

# Keeping adventure tourism safe

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*By TIA Chief Executive Tim Cossar*

All adventure tourism and activity operators will be watching closely the outcomes of investigations into the recent spate of accidents around the country.

Although not all involved commercial tourism operations, they all have significant implications, for the safety of our visitors and the operation of our businesses, not to mention our international reputation as the adventure tourism capital.

Last week the Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre (OPC) in the central North Island was fined \$40,000 and ordered to pay \$480,000 in reparations following the tragic deaths of seven people in April 2008.



And the director of Manawatu company Crag Adventures was charged with the manslaughter of the Massey University student who died during a bridge swing activity earlier this month.

We are also awaiting the outcome of investigations into the hang-gliding accident which killed a pilot and his passenger in Queenstown recently, along with several recent private and commercial jetboat accidents.

Following the OPC judgement, the Department of Labour urged the adventure tourism industry to look critically at its health and safety systems, to ensure operators and their clients were never placed in a similar position.

Safety must be paramount in the adventure tourism sector at all times. It's vital that all adventure tourism operators maintain high standards.

Perceived risk is a key component of the attraction of adventure activities. While it will never be possible to completely eliminate risk, we must strive to mitigate it to the greatest degree possible.

As an industry, we must now focus on what we can learn from these incidents.

It's essential that tourism operators foster a 'safety culture' in their teams. Government regulations don't make it safe – it's the culture of your organisation which determines your level of risk exposure.

Does everyone feel a personal sense of responsibility for maintaining safety standards? Do senior staff always set the right example?

Visitor safety is not a separate component of your business, it must be integrated into every process and every decision.

Qualmark includes safety procedures in their assessments of activity operators and a number of sectors have developed their own best practice guidelines, including jetboating, rafting, river

sledging, canoeing and tourist flight operators. All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) and the horse-trekking sector have also informally developed best practice standards.

TIA regularly runs operational risk management workshops ranging from one hour to two days.

We held one in Queenstown in October for adventure/outdoor operators and TIA Advocacy Manager Geoff Ensor recently ran a two-day workshop in Tauranga for chief pilots, which included discussion on safety. This followed similar workshops last year and another workshop is being planned for the South Island this winter.

We have also worked with Cycle Tour Operators New Zealand (CTONZ), the Tongariro Alpine Crossing Users' Group and the Outdoor Recreation Forum on improving safety standards.

But are these efforts enough or has the time come for an coordinated industry-wide approach to adventure tourism safety?

This is an issue we are giving considerable thought to within TIA and I'd be interested to hear your views on whether operators want or need more support. Please e mail [info@tians.org.nz](mailto:info@tians.org.nz) if you have any thoughts.