal connection with the walker or climber. Decisions about when to call the Police can be very difficult, even when explicit instructions have been given by the walker or mountaineer.

Friends & Family? In principle the route cardholder should be either an employer, voluntary organisation, family/club member or friend. Such people will have appropriate levels of knowledge of the flexibility of the days plans and the level of competence of the people involved. They have a duty of care towards, or a level of private concern for, the people involved and are better able to make reasoned decisions about their friends safety.

Your Accommodation provider? It should not be assumed that an accommodation provider will be the card holder. Many accommodation providers apparently find it difficult to judge when or when not to report a person as missing. It is likely to result in unnecessary call outs inspired by worried people deciding to be on the safe side. They may also fear actions for negligence if they do not alert the Police.

The Police? In principle if the police wish a reporting scheme to operate in the area for which they are responsible they should be prepared to be the route card holder. It is unacceptable to insist on (or actively promote the idea of) visitors filling in route cards and then expect the system to be operated by somebody else.

Any reporting back service (with appropriate route cards / travel plan forms) developed and operated as part of the Walkers / Cyclist Welcome Scheme is best promoted with proper training as to how it will work and should be presented with an ethos of 'service' to the traveller.

MCofS Recommendations

Personal freedoms: The MC of S does not support any reporting scheme that suggests that hillwalkers or mountaineers have an obligation to fill in elaborate route cards either about their plans or when they return. This is an issue of civil liberties.

The Club as a collection of friends: A club is an association of self-reliant mountaineers who are primarily responsible for each other, rather than the emergency services. Clubs are advised to have a reporting system for the voluntary use of their members. It should not be used to constrain members' freedom of action or interpreted as giving the club some sort of liability for the actions of the individual member.

Route card design: Any information leaflet or exemplar route card should explicitly state that the person holding the route card has no legal liability should they fail to alert the police. Because some expeditions are more open ended than others, the persons lodging a route card/travel plan should indicate the time they would like the police alerted. Leaflets advertising a Route Card / Reporting System scheme could recommend that personal accident/ medical insurance is carried which covers all the activities with which the individual is likely to get involved. This should be carefully distinguished from insurance for the cost of rescue. The information on any leaflet should not exaggerate the risks to be drafted to frighten hillgoers and thereby act as a covert means of constraint.

A voluntary service: The MCofS will not support any route card/reporting scheme which will be gratuitously operated by a constituency who are not consulted or involved in the creation of the scheme. Any scheme should be voluntary and presented as a service to hillgoers and the range of information to be recorded should not be decided on the basis of the requirement for the Police to collect evidence in the event of a fatal accident.

Letting people know one's plans is not only applicable to hill walking. Information leaflets should be helpfully informative and identify all the hazards of the Scottish countryside. The hills are no more dangerous than the sea, towns and roads.

COMPLICATIONS - the arguments against: Instituting a formal system carries with it a risk of creating an accountability loop within the civil law of negligence/duty of care. The walker obliged to leave a route card, the responsible person obliged to contact the police if they do not report in, the police obliged to initiate a rescue, the rescue team obliged to find the person who left the route card and the promoter accused of negligence if the system does not work as advertised. It may also put lone travellers at risk by identifying them as vulnerable. It is important not to conflate the Accident/Medical Insurance and Insurance against the costs of Mountain rescue.