

COCONINO NF – PSAR 2015



9/8/2015

Humphreys Trail

This document provides a summary of activities, resources and recommendations gained from

participation in the Preventative Search and Rescue (PSAR) program on Humphreys trail in 2015.

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HUMPHREYS TRAIL

2015 PSAR PROGRAM OVERVIEW

A Preventative Search and Rescue program, primarily focused on Humphreys trail, was launched in 2015. The program was led by Mike Suggs, an NAU Forestry master's student, and staffed by 20 volunteers primarily made up of members of the Friends of Northern Arizona Forests association. Oversight for the program was provided by Laura James, Forestry Technician/Recreation and Brian Poturalski, Recreation and Wilderness Staff Officer both from the Coconino National Forest, Flagstaff Office.

A meeting was held on Saturday May 16th, at the Flagstaff Ranger District office, to launch the 2015 program. In attendance were individuals interested in volunteering for the program, members of Friends of Northern Arizona Forests, Search and Rescue Coordinator from Coconino County Sheriff Office, Dr. Marty Lee from the Wilderness program at NAU and program stakeholders from the Coconino National Forest, Flagstaff office.

PSAR presence on Humphreys trail began the Friday before Memorial weekend, i.e. May 22nd, 2015. PSAR presence could be found at Humphreys trail on most Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays from May 22nd thru the Labor Day from 8am until 3pm, weather permitting. Mike Suggs and Darcy Lewis were present between 8am and 3pm and additional volunteers would arrive at 10am and depart around 2pm. PSAR was present on Humphreys trail a total of 50 days during that time period. On average there were 2.3 PSAR volunteers per day, in addition to Mike Suggs. PSAR program has continued into the fall of 2015 on a more limited schedule.

PSAR AT THE TRAILHEAD

Each day PSAR was active on Humphreys trail, Mike Suggs and/or Darcy Lewis would collect the materials from the Flagstaff District Warehouse around 7:30am and transport the materials, via a government vehicle, to the trailhead. Materials included a table, pop-up tent, chairs, Leave No Trace (LNT) interactive display and box containing informational signage, hand counter, walkie-talkies, volunteer vests and name tags, administrative forms and information for volunteers and swag for hikers. Note the trailhead is actually the starting point for both the Aspen Loop trail as well as Humphreys trail.

There is a 3 panel kiosk at the trailhead. The PSAR table was setup just to the left of the kiosk. Positioning of the table enabled volunteers to easily speak to hikers about information available at the table as well as in the kiosk. The table positioning, however also allowed hikers, who choose to do so, to walk by the table at a distance of 20 feet or more and avoid engagement with the volunteers.

Information for Hikers

Permanent Signage

The term ‘permanent signage’ refers to information which is available at all times related to Humphreys trail. Information may be physically present at the trailhead.

- A general map of trails and roads on the peaks

- ‘What is Wilderness?’

- Information on some plants in the area

- Distances to the Weatherford trail, to Humphreys’ peak and to the Arizona Trail
- Horse, bike and dog restriction notices

Signage/Information Provided At Trailhead by PSAR

- Leave no trace (LNT) in English & Spanish and an interactive display

- Stay on trail

- 7 essentials

- Effects of altitude

What to look for

PSAR visually assessed hikers as they passed the table for the following

Size of pack

Type of footwear

Age and level of fitness

Size/weight of pack

Amount of water

Extra clothing, windproof/waterproof jackets

Number of individuals hiking together and any apparent leader(s) in the group

Direction and trail headed

Engaging Hikers

PSAR would attempt to engage each hiker or group of hikers as they passed the table. Each conversation was tailored based upon information gleaned from the visual assessment as well as our perception of each hiker's willingness to engage in conversation. Some hikers were curious about what was on the table and would approach the table to speak with us. Swag definitely helped bring people to the table particularly those with children. The key to engaging any visitor was to begin with a big smile, be authentically interested in what they have to say and speak in a friendly, caring and enthusiastic tone of voice.

Hikers Headed Downhill

From hikers coming down the hill, particularly the first ones we saw each morning, we would ask about how their hike went as well as trail and weather conditions. Trail and weather condition information was valuable for passing along to those just starting up the trail. These conversations also provided us with another set of eyes on ears on the trail from which we were able to glean an understanding of amount of trash is on the trail, any concerns they had about specific individuals or conditions, lost or found items as well as areas of the trail requiring attention from the trail crew.

Hikers Headed Uphill

When hikers walk by, if they look like they might be intent on heading for the top I like to start by asking if they are. About 70% of the time, the answer is a strong affirmative response. Another 15% of the time, it will be something less committal such as 'hope so'

or ‘at least the saddle’. The remaining 15% just want to experience Humphreys and usually have some duration in mind for their hike. The last two categories of individuals (30%) show some understanding of the trail, their level of fitness and some preparation for the hike.

My very next question for those headed to the top is ‘Have you done this before?’ About 80% of those saying they are headed to the top have never hiked any part of Humphreys thus provides the PSAR volunteer a good understanding of what level of information to begin sharing. Sometimes when encountering a group there will be an individual or two who has at least hiked Humphreys before and appears, at some level, to be providing some leadership to the group. Another reason this is a great question it often prompts curiosity and they will ask ‘What do I need to know?’.

Some other great follow up questions are

- ‘Where are you from?’ provides information on their accustomed elevation as well shows an interest in them personally
- ‘When did you arrive in Flagstaff?’ provides information on how much acclimatization they’ve experienced and sometimes is an indication of how much preparation and planning has gone into their hike and often they will share how much time they have to do a hike

Once you have engaged a hiker, use the information garnered visually and from their responses along with current weather reports and weather patterns, current trail conditions, and typical experience of hikers on Humphreys prioritize and customize the information you share with them.

Much of the information to share with hikers has been identified above in the sections on signage. Below are some additional ideas of pertinent topics.

Wet – slippery

Snow/ice – very slippery and trail may be difficult to follow; traction devices recommended

Wind – can be quite brisk at top, up to 70mph at times and dangerous for smaller people and dogs

Rain/lightening expected – stay below tree line, minimizing risk, anticipate turning around earlier than anticipated

Temperatures – 10–15 degrees cooler at top than trailhead and if clouds or precipitation comes in, even cooler

Lots of hikers or pretty quiet

Daylight remaining – may suggest a need to carry lights or to plan a turnaround time

Forest Service Safety Requirements

4 Job Safety forms (JHAs) were identified related to activities of the PSAR program. All volunteers were required to read all 4 forms and sign to indicate they had read and understood the forms.

In addition, each day a tailgate safety meeting was held with the volunteers after which volunteers signed a safety meeting form.

Metrics

Table 1, found in the Appendix to this document, contains a summary of the metrics gathered throughout the summer.

Metrics gathered show that PSAR engaged approximately 53% of hikers each day PSAR was present. Of the 47% not engaged by PSAR an estimated 40% of those were not engaged due to them starting their hike prior to PSARs arrival for day. Daily car count at 9am averaged 54 cars. With an estimated 2 or more people per car and given the hour between our arrival and the 1st car count of the day, 75–100 individuals ‘on trail’ prior to our arrival each morning seems about right. The remaining 7% seems about right for the percentage of hikers encountered who would not provide eye contact, did not glance at the PSAR table nor slow down when walking by. The vast majority of hikers were friendly and willing to engage with PSAR.

PSAR ON THE TRAIL

Most hikers, who run into trouble, do so between the switch back at large rock slide and the saddle, alternatively described as between 1.7 miles (10,500 ft. elevation) and 3.8 miles (11,800 ft. elevation) into their hike.

To be present on the trail when and where hikers were needing help, we began to send a PSAR volunteer up first thing in the morning to hike to the saddle, hang out for a bit and then begin descending between 12:00 and 12:30 to return to the trailhead by 3pm.

People tend to turn down help when offered. It takes a little experience to detect the signs of an individual who really does need help, although they may initially decline, and then to encourage them to accept.

Support for Hikers on the Trail

Distance, Altitude and Time

Hikers encountered on the trail often requested information regarding current altitude, distance travelled to current location or distance remaining to the saddle or top. Distance travelled to current location and then distance to their objective was often nonsensical to them due to pace they were accustomed to hiking/walking and pace they were able to maintain on the trail. Thus performing calculations on the fly by getting understanding of how long they had hiked to reach their current position and knowing how far they were from their objective we could provide them with an estimate of how much further, timewise, they were from their objective.

Weather

The peaks create their own weather system and it can change rapidly. It's often difficult to see changing weather when hiking below the saddle. To remain current on the weather it was useful to exchange information regarding between PSAR on the saddle and at the trailhead and to then share the most current information with hikers at those locations and along the trail.

General Information

Particularly when hanging out at some point on the trail in uniform where hikers tend to stop for a break, questions will arise regarding history and geography of the peaks, other trails in the area, what landmarks they can see, names of birds, flowers and trees. Be prepared.

Individuals Separated from their Group

Individuals separated from their group can also be a concern, particularly in cases of young kids and older individuals. Work to reconnect them with their group, walk them down or find a reliable individual willing to take responsibility to walk them down.

First Aid

Humphreys trail has exposed roots and rocks along much of its surface. Trips, slips and falls are frequent occurrences particularly after a good rain and early in the year when there is still snow and ice on the trail. Bandages, wet wipes and ankle/knee wraps come in handy.

Dehydration and low blood sugar are another common occurrence. Hikers may look unhappy or in pain, or sitting on the side of the trail hunched over and sometimes even crying. Carry extra energy bars, water and electrolyte/protein mix. When offering the electrolyte/protein mix, also give them extra water to mix it in so that if they are not able to drink it you have not also reduced the amount of water they have available. Also, check to see if they are part of a larger group and attempt to reconnect them with their group. Sometimes groups separate and expect to meet up later to share food and water and 'later' turns into longer than anticipated.

Fear of heights often first presents itself at the saddle. Individuals may be crawling around on the ground, appear panicked, hyperventilating and/or crying. They usually improve significantly if walked down a bit, below the saddle and back into the trees.

Headache, Dizziness, Nausea

These are common symptoms for those experiencing altitude sickness but may also result from dehydration, low blood sugar, hypo/hyperthermia. If mild, ensure they are eating and drinking regularly and consuming sufficient electrolytes. Aspirin or ibuprofen

may also help with headaches. If symptoms persist or worsen, encourage them to descend.

What to carry

- 10 essentials
- Extra clothing (hat, gloves, layers, rain gear) – if stopping and hanging out at a point along the trail, is cooler than continuing to hike
- Micro cleats if snow on trail
- Walkie-talkie
- Cell phone
- information needed when making a medical incident report, aka 9 liner
- Trash bag and rubber gloves
- Several quarts of extra water
- First aid kit
- Extra food (cliff bars)
- Electrolyte powder
- Aspirin/ibuprophen
- Bandages, ace bandages

Trash

Most hikers are really good and pick up their trash and many hikers are awesome and pick up trash they find on the trail. However, with so many users of the trail there seems always to be some. Carry a trash bag and gloves when hiking the trail to pick up trash.

PSAR PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Volunteers

Volunteers are a key component to enabling the PSAR program. Finding, training and keeping good volunteers is an important activity in the PSAR program. As you can see above there is quite a variety of activities involved in the PSAR program and thus will require a wide variety of individuals with varying interests and talents. All need a passion for the wilderness and truly care about the people who want to experience the trail.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A

Challenge: Mike Suggs was the key to the success of the program this year. Mike did a fantastic job scheduling and training volunteers. However, when he left the program to return to school he left huge shoes that are tough to fill.

Suggestion: Reduce program dependency upon single individual by creating a core group of individuals that can share the responsibility and support attrition without risk to the program.

B

Challenge: Online tool called Doodle was use to schedule volunteers. It has a number of shortcomings such as inability to transfer administrative rights between individuals thus requiring new poll (with new link) for each new person managing the volunteer signup tool. In addition, it is not user friendly.

Suggestion: Find a better online tool with ability to transfer administrative ownership, multiple administrators at once, alerts when information changes, auto-notification to volunteers of upcoming commitment, place to maintain contact information for volunteers, mobile friendly, define roles (on trail/at trailhead) needed per day and individuals to select roles when they volunteer.

C

Challenge: Volunteers have varying levels of experience and background.

Suggestion: Formalized training and/or training materials for volunteers. Meet with other PSAR programs, such as the Grand Canyon, to review Humphreys PSAR program and learn about their best practices. Identify additional reading materials for volunteers who are interested in increasing their knowledge.

D

Challenge: PSAR unable to be everywhere all the time with all the information hikers are seeking.

Suggestion: Improve permanent signage. In general, create permanent and online information for hikers. The information should be more compelling, easier to read (eye level and larger type), photo friendly (i.e. of sufficient clarity that an image taken by a phone can be read and used on the trail) and available online.

Some ideas for additional signage are as follows

What to do in case of lightening

What is altitude sickness, symptoms and how to treat

Wildlife, flora and fauna in the area

History and geology of the peaks

Landmarks that can be seen from the trail and trailhead

Wilderness trail etiquette

Improve Humphreys 7 essentials list

- match SAR's 10 essentials and
- make it specific for Humphreys, such as specifying the recommended minimum amount of water to carry

Improve map of Humphreys trail

- you are here marker
- trail milestones such as sign in box, large rock slide, tree line, saddle and peak
- larger and easier to read
- mobile phone photo friendly

APPENDIX

TABLE 1 SEASON AVERAGES

| Metric | Daily Average | % of Total | Notes |
|--|---------------|------------|---|
| # of people encountered | 190 | 100% | This value was gathered thru use of a hand counter. Each hiker approaching the trailhead was counted even if they were only intending to look at the flowers in the field, hike the aspen loop or just look at the information available and the view. In addition, hikers returning to the trailhead who appeared to have started prior to our arrival were also included in this count. |
| # of people intending to hike Humphrey's | 175 | 92% | Estimate based observing individuals within sight of the trailhead. Some wander out into the field to look at flowers, some head down aspen trail and others head out on Humphreys trail. |
| # of hikers intending to summit | 153 | 81% | Estimate based on talking to and observing hikers headed up or coming down. |
| # of hikers offered an alternative | 8 | 4% | Count of actual after talking to them |
| # of hikers changed plans | 6 | 3% | Count of actual after talking to them |
| # of people engaged by volunteers | 101 | 53% | Estimate |
| % prepared for their planned activity (est.) | 85% | n/a | Estimate based on conversations with hikers and observing packs, footwear, gear carried, clothing |