

# **Risk Culture and Appetite at The Climbing Connection**

## **Background**

The Climbing Connection (“TCC”) offers rock climbing education and experiences aimed at increasing emotional and cultural access to rock climbing. In doing so, we hope to create a cyclical relationship between the climber and the sport that builds self-reflection, strong community, and a network of land stewards.

## **Risk Appetite Statement**

A significant aspect that makes up the benefits of rock climbing is the risk involved in the sport. The Climbing Connection values the risks that we take while rock climbing and uses managed, inherent risks to build meaningful programming and clinics. We understand that there is no way to truly eliminate risk and thereby guarantee “safety” in the sport of climbing, as “safety” is defined as “protection from harm”. Even with the most extensive risk management procedures, “safety” is not assured. Rather, it is our goal to assess and manage these risks to minimize harmful impacts, maximize the safety measures we can take, and turn managed risk taking into a positive growth experience for our participants.

## **Risk Management Goals**

1. To prevent fatalities, disabling or disfiguring injuries and serious illness.
2. To reduce all injuries and illnesses.
3. To anticipate emergency response and crisis management needs and design suitable protocols and plans.
4. To identify accepted field practices for managing life threatening risks and hazards and the expectations for their consistent use.
5. To be a leader and resource of wilderness risk management practices.
6. To design clinics, trips, and programs that provide risk assessment and management skills to participants so that they can be informed and responsible users of climbing spaces.

## **Risk Management Definition**

Risk management is the process of understanding and anticipating the risks of leading groups in both front country and backcountry environments and applying appropriate responses to reduce the likelihood of an injury, illness, or fatality.

The Climbing Connection engages with the risk inherent to our programs through a Risk Management Plan. It is organized into the following:

1. Risk Management Oversight
2. TCC Core Curriculum
3. Instructor Training
4. Administrative Processes
5. Field Support Services

## **RISK MANAGEMENT OVERSIGHT**

### **The Climbing Connection Risk Management Committee**

The Climbing Connection's Risk Management Committee is comprised of representatives from TCC, special advisors, medical professionals, and veteran industry guides. The committee reviews the risk management plan and performance and assists in formulating risk management goals and strategies. This committee meets one to two times a year to review the current practices and update any protocols.

### **Guides**

All trips, clinics, and adventures at TCC are run under the supervision of a lead guide. This professional is certified to provide instruction within their scope of practice. Lead guides are also Wilderness First Responder certified and prepared to provide client care within the constructs of that education.

A lead guide is responsible for the following risk management in the field:

- Identify a climbing location and terrain appropriate to the clients and goals of the day
- Confirm the integrity of all gear used within manufacturer specifications
- Provide instruction during the day that models risk assessment and risk management skills
- Immediately, to the best of their ability, address any situations in the field that could lead to increased risk

Any volunteer or assistant guides will operate under the guidance of the lead guide and develop their skills and understanding of risk over time. Assistant guides have ample climbing and instruction experience. They are at least CPR certified, if not Wilderness First Aid or higher. Assistant guides will only perform skills and tasks that they have covered with the lead guide or another certified professional in the field.

### **Students**

Students have important responsibilities for risk management in the field.

- Students are required to read the enrollment information on The Climbing Connection website ([www.theclimbingconnection.com](http://www.theclimbingconnection.com)) to determine if they meet the general requirements of a TCC clinic/trip and understand the rigors, risks, and remoteness of the particular clinic/trip.
- Students are required to read the clinic/trip descriptions and other enrollment information sent after they are enrolled.
- Students and/or parents or guardians are required to read and sign The Climbing Connection Student Agreement that describes the inherent and other risks of participating on a TCC clinic/trip.
- Students and their health care providers are required to complete the health history form and honestly describe their physical and psychological health.

Prior to the course departing for the field, instructors provide a welcome packet

that addresses various aspects of the course including travel conditions, camping conditions, course environment, student and instructor responsibilities, TCC policies and the course goals, and learning objectives. There is particular emphasis on student's individual responsibilities for risk management for themselves and the group.

This entire process is intended to alert and inform the student that risks do exist and that risk assessment and management is a priority during a TCC clinic/trip.

Once in the field, the student has responsibility for managing risk within their abilities and is expected, under the direct and indirect supervision of the instructors, to learn and practice leadership, judgment, decision-making, and use the risk management practices taught on the clinic/trip.

## **TCC LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

These objectives define the core curriculum taught on every Climbing Connection Clinic/Trip. Each clinic and trip provides differing levels of fundamental knowledge, skills, and experience essential for engaging with rock climbing in an enjoyable, responsible, and informed way.

### **Objectives**

- Risk Management: TCC teaches risk management by facilitating experiences to develop judgment. Students learn hazard identification, risk assessment, practice decision-making and develop situational awareness.
- Climbing Skills: TCC aims to increase access to rock climbing spaces by providing a learning environment in which participants can develop their technical skills so that they can be informed and confident users of rock climbing spaces.
- Mental/Emotional Skills: Mental and emotional challenges are inherently present in rock climbing. TCC clinics aim to provide learning spaces where participants can examine their fear, limitations, motivations, and other emotional/mental constructs so that they are able to engage with the sport in a way that best suits their individual needs.
- Environmental Studies: TCC connects participants to wild places. Participants learn *Leave No Trace* ethics as they relate to climbing, the history of certain climbing spaces, how climbing spaces are currently managed, and about ecosystems and cultural issues.

## **INSTRUCTOR TRAINING**

Minimum lead guide certifications:

- Single Pitch Instructor
- Wilderness First Responder

We recognize that the ways we understand and use risk for positive benefits in our work is an ever developing body of knowledge. The Climbing Connection regularly participates in conversations, training, and skills development forums to increase our understanding of industry practices and ways to respond to risk management.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES**

### **Pre-clinic information**

TCC strives to accurately describe the format, curriculum, and risks associated with our trips and clinics. This includes a client questionnaire, health forms, and trip information.

Prior to a trip, the questionnaire and health form are reviewed, usually by the lead guide running the trip. The questionnaire and health form are assessed to determine if the applicant is matched with a clinic that meets their stated goals and is appropriate for their physical and mental needs.

Trip information is provided to participants prior to the trip and will include information about the location, times, dates, suggested packing lists, and goals of the clinic. This is provided to ensure that the participant is able to prepare for their trip with full information about the logistics and tools needed.

### **Risk Management Incident Review Process**

At the close of every TCC trip/clinic the lead guide will complete a post-trip report. This report will track any near misses, injuries, or illnesses, and are used to learn from these experiences and inform and, if necessary, revise our field risk management practices.

This form also includes information about the location and numbers of climbs, weather, if trip goals were met, and gear quality.

### **Participant feedback**

After every trip, participants will be sent a feedback form. On this form, participants will be asked about their trip. There is an area specific to risk management for the participant to complete. These forms are used by TCC to learn from each clinic and grow in the ways that we can provide experience to our participants.

## **FIELD SUPPORT SERVICES**

In order to manage any emergency that may come up in the field, The Climbing Connection regularly evaluates equipment and works under a Risk Management Plan.

### **Equipment**

All equipment used by The Climbing Connection is checked at the start of the clinic/trip and is checked again at the close of the course as well. Participants engage in this process as well, as part of the learning process of risk management.

Participants may use their own equipment during clinics. This equipment will be checked at the start of each clinic and can only be used if it meets TCC standards.

## **Food**

Due to COVID-19, The Climbing Connection is not currently offering food services to participants. Participants are required to pack their own food. Because climbing and hiking are demanding activities, it is recommended that participants pack adequate meals for their trip. If a participant has questions on the types of food that would make for good additions, they are welcome to speak to a lead guide prior to the trip for suggestions.

## **Transportation**

TCC does not currently offer any transportation for clinics/trips. Students are responsible for their own transportation to and from all trips/clinics.

## **Emergency Support and Management**

Should a student become injured or sick during a clinic or trip, TCC has developed an efficient and well-organized emergency response system to provide first aid and, if necessary, evacuate the student to medical care. While a majority of our clinics and trips operate in climbing locations that are within 60 minutes of a medical facility, the technical terrain from the climbing area to transportation can complicate an emergency response. Weather and other variables can also hinder evacuation response resulting in delays in reaching medical care. Our lead guides will always have a cell phone with a back up battery on the trip or clinic for emergency notification. Most of the climbing areas we operate in have moderate-to-good cell coverage. These devices work well, but are subject to limitations due to the topography and atmospheric conditions so they are not always 100% reliable. Rapid evacuation from remote locations cannot be guaranteed.

## **CONCLUSION**

Access to outdoor spaces means considering, understanding, and making informed decisions about the risk associated with using rock climbing spaces. The Climbing Connection values the importance of incorporating risk assessment and management practices into our clinics and trips. Nevertheless, no matter how many systems an organization employs, and no matter how stringently those systems are followed, incidents will happen. We cannot—nor can anyone—reduce that possibility to zero. We accept risk as an integral part of the learning process and of the environments through which we travel, but we do not seek risk for the sake of risk. Our climbing classrooms have no handrails. Emergency situations can be complex and take time to resolve. Participants on our trips and clinics must accept the fact that risk of injury or death exists as a part of rock climbing and other outdoor recreation.

TCC aims to bring our love of rock climbing and the outdoors to a greater community. Our trips and clinics aim to provide tools with which participants can assess the environment and the activity, reflect upon the scope of their abilities and the abilities of those around them to determine how those impact safety and risk, and use the natural, social, and emotional environments around them to make decisions that will reduce risk.