Field Guide to Adventurous Journeys

What to Do When the Plan Meets Reality

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A companion to the Adventurous Journey Planning Handbook

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Field Guide to Adventurous Journeys:
What to Do When the Plan Meets Reality
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A companion to the Adventurous Journey Planning Handbook.
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"Good plans do not prevent things from going wrong. They determine what happens when something does."

About This Guide

The *Adventurous Journey Planning Handbook* ends at departure. You have done the hard work, the route is planned, the risks are assessed, the mentor has signed off, the trip intention is lodged, and the group is ready to go.

That guide is about the thinking that happens at a desk.
This one is about what happens on the trail.

The moment the group steps onto the track, the plan shifts from a prediction to a reference. Conditions diverge from the forecast. Participants move faster or slower than expected. A water source that looked reliable on the map is dry. The weather turns earlier than the thresholds you set. Every one of these moments is a decision point, and the quality of those decisions determines whether the journey you planned is the journey that happens.
This guide is structured around those decision points. It assumes you have built a complete plan following the *Adventurous Journey Planning Handbook*. It does not repeat that planning content, it shows you how to use that plan in the field as a living tool, not a filed document.

The handbook covers **Plan**. This guide covers **Do**. A third element, **Review**, closes the loop when you return.

How to use this guide

Read it before departure, not during an emergency.

The chapters on emergency response and turnaround decisions are most valuable when you have already thought through the scenarios they describe, before the pressure is on.

The Quick Reference section at the front contains card summaries of the most time-critical decisions. Print them. Put them in the top of your pack.

Each chapter cross-references the relevant section of the *Adventurous Journey Planning Handbook* so you can connect field decisions back to the planning that informed them.

QS-1 Daily Morning Routine

When	Action
On waking	Check weather against overnight observations. Any significant change?
Before breakfast	Check group, any overnight medical issues, blisters, concerns?
During breakfast	Review today's route plan: legs, timing gates, water sources, key hazards.
Pre-departure brief	Brief group on today's plan, key decision points, and turnaround time. Confirm today's communication check time and who holds the PLB.
10 minutes before leaving camp	Group gear check. Packs on. Water topped up. Everyone accounted for.
Departure	Note actual departure time against planned time. If significantly late, recalculate timing gates and turnaround.

QS-2 Timing Gate Decision Framework

At each timing gate waypoint, ask three questions:

1. Are we on time?

- On time or ahead: proceed as planned.
- Behind by less than 30 minutes on an easy leg: proceed with awareness.
- Behind by more than 30 minutes, or any amount on a difficult leg: assess whether the remaining route is achievable before turnaround time.

2. Is the group in good condition?

- Check for fatigue indicators: pace has dropped, conversation has stopped, people are stumbling, mood has shifted.
- Any medical issues developing?
- If group condition has deteriorated significantly, a timing gate that looks achievable may not be safe.

3. Have conditions changed?

- Weather deteriorating beyond thresholds set in the plan?
- A hazard you encounter is worse than assessed?
- Water source dry?

If the answer to any of these is a meaningful concern;

- stop
- make the assessment

don't keep moving and hope it resolves.

QS-3 Turnaround Decision Framework

Calculate your turnaround time before you leave camp each morning.

Work backwards from last light:

- Identify today's campsite or exit point and the estimated time to reach it from your current position.
- Subtract that from last light (check BOM or calculate from sunrise + ~12 hours).
- The result is your latest acceptable departure time from your current position.
- Set this as today's turnaround trigger. Write it down. Tell the group.

If you reach the turnaround time and have not reached the next waypoint: turn around. Not in five more minutes. Not after the next rise. Now.

The hardest version of this decision is when the destination is visible, morale is high, and turning around feels unnecessary. That feeling is the social pressure that has contributed to most serious bush incidents. The plan had a turnaround time. Trust it.

See Chapter 5 for the full decision framework.

QS-4 Emergency Action Sequence

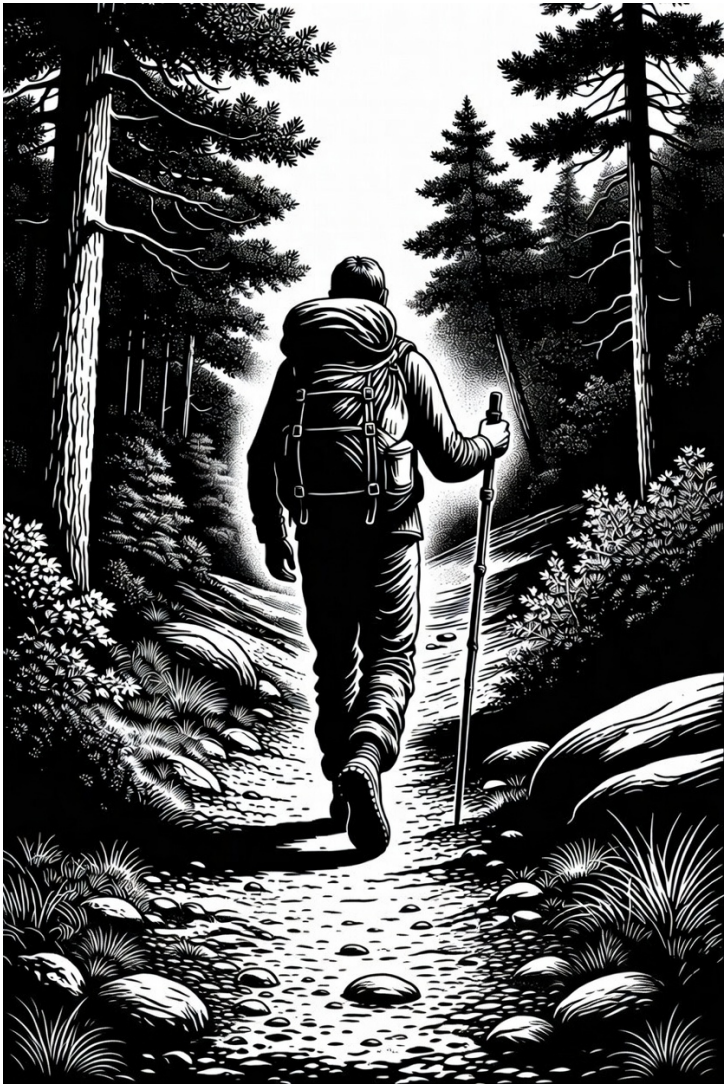
STOP. Breathe. Do not rush.

1. **Secure the scene.** Move the group away from ongoing hazard. Ensure no-one else is at risk.
2. **Assess the patient.** Is there immediate life threat? (Airway, breathing, circulation, major bleeding.)
3. **Assign roles.** Incident Commander. First Aider. Group Supervisor. Communications Officer. (See Ch 9 of this guide.)
4. **Stabilise.** First aid. Warmth. Shelter if needed. Do not move a patient with suspected spinal injury unless there is an immediate threat to life at the current location.
5. **Communicate.** Assess communications options: mobile (check coverage), satellite communicator, PLB.
6. **PLB activation threshold:** Activate when: there is a life-threatening injury or illness, the group cannot self-evacuate, or you cannot reach help by any other means. Once activated, stay at the location or move to the nearest clear, open ground.
7. **Document.** Time of incident. Patient condition. Location (6-figure grid reference). Actions taken. This information goes to emergency services.

Emergency contacts are in your route plan. You briefed them before departure.
They know the trigger time.

PART ONE

STARTING RIGHT



Chapter 1:
The Trailhead;
Getting Departure Right

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Why the trailhead is the last decision gate, not just a starting point
- The departure brief and what it must cover
- Time checks and what to do if you are starting late
- The final gear check before you leave the car park

Typical time: Allow 20–30 minutes at the trailhead before stepping onto the trail.

"The first decision of the day is whether to start at all."

The trailhead is not just where the walking begins. It is the last point at which you can address a problem before it becomes a field problem. A participant who has forgotten their medication, a pack that weighs far too much, a weather forecast that has shifted overnight, all of these are resolvable at the trailhead. On the trail, they are managed under pressure.

Use this time deliberately.

The Departure Brief

Before the group takes a single step, hold a brief. Keep it under ten minutes.

It should cover:

Today's plan. Route summary: where you are going, approximate distance and time, where you will camp tonight. Not the full detail just the key facts that mean every person in the group has a mental model of the day.

Key hazards and controls. What are the one or two hazards on today's route that the group needs to know about?

A creek crossing at Leg 3 that may be fast after overnight rain.

A cliff-edge section on the ridgeline.

A steep descent that is slippery in wet boots.

These are the controls from your risk assessment, delivered verbally to the people who need to apply them.

The turnaround time. State it explicitly. "If we have not reached the saddle at grid reference [xxx] by 2:30pm, we turn around." Every adult and senior participant should know this number. Write it on a piece of tape and stick it to your compass if that helps.

Communication and emergency roles. Who holds the PLB? Who is the designated first aider? If something happens and the Journey Leader is incapacitated, who takes over? These roles were assigned in the Activity Plan. Confirm them out loud, at the trailhead, today.

Questions. Give the group thirty seconds to ask anything. A question at the trailhead is an opportunity. The same question three hours in is a delay.

Time Check

Note your actual departure time and compare it to your planned departure time. If you are starting late, recalculate your timing gates for the day before you set off, not at the first waypoint.

A 30-minute late start on a comfortable day with good conditions and an experienced group is manageable.

A 30-minute late start on a technically demanding day with marginal weather is a different problem that requires a different response.

STRONG PRACTICE Calculate the impact of a late start at the trailhead, not at the first timing gate. Adjustments made early, a shortened lunch stop, a slightly faster pace, are smaller decisions than the choice to push past the turnaround time because you started late and didn't adjust.

PITFALL Rushing the trailhead brief because participants are eager to start. Enthusiasm is good. Uninformed enthusiasm in the bush is a hazard.

Gear Check at the Trailhead

The pre-departure gear check (Chapter 18 of the handbook) should have happened 48 hours before. The trailhead check is confirmation, not discovery.

Walk down the group. Ask each person to confirm:

- Water filled to capacity (you are about to walk away from the last chance to fix this)
- PLB and emergency items accessible (not buried at the bottom of the pack)
- Boots laced and appropriate
- Rain gear accessible, not packed away at the bottom

Distribute any remaining group gear. A stove that has been left in the car is a dinner problem. Discover it at the trailhead.

Chapter 2:
The First Hour;
Reading the Group

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Why the first hour is the most important calibration tool you have
- Setting pace for the group, not the fastest members
- The first rest stop as a genuine assessment point
- Early warning signs: what to watch for

"The first hour tells you more about how the day will go than any planning document."

The first hour of walking is when the plan meets the group. Until now, your pace estimates, your fitness assessments, and your risk controls have been predictions. The first hour is where you find out how accurate those predictions were.

Setting Pace

Pace is set by the group's least capable member on the terrain that is being walked, not by the Journey Leader's comfortable speed.

This sounds obvious. It is routinely ignored, especially when the first hour is relatively easy terrain and the group is fresh. The problem is that pace set on the easy early section becomes the group's expectation for the day. When the terrain gets harder, the group tries to maintain that pace and pays for it in the afternoon.

Set a sustainable pace from the start. A useful test: can the slowest member of the group hold a short conversation while walking? If not, the pace is too fast.

Naismith's Rule and its limits. Your route plan used Naismith's Rule to estimate leg times. The Naismith time is the minimum for a fit, unladen adult walking efficiently. Your group is probably none of those things: some participants are less fit than others, packs are heavy on Day 1, and the early legs are often the most technically unfamiliar. Apply a realistic buffer. The buffer you used during planning (10–30% depending on group profile) is your starting estimate. The first hour will tell you whether it was right.

The First Rest Stop

Take a deliberate rest stop approximately 45–60 minutes into the walk, regardless of whether the group "needs" it. This is an assessment point, not a reward.

During the first rest stop:

- Check for blisters. Day 1, Hour 1 is when blisters start, not when they are noticed. A 30-second check and a piece of tape prevents a 3-day problem.
- Check hydration. Is everyone drinking? In cold weather, participants underestimate their fluid needs.
- Check morale and energy. How is the group feeling? Any concerns being raised that were not mentioned at the trailhead?
- Check your actual position against the route plan. Confirm you are where you should be. If the terrain does not match the map, investigate now, not at the third leg.
- Check your time. What was your actual time for the first leg versus the planned time? This is your pace calibration for the rest of the day.

KEY PRINCIPLE The first rest stop is a decision point, not a tea break. The data you collect here — pace, physical condition, morale, navigation confidence — determines whether your plan for the rest of the day is still valid.

Early Warning Signs

Experienced leaders learn to read the group before problems become visible. Watch for:

Pace fragmentation. The group is spreading out. The gap between the fastest and slowest is growing. This is a pacing problem that will get worse, not better.

Silence. A group that was chatting during the brief but has gone quiet after 30 minutes of walking is working harder than comfortable. This is not necessarily a problem, but it is worth noting.

Equipment adjustments. Participants stopping frequently to adjust packs, boots, or clothing are uncomfortable and will become slower and more uncomfortable as the day goes on. Address it early.

Mood shifts. Irritability, complaints, or disengagement in the first hour are signals. They are not necessarily character flaws, they are information. Acknowledge them, investigate briefly, and address what you can.

STRONG PRACTICE Walk at the back of the group occasionally. Leaders who walk at the front see the terrain ahead. Leaders who walk at the back see the group. Both are necessary. In the first hour, walk at the back.

PART TWO

NAVIGATION IN THE FIELD

Chapter 3: Confirming Your Position

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Using the route plan to confirm position at each waypoint
- What to do when the terrain doesn't match the map
- Navigation recovery when you are off-track
- The role of GPS as a backup, not a crutch

"A leader who knows exactly where they are is never lost, even when the group is uncertain."

Navigation in the field is the application of the route planning skills covered in Chapter 4 of the handbook. The topographic map reading, grid references, and bearing work you learned at the desk are the tools. The field is where you use them under time pressure, with a group watching.

Position Confirmation at Waypoints

Your route plan defines waypoints with 6-figure grid references. At each waypoint, confirm your position on the map before moving on. Do not rely on the feeling that you are in the right place. Confirm it.

The confirmation process:

1. Identify the landmark on the ground (saddle, creek junction, track junction, prominent rock feature).
2. Find the same landmark on the map.
3. Read the 6-figure grid reference from the map and compare it to the reference in your route plan.
4. If they match: proceed.
5. If they do not match: stop and investigate before moving on.

This takes about 60 seconds per waypoint. Over a three-day route with 20 waypoints, this is 20 minutes of navigation checks. That 20 minutes has prevented more costly navigational errors than any other single practice.

When the Terrain Doesn't Match the Map

Australian topographic maps are good but they are not perfect, and conditions change. A track on the map may have been closed. A creek shown as permanent may be dry. A saddle that looks straightforward on the map may have a cliffline that is not shown at 1:25,000 scale.

When you encounter terrain that does not match the map:

Stop moving before you investigate.

Do not walk towards the discrepancy; you may compound it. Stop where you are confident of your position and examine the situation from there.

Use multiple features to fix your position.

A single landmark can be misidentified. Three consistent features (a bearing to a summit, a creek junction below you, a ridge running in a specific direction) create a confident fix.

Consider scale.

At 1:25,000, a 2mm error on the map is 50 metres on the ground. Short cliff sections and minor re-entrants that matter in the field are often too small to show at map scale.

Do not continue if you are not confident of your position. It seems obvious. Under group pressure, time pressure, and the assumption that the right track must be "just around the next corner," many groups continue when they should stop. The cost of stopping for 10 minutes to confirm position is trivial. The cost of 30 minutes of misdirected travel is not.

Navigation Recovery

You are off your planned track.

How you know matters less than what you do next.

The cardinal rule: return to your last known position.

Do not attempt to navigate to the correct track from an unknown position. Back-track to the last point where you were confident of your location, then navigate forward correctly from there.

The three navigation errors to avoid:

1. Continuing in the hope you will recognise something familiar.
2. Assuming the group member with the most confident voice is right.
3. Splitting the group to search in multiple directions.

Keep the group together. Retrace to the last confirmed waypoint. Re-navigate from there.

STRONG PRACTICE Maintain continuous position awareness throughout the day, not just at waypoints. Know the terrain you are passing through, the feature to your left, the drainage below, the ridgeline above, so that if your route becomes unclear, you have a recent anchor point to return to. You should always be using catching points and handrails to aid in continuous navigation.

PITFALL Using GPS as the primary navigation tool and losing the skill of map reading. GPS devices fail: battery dies, satellite signal blocked by gorge walls or dense canopy, screen cracks, device is dropped in a creek. The map and compass are the primary tools. GPS is the backup.

Chapter 4:
Reading the Terrain Ahead

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- What the map cannot tell you about the ground ahead
- Assessing creek crossings before committing
- Technical terrain assessment
- Adjusting your plan when terrain is harder than expected

"The map shows you where the creek is. It does not show you how fast it is running today."

Your route plan describes the terrain based on the map. The map was made from survey data and aerial photography, not from someone walking your route on the day you are there. The map is accurate about what exists; it cannot be accurate about current conditions.

Creek Crossing Assessment

Creek crossings are the highest-consequence navigation decision on most Australian bush routes. A crossing that is straightforward at knee depth becomes genuinely dangerous at waist depth for a youth group.

Current speed matters as much as depth.

Before any non-trivial creek crossing:

1. **Observe from the bank for 60 seconds.** Watch the water. How fast is it moving? Are there submerged rocks? How deep is it at the intended crossing point? Is there a better crossing point upstream or downstream?

2. **Assess the consequences of a fall.** If someone loses their footing, where does the current take them? Is there a pool, a rapid, a cliffline downstream? A fast water crossing with a clear, shallow channel downstream is different from the same crossing above a drop.

3. **Apply the no-cross threshold from your risk assessment.** During planning, you set a threshold for this crossing. If current conditions exceed it, you do not cross. This decision was made when you were calm and objective; it is more reliable than the assessment you make standing at the bank with a group waiting.

4. **If in doubt, do not cross.** The alternative route you planned during route planning exists for this reason. Use it.

The group crossing protocol:

- One person crosses at a time, with observers on both banks.
- Unbuckle hip belts and chest straps before crossing. A submerged pack with a locked hip belt will pull a person under.
- Identify a rescue position downstream before the first person crosses.
- Do not form human chains across fast water unless you have specific training in this technique.

STRONG PRACTICE Establish your no-cross threshold for every creek on your route during planning, and record it in your risk assessment. This takes the decision out of the emotionally charged moment at the bank and puts it in the calm, objective planning session.

PITFALL Underestimating current speed. Water that looks slow from the bank often runs faster than expected mid-stream. Test with a stick if uncertain.

Technical Terrain

Cliff edges, boulder scrambles, steep descents, and exposed ridges require slowing the group and increasing supervision ratios.

Before the group enters technical terrain:

- Brief the group on the technique required (hand-holds, foot placement, slab vs step technique).
- Increase supervision density.
- Move one at a time through the most exposed sections.
- Monitor slower or less confident participants specifically as they will need additional support.

When terrain is harder than the map suggested:

Stop before the group commits to a difficult section and assess whether it is within the group's capability. A section that a fit hiker can manage may not be safe for the least capable youth participant in the group.

The group's capability, not the journey leader's, is the measure.

PART THREE

MAKING DECISIONS

Chapter 5:
Timing Gates and Turnaround Decisions

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Using the pre-set timing gates from your route plan
- Calculating and applying the turnaround trigger
- Social pressure and why it undermines good decisions
- How to communicate a turnaround decision to the group

"The turnaround trigger was set by your best thinking, at a desk, without pressure. Trust it more than the optimism you feel standing 500 metres from the campsite at 4pm."

The timing gates in your route plan are not aspirational targets. They are the mechanism by which you catch problems early enough to address them.

Using Timing Gates

At each timing gate waypoint, record your actual time of arrival against the planned time. Do this every time, not just when you sense a problem. The pattern of your actual versus planned times tells you things that a single data point cannot.

A group that arrives at Waypoint 2 on time, Waypoint 3 five minutes late, and Waypoint 4 fifteen minutes late is decelerating. The trend matters more than any individual reading. A group that is maintaining the timing gates across the first three legs is building confidence in the remaining legs.

The three responses to a timing gate:

On time or ahead: Note it, proceed as planned. Do not speed up because you are ahead, the gate was set for a reason, and banking time early often means burning it later.

Marginally behind (within 20% of planned leg time): Proceed with awareness. Identify whether the gap is due to terrain, group pace, or a single slow section. Adjust rest stop duration and monitor the next gate closely.

Significantly behind (more than 20% of planned leg time, or any amount on a difficult or weather-sensitive leg): Stop and make a conscious decision. Do not just keep walking and see what happens. The options are: adjust the remainder of the day's plan (shorter lunch, modified route), activate the alternative route, or turn around.

The Turnaround Trigger

The turnaround trigger is the latest time at which you can turn around and still reach safety, the previous campsite, a road, a known shelter, before dark or before conditions become dangerous.

Calculate it every morning, not just when you sense a problem. The calculation is:

1. Identify tonight's campsite (or exit point) and your current location.
2. Estimate walking time from current location to campsite using Naismith's Rule, with a buffer for afternoon fatigue.
3. Add set-up time (minimum 30 minutes).
4. Subtract from last light time for today's date and location.
5. The result is the latest time you can depart from your current position and still reach camp before dark.

Write this time down. State it at the morning brief. Put it on your wrist with a pen if necessary.

KEY PRINCIPLE The turnaround trigger was set using your best judgment, without group pressure, social expectation, or the allure of a destination that feels close. That judgment is more reliable than the reasoning you will do standing at the trigger point with the group watching.

Social Pressure and Turnaround Decisions

The turnaround decision is where good planning most often fails in practice. Not because the plan was wrong, but because the leader does not follow it when the moment arrives.

The forces working against a turnaround are real and strong:

- The destination is visible or feels close.
- The group has been looking forward to reaching it.
- Turning around means a disappointing result and a longer return journey.
- The journey leader has invested significant effort in this journey and does not want to pull the trigger.
- "Just a bit further" feels like the reasonable middle ground.

None of these are reasons to override a timing gate. They are the exact pressures that the timing gate was designed to override.

The leaders who handle this decision best are the ones who have decided, in advance, before the pressure exists, that the timing gate is non-negotiable. The decision has already been made. At the gate, you are executing it, not making it.

Communicating the Turnaround

When you make the turnaround call, be clear and direct.

"We've reached the turnaround time. We're heading back."

Do not apologise for it. Do not present it as a failure. Do not invite the group to vote. The decision is yours, it is correct, and a brief, confident statement communicates this.

Brief the group on where you are returning to, the expected time to get there, and what tonight's plan looks like. Give them something to move towards, not just away from.

> **STRONG PRACTICE** Role-play the turnaround conversation with yourself before the journey. "It's 2:30pm and we're 200 metres from the summit. What do I do?" If you cannot answer that question confidently in your living room, you will not answer it confidently at the summit.

There is a strong caveat to this chapter in regards to turn around times that is solely based on your prior planning and experience.

I know that Ive given the example of being so tantalisingly close to a campsite that you can see it but you are at the turnaround time so you must go back.

While this does actually happen in reality, your planning will tell you what to do. If you are this close, but it is late afternoon and you still have hours of daylight, then the turnaround time might have been enacted because you had more breaks, a tired hike party or any number of reasons that slowed you down.

If your plan had given you hours of daylight to spare, then you would continue to your campsite in this circumstance.

Hard and fast rules on turnaround times do absolutely depend on your plan. Be careful to allow yourself enough time to account for the multitude of reasons that can slow you down or have non accurate Naismith's times.

Chapter 6:
Weather in the Field

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Reading weather on the ground, not just from forecasts
- Applying your go/no-go thresholds in real time
- When the forecast was wrong
- Shelter decisions and when to use them

"A forecast tells you what the weather is likely to do. The sky tells you what it is doing."

Your weather planning (Chapter 13 of the handbook) established go/no-go thresholds and identified the key weather risks for your specific route, season, and terrain. In the field, your job is to apply those thresholds and to monitor the sky even when the forecast looks good.

Reading the Sky

Australian mountain weather changes faster than most forecasts predict, particularly in the Mountains, Alpine areas, and ranges above 800m. Learn to read the signs.

Cumulus building. Flat-based, towering cumulus clouds that develop through the morning indicate instability. In summer, these frequently produce afternoon thunderstorms. If you see significant vertical development before midday, your afternoon may look very different from your morning.

Wind direction and speed changes. A wind shift, particularly backing (rotating anticlockwise) or a sudden

increase in speed, indicates a change in weather pattern. In the context of an Australian cold front, a northwesterly that suddenly becomes a southwesterly means the front has passed and conditions will deteriorate rapidly.

Falling barometric pressure. If you carry a barometric altimeter or watch, a falling pressure reading over 1–2 hours indicates deteriorating conditions. A rapid fall (more than 3–4 hPa in an hour) is a strong warning.

Lenticular cloud over ranges. Lens-shaped clouds sitting over peaks indicate very high wind speeds at altitude, even when conditions at your level are calm.

The horizon. A dark, flat-bottomed cloud mass approaching from the south or southwest in the afternoon is a warning that requires immediate attention. Move the group to shelter or lower ground.

Applying Your Thresholds

Your risk assessment set specific, measurable go/no-go thresholds for weather: a wind speed, a rainfall amount, a fire danger rating, a temperature range. In the field, apply them literally.

A threshold that says "do not proceed if wind speed exceeds 40km/h on the exposed ridge section" means do not proceed if wind speed exceeds 40km/h on the exposed ridge section. Not "it's probably close to 40km/h but we can see it from here." Not "the forecast said 35km/h." Apply it.

If you are uncertain whether conditions exceed a threshold, assume they do. Thresholds are conservative by design. If you are genuinely uncertain, you are in the threshold zone, and the conservative response is the correct one.

When the Forecast Was Wrong

The BOM forecast was good three days out. It was less accurate two days out. Today, it is wrong.

A forecast that does not match what you are observing does not mean the forecast was useless, it means conditions evolved differently than predicted, which happens. The response is to observe the current conditions and apply your thresholds to what you can see, not to what the forecast said.

If conditions have deteriorated beyond your thresholds, and the forecast did not predict this, the question is not "why was the forecast wrong?" It is "what do I do now?"

Immediate deterioration protocol:

1. Move the group to shelter, below the tree line, away from exposed ridgelines, out of creek beds (which are flash flood channels).
2. Assess the severity and likely duration of the deterioration.
3. Decide: shelter and wait, activate alternative route, or begin early return.
4. Contact base via satellite communicator if conditions may prevent normal check-in.

Shelter Decisions

A tent or tarp in a well-chosen location protects the group from most weather events. A tent in a poor location can be dangerous.

Site selection for emergency shelter:

- Below the tree line but not in drainage channels.
- Sheltered from wind but with visibility of the sky (so you can monitor the storm).
- Away from large individual trees (lightning strikes).
- Not in a depression that will collect water.
- On ground that drains.

Putting up shelter takes time. Make the decision to shelter before conditions make it difficult to erect tents, not during peak rain or wind.

STRONG PRACTICE Monitor weather before each day's departure and at major rest stops. Five minutes of sky-reading at the lunch stop has prevented more afternoon incidents than any forecast.

PITFALL Dismissing weather signs because the forecast did not predict them. The forecast is a probability statement, not a guarantee. Trust what you see.

Chapter 7:
Route Modifications in the Field

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- When and how to activate the alternative route
- Shortening the route versus extending it
- How to document field changes for the debrief
- Who makes the decision and how it is communicated

"The alternative route exists so that using it is a prepared response, not an improvisation."

Every route plan should include at least one documented alternative route (Chapter 4 of the handbook). In the field, this is the option you activate when circumstances require a change to the planned route.

When to Use the Alternative Route

Use the alternative route when one or more of the following is true:

- A hazard on the planned route is more severe than assessed (a swollen creek, a section of trail damaged by recent weather, a cliff section that exceeds group capability).
- Timing gates indicate that the planned route is not achievable before dark.
- Weather conditions exceed the thresholds for the planned route, and the alternative avoids the exposed terrain.
- A medical situation requires faster access to an exit point.

Note what the alternative route is **not** for: it is not a shortcut

taken because the planned route looks hard. It is a prepared contingency for genuine field conditions that warrant it.

Shortening the Route

Shortening the route, removing a day's leg, choosing a shorter exit, reducing the intended distance, is a field modification that does not necessarily require using the pre-planned alternative route.

The decision to shorten should be made before the timing gate, not after it. A group that decides to shorten at midday can adjust their plan for the remainder of the day with appropriate time margins. A group that decides to shorten at 4pm has very few good options.

Conditions that typically warrant shortening:

- Group pace is consistently behind planned times.
- A medical issue is slowing one or more participants.
- Weather conditions are deteriorating but have not yet reached the threshold for route abandonment.
- Group morale or energy is lower than expected for the terrain remaining.

Communicating the Change

Route modifications should be communicated to:

- The group: clear, direct, confident. Not an apology, a decision.
- Base contact / emergency contacts: via satellite communicator if available. Note the change, your new expected arrival time, and your current position.
- Your documentation: note the time, reason, and nature of the modification for the post-trip debrief (Chapter 20 of the handbook). Field decisions that are undocumented are invisible to future planning.

STRONG PRACTICE Brief the group on the alternative route before departure, not when you activate it. A group that already knows the alternative route exists, where it goes, and why it might be used responds calmly when it is activated. A group that hears about it for the first time in difficult conditions is more anxious.

PITFALL Treating the alternative route as a backup of last resort rather than a prepared option. If you are not willing to use the alternative route until things are genuinely dire, you have waited too long.

PART FOUR

MANAGING THE GROUP

Chapter 8: Fatigue, Morale, and Group Dynamics

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Recognising fatigue before it becomes a safety issue
- Managing the pace between strongest and weakest walkers
- Youth-specific responses to challenge and stress
- Morale management in a tired group

"A group that is physically capable of finishing the day can still make a poor decision when morale collapses."

Group management is the skill that separates experienced Journey Leaders from technically competent ones. You may have a perfect route plan, correct navigation, and impeccable risk assessment, and still have a difficult journey if the group is fragmenting, exhausted, or demoralised.

Recognising Fatigue

Fatigue in the bush presents before participants report it.
The early signs are:

Gait changes. Shuffling feet, reduced foot clearance, stumbling on sections that were handled cleanly earlier. This is a sign of significant fatigue and indicates increased trip and fall risk.

Pace collapse. The group pace drops noticeably, particularly uphill. This often happens suddenly rather than gradually, the group was managing, and then they are not.

Decision latency. Participants take longer to respond to

instructions. They stop at obstacles and wait to be told what to do rather than problem-solving. This is cognitive fatigue, not physical.

Mood shift. Irritability, complaints, or withdrawal from the group. A participant who was engaged in the morning and is silent in the afternoon is fatigued, not resting.

Clumsiness. Increased pack adjustments, dropped items, coordination issues.

When you observe these signs, increase rest frequency, reduce pace, ensure food and water intake, and reassess the day's remaining plan.

Managing the Group Gap

On multi-day journeys with mixed-ability groups, some degree of pace difference is inevitable. The danger is when the gap between the fastest and slowest group members becomes large enough that the leader cannot monitor both.

The golden rule: the group stays within visual range of each other at all times. On marked tracks in good conditions, this means everyone visible. On technical terrain or in poor visibility, this means within voice contact.

Managing the gap:

• Set the pace at the back of the group, not the front.

• Use rest stops to allow the group to reassemble before moving on.

• Assign a capable or senior participant to walk with the slowest group members and maintain pace.

• Adjust the group's target distance if the gap is consistently large.

Do not use the fastest group members to "pull" the pace. The strongest walkers expend less energy walking fast than the

slowest walkers expend keeping up. The result is a tired, demoralised rear group and an increasingly separated front.

The other physical limitation of this approach is that the fast walkers get to rest often while they wait for the slowest walkers, but the slowest walkers never get a rest stop as the fast walkers are eager to keep going so as soon as the slow party catches up, they head off.

This is actually a big demoralising factor for slow walkers that feel like they never get a rest break.

Youth-Specific Behaviour Under Challenge

Youth participants respond to physical and psychological challenge differently from adults, and their responses are not always easy to read.

Bravado. Youth participants, particularly adolescent males, often report feeling fine when they are not. The social cost of admitting difficulty is higher than the physical cost of pushing on. Watch for the physical signs of fatigue regardless of what participants report.

Social dynamics. Group dynamics that were benign at the trailhead can become significant under fatigue. The participant who was friendly with everyone in the morning may be isolated or in conflict by the afternoon. Check in with individuals, not just the group.

Emotional responses. Crying, anger, withdrawal, or dramatic pronouncements that "they can't go on" are common in youth groups under stress. They are usually not genuine emergencies. The response is calm, non-reactive acknowledgment, a genuine check on physical condition, and a brief rest with food and water. Most pass within 10 minutes.

When they don't pass. A participant who genuinely cannot continue, for physical, medical, or serious psychological

reasons, requires a field decision: shelter and wait for improvement, modify the route to reduce demands, or initiate evacuation. See Chapter 9 for the assessment framework.

Morale Management

Morale in a tired group is maintained by small wins, not motivational speeches.

Name the milestones. "We've covered 12km and climbed 400m. Camp is 3km from here." Concrete information gives participants a measure of progress. "Not much further" does not.

Not being truthful doesn't help either. This is usually done with the best of intentions, don't stress the person further by telling them that we have 10km to go, so say 2km.

An honest, we have covered 12km already, 10km to go, that has a constant countdown, only 8km to go, is received far better than the stalling of 2km for 8km worth of travel.

Food and water. More than any other single intervention, adequate nutrition and hydration improves morale and cognitive performance. Snacks every 60–90 minutes are not optional on hard days.

Brief rest stops. Five minutes off the pack, boots off at a good view, a snack. The break is brief. The psychological effect is huge.

Honest leadership. Participants know when a leader is managing them. A brief, honest assessment, ”today is the hardest day of the walk, and you are handling it well”, is more effective than false positivity.

STRONG PRACTICE Check in with the group as a whole at each rest stop, and with individuals who seem to be struggling. A question asked in passing, ”How are you going? Blisters okay?”, takes five seconds and communicates that you are watching.

Chapter 9:
Medical Situations in the Field

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

• The assessment sequence for an injured or ill participant
• The three field decisions: treat and continue, treat and shelter, evacuate
• Using the emergency roles from the Activity Plan
• Communicating with base and emergency services

"Your first aid certificate gave you the skills. The Activity Plan gave you the roles. This chapter is about putting them together."

Medical situations in the field range from blisters and twisted ankles, common, manageable, rarely serious, to genuine emergencies requiring evacuation. The management of any medical situation follows the same sequence, regardless of severity.

Assessment Sequence

When a participant reports injury or illness, or when you observe a problem:

1. Ensure scene safety. Before attending to the patient, ensure the rest of the group is safe. Move them away from any ongoing hazard. Assign the Group Supervisor role (from the Activity Plan) to a capable person to manage the group while you assess.

2. Primary survey. Is there immediate life threat?

• Airway: can the patient breathe freely?

- Breathing: is breathing occurring? Is it adequate?
- Circulation: is there major, uncontrolled bleeding?

If yes to any of these, address them first. Everything else waits.

3. Secondary survey. What is the full extent of the injury or illness? Mechanism of injury (how did it happen?). Symptoms (what does the patient feel?). Signs (what do you observe?). History (any relevant medical conditions, these were recorded in the consent forms).

4. Treat. First aid appropriate to the injury, by the designated first aider.

5. Decide. Treat and continue, treat and shelter, or evacuate.

The Three Field Decisions

Treat and continue is appropriate for minor injuries and illnesses that have been treated, do not affect the participant's ability to walk safely, and do not require monitoring that walking cannot accommodate. Blisters, minor cuts, mild headache. The participant walks out under their own power.

Treat and shelter is appropriate when the participant cannot continue walking safely, but the situation is not immediately life-threatening and evacuation is not immediately necessary. Possible sprained ankle, mild hypothermia with good prognosis, exhaustion. The group makes camp, the patient rests, and the situation is reassessed after food, water, and rest. Many situations that look like evacuations after two hours of walking resolve significantly after two hours of rest.

Evacuate is appropriate when the participant has a serious injury or illness, when the situation is or may become life-threatening, when self-evacuation is not possible, or when appropriate treatment cannot be provided in the field. The evacuation plan in the route plan documents the nearest exit point for each major leg. Use it.

The distinction between these three decisions is judgment. Some situations are clear. Others are not. When in doubt, be conservative. A participant who rests unnecessarily overnight is inconvenienced. A participant who continues walking on a seriously injured ankle for eight hours is injured more seriously.

Communications During a Medical Event

Your communications plan (Chapter 19 of the handbook) documents your devices, coverage, and contact chain. Apply it.

Mobile phone. Check coverage at your location. If you are in a gorge, move to higher ground to improve signal. Describe your location (6-figure grid reference or What3Words), the nature of the incident, the condition of the patient, and what you need.

Satellite communicator (Garmin inReach or similar). Allows two-way text messaging regardless of mobile coverage. Send a message to your base contact with your location, situation, and intended action.

PLB. Activate only when the situation genuinely requires a search-and-rescue response and you cannot reach help by other means. PLB activation initiates a rescue mission. Once activated, stay at the location if possible, or move to the nearest clear, open landing area for helicopter access.

When communicating with emergency services, be clear and structured:

- Location: grid reference and description.
- Number of patients and nature of injury.
- Group makeup: number of people, any assistance needed.
- Current condition and trends.
- What you have done.
- What you need.

STRONG PRACTICE Know where your nearest exit point is at all times, not just at campsite. The route plan documents exit points for each major leg. Reference this at morning brief so that if an incident occurs mid-leg, you know the nearest option.

PITFALL Delaying the decision to evacuate because you are uncertain. An early evacuation of a participant who recovers quickly is a conservative decision. A delayed evacuation of a participant who deteriorates significantly is a failure of judgment. If you are genuinely uncertain, consult your base contact via satellite communicator.

Chapter 10:
Water Sourcing in Practice

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Finding and assessing water sources on the ground
- What to do when a marked source is dry
- Treatment methods and their applications
- Recognising and responding to dehydration

"The map shows you where the water should be. Your eyes show you whether it is."

Your water plan (Chapter 6 of the handbook) identified the water sources on your route, calculated daily requirements, and documented contingency sources. In the field, the plan is executed and the contingencies are activated when needed.

Assessing Sources on the Ground

Not all water is equal, and conditions change. Assess each source before drinking from it.

Flow rate. Running water in upland streams is generally safer than still or slow-moving water. A creek that should be flowing but is reduced to a series of pools is a lower-quality source, longer contact between standing water and the environment increases contamination risk.

Upstream assessment. If you can see the upstream catchment, look for human activity (camping, livestock) that would increase contamination risk. In the Australian bush, agricultural activity or livestock upstream is a significant

contamination indicator.

Visual inspection. Clear water is not safe water, but turbid, discoloured, or odorous water is a definitive warning. Do not use it without chemical treatment, and even then, consider whether a better source is accessible.

Treatment method. Your water plan specified a primary method (filter, chemical treatment, or boiling) and a backup. Apply the primary method consistently. Do not skip treatment because the source looks clean or because you are tired and camp is close.

When a Source Is Dry

Seasonal variation, drought, and the unpredictability of Australian conditions mean that marked water sources are not always present. Your water plan documented contingency sources for each leg. Use the contingency before you are critically low on water, not after.

If the contingency source is also dry: Ration existing water to essential drinking only. No cooking. Reduce exertion where possible. Move towards the next leg's source or the fastest exit from the area. Communicate with base.

The minimum functional water level for a group is enough water to reach the next confirmed source or the exit. Below that level, you are in an emergency water situation and your decision-making must reflect that priority above all others.

Dehydration in the Field

Thirst is a late indicator of dehydration. By the time a participant reports thirst, they are already mildly dehydrated. In hot weather or high-exertion conditions, require drinking at every rest stop, not just when participants ask for it.

Signs of significant dehydration:

- Decreased urine output and dark yellow or amber urine.
- Headache, dizziness, or nausea.
- Reduced cognitive performance, slow responses, poor judgment, irritability.
- Muscle cramps.

Treatment is oral rehydration with water. In high-exertion conditions, electrolyte replacement improves absorption. In severe cases, the participant cannot continue until adequately rehydrated.

STRONG PRACTICE Perform a "water audit" at each campsite: how much water is the group carrying, how much does the next leg require to the next source, and is the margin adequate? A group that arrives at a dry source with minimal reserves has a serious problem. A group with adequate reserves has options.

STRONG PRACTICE In almost all circumstances, hikers should never be simply drinking water. All water should include electrolyte addition. Drinking just plain water, sometimes no matter the quantity, can not be enough to keep a hiker sustained.

PART FIVE

CAMP

Chapter 11:
Campsite Selection and Setup

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- What to look for in a campsite beyond the planned site
- Hazard assessment: drainage, wind, wildlife, widow-makers
- Camp layout and safety considerations
- Evening group check

"A well-chosen campsite is a rest. A poorly chosen one is an overnight hazard."

Your route plan designates campsite locations, usually at predetermined or permitted sites. In the field, the specific site within that area, where exactly tents go, where the cooking area is, requires judgment.

Site Assessment

Before the group unpacks, spend a few minutes walking the site.

Drainage. Where does water go when it rains? A flat, lush patch of ground in a slight depression is a puddle in a wet night. Look for ground that drains away from the intended tent area. Never camp in a drainage line, even if the sky is clear.

Wind. What is the prevailing wind direction? Natural windbreaks (rock walls, dense scrub) on the windward side are valuable. Exposed ridges and saddles funnel wind; valley floors collect cold air overnight. Aim for sheltered ground with good air circulation.

Overhead hazard. Australian eucalypts drop branches without warning, particularly in hot, dry conditions or after storms. Assess the trees above the intended tent site. Dead branches, large limbs with cracks or previous partial drops, and trees with obvious structural damage are hazards. Move away from them.

Ground hazards. Check the tent site for rocks, roots, and slope before placing tents. A slight slope can make sleeping uncomfortable and packs unstable. Rocky ground under a tent results in a poor night's sleep that compounds next-day fatigue.

Access. Ensure the site has clear access to an exit route. If you need to leave quickly at night, for a medical emergency, or in extreme weather, you need to be able to move.

Camp Layout

A consistent camp layout reduces confusion and improves safety.

Cooking area separate from sleeping area. Food smells attract wildlife. The cooking area should always be away from sleeping tents.

Group gathering point. A defined location where the group assembles in an emergency. Brief this at camp setup.

Toileting area. Designated and briefed before it is needed. At least 100m from water sources and from the camp area. Carry a trowel and follow leave-no-trace protocols.

Gear storage. Group gear, food, first aid, communications equipment, stored in a designated, accessible location known to all members of the group.

The Evening Group Check

Before the group settles for the night:

- Physical check of every participant. How are feet? Blisters treated? Any injuries developing?
- Hydration and food intake for the day. Is everyone adequately fuelled?
- Gear check. Are sleeping bags and such doing their jobs for tonight's temperature? Remember that everyone is different and there are solutions to help out someone that is cold.
- Brief for tomorrow. Start time, route summary, key decision points. Brief given when participants are fed and rested, not at 6am when everyone is rushing.
- Communication check-in. Send the scheduled check-in message to your base contact.

> **PITFALL** Choosing a campsite without assessing overhead hazard. Widow-maker branches are the leading cause of fatalities in Australian national parks. Check the trees above your tent site. Every time.

Chapter 12:
Camp Management and Overnight Decisions

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Evening and overnight weather monitoring
- Managing the group's overnight needs
- The morning launch sequence
- When overnight conditions change the day's plan

"The decisions you make tonight determine how tomorrow starts."

The journey does not pause overnight. Weather changes, participants recover or deteriorate, and the morning launch sets the tone for the next day.

Overnight Weather Monitoring

The evening weather observation establishes your baseline for tomorrow. Before sleeping:

- Note the sky conditions: clear, partial cloud, overcast, frontal system visible.
- Note temperature: is it within expected range for the forecast? Significantly colder than expected may indicate a front moving faster than predicted.
- Check your satellite communicator for updated forecast if the service provides this.
- Set an alarm to check conditions 60–90 minutes before planned departure.

If overnight conditions deteriorate significantly (storm, heavy rain, significant temperature drop), reassess tomorrow's plan before departure, not during it.

The Morning Launch Sequence

The morning routine is covered in QS-1 (Daily Morning Routine). The key principle is that departure decisions are made before departure, at a fixed point, with the full group assembled, not managed by individual stragglers appearing over 45 minutes.

Set a group alarm time. Breakfast and pack-up is a group activity. Departure is at a stated time. A group that establishes this routine on Day 1 maintains it through Day 3. A group that allows chaotic morning departures on Day 1 has that problem amplified by fatigue on Days 2 and 3.

A note on daily start and departure times.

A good plan will stagger these times as the journey progresses.

Give the participants 30 minutes or even an hour longer each day if the plan has been made this way.

There's not much more demoralising than needing to start earlier day.

If the morning check reveals a problem (weather outside thresholds, medical situation developed overnight, gear failure), make the decision about today's plan before the group is packed and ready. The social pressure of a packed, expectant group is the same pressure described in the turnaround section. Decide first. Pack second.

PART SIX

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

Chapter 13:
The Emergency Response Sequence

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- The STOP framework for the first moments of an emergency
- Activating the plan you already have
- PLB and satellite communicator protocols
- What emergency services need from you

"Preparation does not eliminate the shock of an emergency. It compresses it."

The first moments of an emergency are characterised by a shift from normal mode to emergency mode. This transition, even in experienced leaders, takes a few seconds to minutes.
The STOP framework is designed to use those first moments productively.
The chapter on Emergency Procedures in the handbook (Chapter 19) described how to plan for emergencies.
This chapter describes how to respond to one.

STOP

S - Stop. Do not take action immediately. Stop the group. Secure the area. Ensure no-one else moves into a hazardous area.

T - Think. What has happened? What is the nature of the emergency? What resources do you have?

O - Observe. Look at the patient and the environment. Is the scene safe? What are the patient's immediate needs? What are the conditions?

P - Plan. Decide what to do. Assign roles. Communicate. Act.

This takes less than two minutes when practised. It replaces the reactive rush that sends people in the wrong direction and compounds emergencies.

Activating the Plan

Before departure, you assigned emergency roles (Chapter 19 of the handbook). Now you name those roles out loud.

"[Name], you are the First Aider, assess and treat."

"[Name], you are the Group Supervisor, keep the rest of the group here, calm, and safe."

"[Name], you are Communications, find the comms device and check coverage."

"I am managing the incident."

This is not bureaucracy. It is the difference between a group that functions under pressure and one that freezes.

Communications

Work through your communications options in order of availability:

Mobile phone. Check coverage at the incident location. In low or no coverage, move one person to higher ground to check for signal. Do not move the patient.

Satellite communicator. Two-way messaging to your base contact and, if needed, to emergency services. Send a position, description of the incident, patient condition, and your intended action. Await response.

PLB. Emergency activation for life-threatening situations where other communication is not possible or is insufficient. Initiate a full search and rescue response. Once activated: stay at the location, maintain signal by keeping the PLB with a clear sky view, and prepare for rescue personnel arrival.

What Emergency Services Need

When you contact emergency services (000 for life-threatening situations, police rescue for non-life-threatening but requiring external assistance):

1. Your location: 6-figure grid reference or What3Words, map reference, and a description ("at the base of the second gully south of Peak X").
2. Nature of the incident: what happened, when, mechanism of injury.
3. Patient condition: consciousness, breathing, major injuries visible.
4. Your group: how many people, any others requiring assistance.
5. Your communications capability: will you have ongoing contact?
6. Your resources: first aid capability, shelter, water, daylight remaining.

Keep a written note of this information. In a stressful situation, recall is unreliable.

KEY PRINCIPLE The emergency plan you built during planning exists so that you are executing a response, not inventing one. Your emergency contacts are already briefed. The exit points are already documented. The roles are already assigned. Your job is to use the plan.

Chapter 14:
Managing the Group After an Incident

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Keeping uninvolved participants safe and calm
- Leadership continuity if the Journey Leader is incapacitated
- Caring for participants after a distressing event
- The leader's own response to a serious incident

"The group that was hiking together an hour ago is now a group that has been through something. They need a different kind of leadership."

A medical emergency or serious incident changes the nature of the group. Participants who were walking, talking, and focussed on the trail are now witnesses to a crisis. How you manage them in the aftermath is as important as how you managed the incident itself.

Keeping Non-Involved Participants Safe

The Group Supervisor role (assigned in the Activity Plan) exists for this exact situation. While the incident response is underway, one designated person is responsible for everyone who is not the patient.

Immediate priorities:

- Move the group away from the incident scene if the scene is distressing, dangerous, or if their presence is hindering the response.
- Establish a clear, safe location for the group to wait.

• Give them a task: water, food, setting up shelter if needed. Occupied participants are calmer than idle ones.
• Do not give them uncertain information. "We are dealing with a situation. Please stay here and I will update you as soon as I can" is better than a partial account that creates anxiety.

Leadership Continuity

The Activity Plan named a deputy if the Journey Leader is incapacitated. If the Journey Leader is the patient, that deputy takes command. This should not be the first time the deputy has considered this possibility.

In Andrew's incident (described in the Final Note of the handbook), a young member of the party took charge after the Journey Leader was seriously injured. He assessed the situation, determined what was and was not happening, communicated clearly to the emergency contact, and activated the EPIRB. The system worked because the planning had created a group that understood the plan and could execute it.

That preparation, role assignments, briefed emergency contacts, known communications chain, is what makes leadership continuity possible when it is needed most.

After the Incident

Once immediate needs are addressed, the group needs acknowledgment.

A brief, calm, factual debrief, “here is what happened, here is what we did, here is what happens next”, prevents rumour and anxiety. Give it when the group is physically settled (seated, with water and food if possible).

Do not dismiss or minimise the experience. "These things happen in the bush" is not helpful to someone who has just watched a friend be evacuated. Acknowledge what they

witnessed and give them a clear path forward.
Watch for delayed responses in the hours and days after an incident. Participants may appear fine initially and show distress later. Quiet check-ins are valuable.

The Leader's Own Response

Leaders are not immune to the shock of a serious incident. The professional training and role responsibility that drive effective emergency response do not eliminate the human response that comes after.
After the immediate situation is resolved, and after the group's needs are met, check yourself. Eat something. Drink water. If you have a co-leader, debrief briefly, not a formal process, a human conversation about what happened.
More formal support may be appropriate after serious incidents. Scouts Australia and most outdoor education organisations have pastoral care processes for this. Use them.

A further note on evacuation situations.
In almost every case in Australia, when a search and rescue response is initiated, a vehicle or helicopter will be sent for the evacuation, however a ground team will always be en-route as well.
This ground team in almost all circumstances will walk out the rest of the party as well, so the party will not be alone.

Chapter 15:
Evacuation

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- Types of evacuation and their requirements
- Preparing for a self-evacuation
- Preparing for helicopter extraction
- Documentation during and after evacuation

"An evacuation is not a failure. It is the contingency system working."

Evacuation is the movement of an injured or ill participant out of the field environment to medical care. The type of evacuation required depends on the patient's condition, your location, the terrain, and the available resources.

Self-Evacuation

The patient is mobile, with assistance, and the group can exit under its own power.

Self-evacuation is appropriate for injuries and illnesses that are serious but not immediately life-threatening, where the patient can move safely (with support if necessary) and the exit is within reasonable range.

Preparation:

• Lighten the patient's pack to minimum. Redistribute weight across the group.

• Assign two people to support the patient (one on each side for unstable walking, or improvised litter if the patient cannot

walk).

- Identify the fastest safe exit route from the current position. This is in your route plan.
- Set a realistic pace, significantly slower than normal walking pace.
- Maintain regular rest stops.
- Communicate with base: your location, intention, expected exit time.

Assisted Evacuation

The patient cannot self-evacuate and you require external assistance, a stretcher party, vehicle access, helicopter.

Contact emergency services with the information described in Chapter 13. While awaiting assistance:

- Keep the patient warm, comfortable, and assessed regularly.
- Prepare a clear landing zone for helicopter access if your location allows: a flat area of at least 30 metres diameter, clear of trees and obstacles, with the group positioned at the edge, not in the centre.
- Mark your position with bright gear or signalling device (whistle, signal mirror, bright-coloured clothing).
- Have someone designated to signal the aircraft.

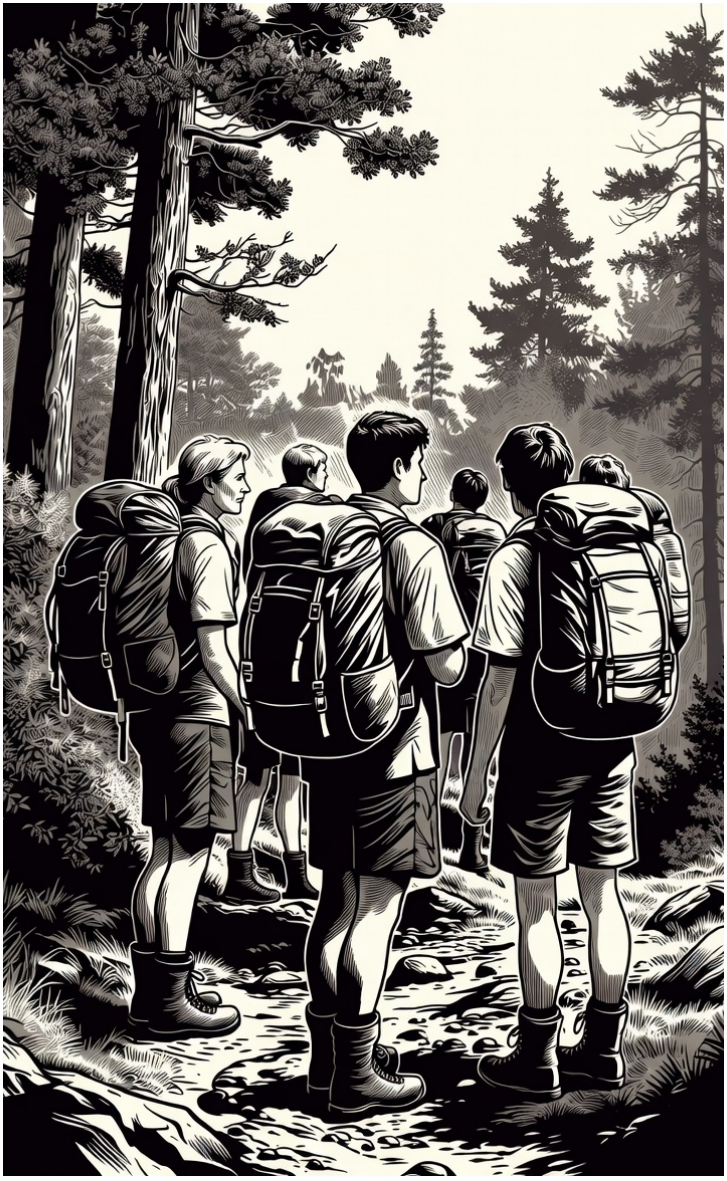
Helicopter landing area preparation:

- Clear loose items that could be caught in rotor wash.
- All group members seated or kneeling (not standing) at the designated position, holding onto hats.
- Do not approach the aircraft until the crew signals it is safe.

STRONG PRACTICE Note your nearest helicopter access point for each major leg of the route during planning. Open ridgelines, fire trails, and cleared areas visible from the air. This thinking, done during planning, takes minutes. Doing it under pressure at an incident scene takes much longer.

PART SEVEN

COMPLETION



Chapter 16:
Return to Vehicles

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- The final leg of the journey
- Confirming your return with the transport plan and base contacts
- The return vehicle check
- Notifying emergency contacts and base

"The journey is not complete until the group is back at the vehicles and the emergency contacts have been told."

The final leg of any multi-day journey carries a particular risk: the group is tired, the motivation to be careful has shifted towards the motivation to be finished, and the attention that characterised Day 1 has eroded.
Maintain the same standards on the final leg as the first. Navigation checks. Timing gate awareness. Group pace management. The terrain does not become less hazardous because the end is in sight.

Confirming Completion

On reaching the vehicles:

- Account for every participant before anything else.
- Check the group for any injuries or issues that need attention before the drive home.
- Execute the return leg of the transport plan: who is in which vehicle, departure time, and expected arrival back at base.

• Contact your base contact. This is the message they have been waiting for since departure. Your emergency contacts are holding a trigger time, the time after which they take action if you have not checked in. Notify them when you are safe. Not when you are almost at the cars. When you are at the cars.

The Transport Plan Return Leg

The return leg is often the least planned part of the journey and the most statistically dangerous. The group is tired. Drivers have been waiting, possibly for several hours. The temptation to "just get home" overrides careful checking.

Apply the same standards to the return trip as the outbound:

• Named, confirmed driver in each vehicle.

• Passenger allocation confirmed.

• Any driver who has been waiting for a significantly delayed group may be fatigued or stressed, assess briefly before departure.

• Do not drive tired. A 20-minute rest at the trailhead car park is a small cost against the risk of a fatigued driver on mountain roads.

Chapter 17:
The Field Debrief - Immediate Observations

CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

- What to capture while observations are still fresh
- The difference between a field debrief and the formal post-trip debrief
- Feeding field observations into the post-trip review process

"Debrief now. The memory that seems clear today is significantly degraded in a week."

The formal post-trip debrief (Chapter 20 of the handbook) is a structured process that should happen within 48 hours of return. The field debrief happens immediately, at the campsite on the final night, or at the vehicles before departure.
The field debrief is not a formal process. It is a brief, structured conversation to capture observations while they are clear and specific.

What to Capture

Route observations. Any section of the route that differed significantly from the map or the plan: dry water sources, changed track conditions, new hazards not in the risk assessment, sections that took significantly more or less time than planned.
Group observations. Physical and morale observations about participants: who struggled and where, what helped and

what didn't, any medical or welfare issues that arose and how they were managed.

Plan vs reality. Where did the timing gates hold, and where didn't they? Which risk controls were actually applied, and which were not needed? What was the meal plan like in practice?

Suggestions. What would you do differently? What worked particularly well?

Write these down. A note in a phone is better than a mental note. A mental note is significantly degraded within a week.

Feeding into the Post-Trip Review

These observations become the input for the formal debrief process (Chapter 20 of the handbook), which includes:

- Updating the risk assessment with hazards that were encountered but not assessed.
- Correcting the timing gates based on actual performance.
- Identifying gear items that were inadequate or missing.
- Documenting lessons for future leaders planning the same route.

> **STRONG PRACTICE** Ask participants for their observations at the final campsite or at the vehicles, not two weeks later. Youth participants in particular notice things that the leader does not, sounds, conditions, moments of uncertainty, and their observations are valuable planning data. They are also most willing to share them while the experience is immediate.

Appendix A:
Daily Field Checklist (Laminated Card)

Morning

- Weather check - conditions vs go/no-go thresholds
- Group physical check - overnight issues?
- Review today's legs, timing gates, key hazards
- Brief group - route, turnaround time, roles
- Water filled, departure time confirmed
- Note actual departure time vs planned

At each timing gate

- Am I on time? (If behind: what is the response?)
- Is the group in good condition?
- Have conditions changed?
- Position confirmed against route plan

Before any creek crossing

- Visual assessment from bank
- Conditions vs no-cross threshold
- Crossing protocol briefed
- Rescue position identified downstream

Evening

- Camp site assessed (drainage, overhead, wind)
- Group physical check - feet, hydration, morale
- Scheduled check-in sent to base contact
- Tomorrow briefed - before everyone goes to bed

Completion

- All participants accounted for at vehicles
- Emergency contacts notified - safe return
- Transport return leg confirmed - drivers, passengers
- Field notes captured for debrief

Appendix B:
The Decision Framework - Route Modification

Situation	Response
Behind timing gate by < 20%	Proceed with awareness. Reduce rest time. Monitor next gate.
Behind timing gate by > 20%	Stop. Assess. Choose: adjusted route, alternative route, or turnaround.
At turnaround time, not at target	Turn around. No exceptions.
Water source dry	Use contingency source. If also dry: ration, exit.
Hazard worse than assessed	Stop. Apply no-proceed threshold. Alternative route or return.
Weather exceeds threshold	Seek shelter. Assess duration. Decide: wait, alternative route, evacuate.
Medical situation developing	Assess: treat and continue / treat and shelter / evacuate.
Group pace significantly below plan	Reduce daily target. Rest more frequently. Reassess route.

Appendix C: Emergency Communications Reference

Before activating PLB: Attempt contact via mobile and/or satellite communicator first.

PLB - activate when:

- Life-threatening situation AND
- Cannot reach help by other means

When contacting emergency services (000 or POLICE RESCUE):

1. Location: 6-figure grid reference or What3Words + description
2. Nature of incident
3. Patient number and condition
4. Group composition
5. Communications capability
6. Your resources (first aid, shelter, water, daylight)

After PLB activation:

- Stay at activation location if safe
- Move to nearest open ground for helicopter access if not
- Maintain PLB with clear sky view
- Prepare landing zone (30m+ clear area)

Your emergency contacts have:

- Your route plan
- Your intended daily positions
- Your planned check-in times
- Your trigger time - the time after which they will call for help

They are waiting for your call. Make it.

Appendix D:
Post-Incident Notes Template

Complete as soon as practicable after the incident.

Date and time of incident:

Location (grid reference):

Description of what happened:

Patient(s) - name and condition:

Actions taken (first aid, communications, evacuation):

Time of communications:
- Base contact notified: _____
- Emergency services contacted: _____
- PLB activated (if applicable): _____

Resources used:

Time of resolution / evacuation:
Follow-up actions required:
- Medical follow-up for patient?
- Incident report to organisation?
- Risk assessment update needed?
- Route plan update needed?

Observations for debrief:

This field guide is a companion to the *Adventurous Journey Planning Handbook*.

Both are available via LogsKeptSimple.com.au

"Good plans do not prevent things from going wrong.
They determine what happens when something does."

Andrew Davis
Blue Mountains, NSW