

Less people, more fatalities

By Doug Chabot

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Our job at the avalanche center is to warn and inform the public about the snowpack and avalanche danger. Unfortunately, the best information cannot prevent all avalanche accidents and deaths will remain a part of winter recreation. Montana has a million people, one of the least populated states, but in the last 15 years we are ranked second in the nation in avalanche fatalities and first in snowmobiler fatalities. These are not standings I am proud of: *less people, more fatalities*. Not a tag-line for the Montana Office of Tourism.

Over the last 15 winters in the USA 418 people died in avalanches, averaging 28 a season. Colorado leads with 89 fatalities during this period, while Montana had 59 deaths (41 motorized, 19 non-motorized). The motorized deaths are especially alarming as our #1 ranking far exceeds the #2 and #3 states, Idaho (24) and Alaska (24). On the Custer Gallatin National Forest the mountains around Cooke City are the deadliest piece of real estate in the US for snowmobiler avalanche deaths: 14 in 15 years.

Montana is a destination area for snowmobilers and skiers. The mountains draw folks from around the US because of its low density population, remoteness, reliable snowfall and incredible terrain. A study by the National Avalanche Center estimated backcountry use increased, at a minimum, 8-fold in 25 years. To illustrate the point, an area that only you and four of your friends knew about in 1992 now has 40 people vying for the same lines. Eight times the people in the mountains means 8x more in the starting zones and triggering avalanches. Yet, avalanche fatalities have not increased 8x. The average of 28 deaths a season has remained statistically flat because there is better avalanche gear, better avalanche education and more people accessing avalanche advisories. The combination of better technology, education and information keeps fatalities in check. Running an avalanche center puts me at the intersection of rising use and offering products to keep people safe. Pictures, videos, free avalanche classes, daily advisories and social media allow me to be a megaphone for avalanche safety. And I am proud of that.

Having investigated avalanches over the last 20 years, I appreciate the complexity of making sound decisions in the backcountry. It's not always easy. However, most people get into trouble because they fail basic, simple tasks. Here are the top three:

1. A failure to recognize avalanche terrain.
2. Not knowing how to perform a rescue.
3. Putting more than one person at a time on a slope.

Skiers and snowmobilers alike fail at all three. They play or travel underneath steep slopes, ignoring the reality that they will be buried in an avalanche from above. During unstable times it's quite possible for riders to trigger an avalanche from the flats far below the slope. Additionally, people erroneously perceive slopes as too low angled to slide. Slopes can avalanche if steeper than 30 degrees, a gentle angle for expert riders. Secondly, most people carry rescue gear (avalanche transceiver, shovel and probe) but are unskilled at using it. They do not practice and have no idea of the ensuing adrenaline, confusion and talent needed to dig someone out in 10-minutes, the small window of 90% survival. I have seen the aftermath of partners having no sense of time, perplexed at the difficulty of finding someone,

unsure how to use a beacon or assemble a probe, as their friend or relative takes a last breath under the snow. And third, exposing only one person at a time to avalanche terrain leaves everyone else safe and ready to rescue if necessary. Traveling one-at-a-time in avalanche terrain is literal: one, Uno, 1, die Eins, person on a slope. Descending one at a time does not mean the second skier gives the first person a head start before following. Snowmobilers playing on low-angled terrain underneath an avalanche path is another example of how a slide can catch multiple people. If more than one person is buried it's almost guaranteed that someone will die. Resources get split between the victims, and multiple, overlapping beacon signals will tax all but the highly trained.

A flat 25-year avalanche fatality line won't bring much comfort if you and/or your partner are buried. What matters is avalanche education, religiously checking the local avalanche advisory and carrying the latest rescue gear and the skill to use it. Help us do our part to relinquish standing on the podium of fatalities.