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When hikers need help, who pays for rescue?

If you run into trouble, your rescue could come with a hefty price tag.



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Search and rescue workers finish a day of searching Zion National Park for lost hikers. (Photo: George Frey/Getty Images)

An 80-year-old man and his family may soon get a bill for the cost of his rescue mission when two teenage grandsons left him behind to hike alone on Mount Washington in New Hampshire while they continued on without him.

After an all-night search by rescuers, James Clark of Dublin, Ohio, was found "in a fetal position, not moving and exhibiting what appeared to be signs and symptoms of hypothermia to the point of not being able to speak any clear or discernible words," according to a statement from the [New Hampshire Fish and Game Department](#). Rescuers wrapped him in dry clothes and a sleeping bag and carried him out about 1.7 miles to safety.

The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department might also ask state prosecutors about criminal charges, reports the [New Hampshire Union Leader](#). (The elderly hiker, however, blames himself, not his grandsons, saying the plan all along was for the teens to go to the summit without him, and he thought he could make it, the [newspaper reports](#).)

Similarly, in 2015, a family of four received an estimated \$500 bill from the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department after their daytime hike left them lost in the dark and required search and rescue (SAR). If they had purchased a \$35 [Hike Safe Card](#) before departing, their rescue costs would've been covered. This raises an interesting question: Who picks up the tab when you get lost or injured in the great outdoors?

In New Hampshire, hikers and others participating in outdoors activities who buy a voluntary Hike Safe Card won't be held liable for rescue costs even if they're deemed negligent. However, they'll still have to pay response expenses if they're found to have acted recklessly.

Other states offer comparable cards to offset expensive SAR costs, such as Colorado's [Outdoor Recreation Search and Rescue Card](#). Similar plans come attached to some states' hunting and fishes licenses, and several U.S. companies even offer rescue insurance for those that partake in outdoor activities.

In Europe, such insurance is common with outdoor enthusiasts because individuals know they'll be held financially responsible if they require rescue. Plans may go for as little as \$30 a year, and the money goes toward training, funding and equipping professional rescue teams.

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professional rescue teams.

Taxpayers pick up the tab

If you find yourself in an emergency situation in a national park, the government typically foots the bill for your rescue.

The same goes for land owned by the U.S. Forest Service — even in areas where resorts lease the government property, such as Wyoming's Jackson Hole resort. And the Coast Guard only gets repaid for the cost of SAR missions when its rescuers are victims of a hoax.

In 2014, the National Park Service conducted more than 2,600 searches and rescues, spending more than \$4 million. Reports show that these costs have been relatively steady over the past decade.

However, Travis Heggie, a professor at Bowling Green State University and a former risk management specialist for the NPS, says these reports don't include SAR-training costs or the price of diverting park rangers from their regular duties.

These reports also exclude the cost of rides on ambulances or medical helicopters. That often hefty bill goes to the individual and their medical insurer.

And if you "create a hazardous or physically offensive condition" while on NPS land, you may be bearing the costly burden of your rescue. In cases of gross negligence, "the court may take action to seek restitution to the government during the penalty assessment," according to NPS spokeswoman Kathy Kupper.

Who should pay?



Being safe in the wilderness can save everyone pain and money. (Photo: Fineart1/Shutterstock)

The high cost of SAR missions is what prompted states like New Hampshire to pass laws that establish programs like Hike Safe to hold individuals more financially accountable for their rescues.

However, some people have called for more stringent laws to shift SAR costs off taxpayers. They say such a move would ultimately make people more responsible and reduce overall SAR costs, but it's a controversial idea.

"Society rescues people all the time — auto accident victims, home fire victims ... — and at far greater cost than wilderness hiker rescues," writes [Backpacker](#). "The difference is that hikers and climbers provide great TV drama for a general public that thrives on hot footage and an arms-length, love-hate relationship with adventure."

Critics say putting a price tag on SAR could cause people to hesitate before calling for help in emergency situations. Howard Paul, former president of the Colorado Search and Rescue Board, told [Time](#) that injured people have even refused rescue because of fear of the costs.

"We know that when people believe that they are going to receive a large bill for a SAR mission, they delay a call for help or they refuse to call for help," he said.

But Heggie says this isn't actually the reason the National Park Service doesn't charge for SAR. He says it all comes down to litigation that would "open a financial

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nightmare."

"If an agency such as NPS starts charging the public for SAR costs, the agency essentially becomes mandated to conduct SAR operations. If something goes wrong during the SAR op, someone could file a tort claim ... It would turn into a nest of claims similar to what we see in the medical field with malpractice lawsuits and so on."

Who's being rescued?



Many of Yosemite National Park's rescues take place on the Half Dome. (Photo: Celso Diniz/Shutterstock)

According to Heggie's research, males ages 20 to 29 are the ones who most often require rescue, and the activity that most often leads to SAR missions isn't an extreme sport — it's hiking.

"Most hikers in the U.S. are not experienced hikers. Couple that with hiking in unfamiliar or new terrain in unfamiliar environments and you have a recipe for disaster," Heggie said.

When he took a look at 2005 NPS data, he found that in 24% of cases, people required rescue on mountains at an elevation between 5,000 feet and 15,000 feet. After that, the most common areas where people called for help were rivers and lakes.

That data also revealed which parks had the most SAR operations.

In 2005, the top three were Arizona's Grand Canyon National Park, New York's Gateway National Recreation Area and Yosemite National Park. Ten percent of the NPS's search and rescue operations took place in Yosemite that year, but the park actually accounted for 25% of the agency's SAR costs.

According to [the Yosemite Conservancy](#), an average of 250 visitors become lost or injured or die in the park each year, and a 10-year [National Institutes of Health study](#) revealed that day hikers in the park use a quarter of the park's SAR services. The majority of those rescued needed help due to lower extremity injuries, fatigue or dehydration.

Heggie's examination of national park SAR operations from 2003 to 2006 drew similar conclusions, finding that the most common reasons people encountered trouble were due to errors in judgment and fatigue.

"The vast majority of rescues in national parks involve people who are not adequately prepared for an activity," Kupper said.

Both Heggie and Kupper say the best way people can avoid needing rescue is simply by being prepared, suggesting that people research hikes before they go, pay attention to their surroundings, pack essential gear and not rely on a cellphone as a [survival kit](#).

"The best time to prevent SAR incidents is when people are still at home," Heggie said. "We often use the term PSAR (preventive search and rescue) and, this is the best type."

He also suggests that adventurers purchase insurance just in case they do require rescue.

Editor's note: This story was originally published in October 2015 and has been updated with new information.



Laura Moss writes about a variety of topics with a focus on animals, science, language and culture. But she mostly writes about cats.

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