

Mountain School Tech Tips: Avoiding Heuristic Traps

On a sunny weekend in the spring of 2006, a group of six skiers and snowshoers set off from a local ski resort on a three day traverse north through Garibaldi Provincial Park. On the second day of the tour, they climbed to the top of an 2650 metre peak via gullies on the south side. On descent, one member of the party triggered a slab avalanche that propagated across several gullies, caught three people, and carried one 200 metres over a series of cliff-bands. Like most accidents involving recreationalists, there were clear signs of instability and the group had the necessary training to recognize the instability and to take mitigating measures, so how did half the group manage to get caught?

The answer, according to Ian McCammon, lies in heuristics. Those ubiquitous rules of thumb that we use to make 99% of our daily decisions. And, while heuristics seem to work well enough for making decisions about which route to take on our daily commute to work or how to avoid a major guff at the staff Christmas party, there is increasing evidence that using heuristics to make decisions in avalanche terrain will sooner or later result in someone taking what may be their last ride down a snow slope.

Check out the links below to learn more about heuristic traps and how to avoid them:

<http://www.snowpit.com/articles/training.pdf> This article is a good starting point and compares the amount of avalanche hazard that people with and without avalanche education expose their party to.

<http://www.snowpit.com/articles/traps%20reprint.pdf> Evidence that even the most experienced skiers get caught by heuristic traps.

<http://www.sunrockice.com/docs/Heuristic%20traps%20IM%202004.pdf> An extension to the previous article, more on heuristic traps.

<http://www.sunrockice.com/docs/Sex%20&%20drugs%20IM%202004.pdf> An excellent article that explains how even experienced parties get caught in the end.

<http://www.sunrockice.com/docs/Decision%20making%20IM%202001.pdf> One of McCammon's best articles with lots of ideas for recreationalists to avoid getting caught using heuristic traps.

<http://www.sunrockice.com/docs/Heuristics%20Alp%20Truth%20card.pdf> A simple decision making tool to avoid getting caught by heuristic traps.