

Phones in the Wilderness

Over the past few years, there has been much discussion at wilderness programs about groups bringing satellite phones into remote areas. Some of the more important concerns voiced during these discussions are:

- The presence of satellite phones on trips raises some legal issues. Bringing phones along on a trip may imply that *communication will always be possible*; however, this isn't the case if a phone is dropped in the water or the battery goes dead.
- Satellite phones do not replace the need for staff medical training. Staff still must know how to stabilize and treat injuries or illnesses until help arrives.
- Some people believe that the presence of satellite phones (or participants' cell phones) changes the character or remoteness of the group's experience.
- The costs of satellite phones and their service can be prohibitive, especially when a program has multiple groups out in the wilderness.

Satellite phones used to cost several thousands of dollars, their weight was in pounds, and the air time was dollars per minute. A lot has changed in a few years. The size and weight of these phones has been significantly reduced, and new functions such as GPS locators added. Although satellite phones are still expensive (\$1,000 or more), you can rent them for as little as \$350 for a three-month period and pay only for the air time used (usually around \$1.25/minute). This price makes them a more economically possible option for some wilderness programs that travel into areas where there is no cell phone coverage.

Keep in mind that currently no industry standard exists regarding wilderness programs' use of communications equipment. That could change as the technology and financial costs merge into what a reasonable and prudent wilderness program should provide.

Whether or not your groups bring satellite or cell phones with them into the wilderness, it's essential to clearly communicate this information to parents and participants in your written materials. If you use communications equipment, it's also important to accurately describe coverage areas and dead zones.

If you have a safety or risk management question or a suggestion for a topic, please contact Markel's Risk Management Department at safety1st@markelcorp.com.