

Accidental deaths of thrill-seeking tourists have weakened the bottom line of our \$4.8 billion a year tourism industry. The problem is, can you eliminate risk without destroying the adventure? ROB GREENAWAY, tourism development planner, investigates.

Thrilling not killing

managing the risk tourism business

The whale-watching town of Kaikoura was shattered by the death of Mei Huei Chen on March 2 this year. The 29-year-old Taiwanese woman drowned after the tourist boat *Uruao* capsized, plunging 29 occupants into the sea and trapping her under the overturned vessel.

Despite the bravery shown by the crew of the ill-fated boat in risking their own lives to save the passengers, and the fact that Whale Watch previously had a clear safety record, the tragedy — together with deaths on the Shotover River, air accidents in Fiordland and last year's fatal balloon crash in Canterbury — begs the question of whether New Zealand's adventure operators can manage the risk their clients

are exposed to.

According to New Zealand Water Safety Council records, 65 tourists drowned in New Zealand in the 15 years preceding 1994 (five of them in rafting accidents). In statistical terms this means that a visitor to New Zealand is about four times more likely to drown than a resident during any one day (not surprising given the greater exposure to water activities that tourists usually choose).

The death of tourists has had a huge commercial impact on some areas. The fatal mid-air collision in Milford Sound during 1989 caused the patronage of scenic flights in Fiordland to immediately fall by 50 per cent and, although there has been a slow recovery over the past six

years, tourist numbers are still below pre-crash figures. Similarly, the rafting industry in Queenstown was reported to have initially lost half its clients, and an estimated \$2 million in income, as a result of the death of an English tourist in 1994 (for which two Kawarau Rafts guides were convicted of negligence and recklessness) plus three other drownings in the past two years. Once again, current client numbers are significantly below those before the deaths.

It is indicative of the concern about safety that one of New Zealand's leading inbound tour operators, Japan Travel Bureau, is advising its clients against booking what it considers to be high risk activities, including bungy jumping.



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Despite all this the New Zealand Tourism Board claims this country has a good safety record.

Chris Ryan, NZTB's deputy chief executive, estimates that the 1.36 million visitors to New Zealand last year took part in about five million adventure activities — around three per person. He believes the number of tourist deaths needs to be put in perspective.

"One tourist death is clearly one too many," Ryan says. However, he believes that we stand to destroy the New Zealand adventure tourism experience by knee-jerking our way through risk-elimination procedures.

"People will shy away from adventure tourism if it is sterilised beyond recogni-

tion," Ryan claims. "Visitors expect a thrill when they take on an activity and risk is one variable that makes that possible — but we must ensure that it is safe."

This poses two questions: do we need to remove all the risk from adventure tourism to prevent deaths and, if so, is it possible?

Bungy jumping provides a model that adventure tourism operators would do well to take note of. The safety programmes that AJ Hackett independently developed for bungy were picked up by the New Zealand Standards Association (at Hackett's suggestion) and named NZS 5848. New operators are now trying, voluntarily, to comply with them.

Andrew Brinsley was, until recently, the general manager of AJ Hackett's operation and worked with him to develop the standard. He now runs his own company, Pipeline Bungy, operating the highest bungy site in the southern hemisphere from a suspension bridge across the Shotover River. He is "99 per cent" of the way to meeting the requirements of NZS 5848.

"I believe in minimum standards," says Brinsley. "It gives the industry a backdrop for a sustainable future, but I doubt the standards will ever become compulsory and I don't think they should. Many small operators have very low guide-to-client ratios and are very conscious of the need for safety and quality management. The

Risk — Real or Perceived

The word risk in adventure activities has two main components.

- *Real risk* refers to the true amount of danger an activity involves. Kayaking Huka Falls has a very high level of real risk.
- *Perceived risk* is an individual's assessment of the danger that they feel they face. Bungy jumping has a high level of perceived risk, but low real risk — which is probably why it is so popular.

An adventure operator needs to manage risk in two ways: first reduce the degree of real risk by managing hazards and incidents; and then tailor the activity to deliver the perceived risk at a level that each individual client feels comfortable with.

The Rafting Review

The Maritime Safety Authority's review of safety management in the rafting industry identified five key problems:

- Inconsistency of safety standards between regions and operators
- Inconsistency of guiding standards and inadequate training and qualification systems
- Inability to apply and enforce minimum safety standards
- Poor client awareness of the nature of rafting
- Poor communication and coordination within the industry.

Ross Clapcott, author of the report and manager of industry service and development with the Sports, Fitness and Recreation Industry Training Organisation (SFRITO), made an additional observation not covered by the brief of the review: "Many rafting companies competing for the mainstream client are essentially competing on price, which limits their ability to thoroughly address safety issues. Those companies which have differentiated their market seem to be able to focus more on the delivery of the experience and less on price, which allows them more room to move in developing effective safety management procedures."

The MSA report recommended 11 key steps be taken to address the identified safety problems, mainly focusing on adherence to mandatory standards and codes of practice.

pressure to comply with mandatory standards could mean small operators aren't viable, and no safer."

For example, it will cost Pipeline Bungy a substantial sum to meet the last one per cent of NZS 5848, and Brinsley will assess the company's ability to reach it as patronage grows.

There is not a lot a customer can do for him or herself on a bungy jump, so the operator has to be fully competent. "A client puts him or herself totally in the hands of the operator, which means that if there is an accident it will be caused by operator error," he says.

"The operator has a lot to consider, but everything is generally predictable. The sequence of events that leads to a jump is pretty replicable, so it's quite easy to document for a safety routine."

Brinsley cautions that this doesn't mean bungy jumping is a naturally safe activity: "If it was, then the public would do it

themselves." That is exactly what happened in France, where bungy kits were readily available in sports stores until the resultant string of deaths led to them being recalled. Deaths are unbecoming for any sport, however attractive the risk.

Cathye Haddock, the author of the Mountain Safety Council's manual on managing risk in outdoor activities, is currently completing a thesis on the topic and is resident teacher at the Rotoiti Lodge Outdoor Education Centre. She believes it is possible and necessary to reduce the real risk (see box) in adventure tourism to the level that we experience in everyday activities — and possibly make it even safer.

Haddock's research indicates that adventure activities are currently at least as safe as driving a car or playing football. A client on a rafting trip is probably in more danger driving to the river than floating

down it (incidentally, Land Transport Safety Authority records show tourists have a better safety record as drivers on New Zealand roads than Kiwis).

"Research in the United States has shown that organised outdoor adventure activities are generally about four to five times more risky than normal, everyday life, and outdoor adventure is, on average, slightly less risky than driving," says Haddock. "However, society has shown that it will not tolerate that level of risk for activities that are offered by a commercial operation."

As she explains, risk is a socially constructed concept. "An operator cannot assume that clients understand and accept the level of risk they may be exposed to," she says.

"Society's reaction to a death will relate to the fact that the operator has assumed responsibility for the health and safety of its clients, not to whether the activity was inherently dangerous. If an activity is offered as a commercial service, society expects that the operator will take care of the risks involved, and will therefore react more strongly if a death results, even if the activity is statistically as safe as driving a car."

Only three commercial river activities remain unblemished by tourist deaths: black water rafting (although tourists have been killed in other tubing activities), riverboarding and river sledging.

Riverboarding evolved from the coastal activity of bodyboarding, while sledging is more of a half boat, half swimming concept. Both sports share many similarities, including the use of a wetsuit, fins, helmet and life jacket, while the main differences are the board and sledge themselves.

Riverboarding appears to be an incredibly risky sport. Clients are fully immersed in the river and control their own destinies. In a few hours they are taught to manoeuvre around the river, play in whirl pools and surf waves, usually displaying skills that would take months of practice in a kayak. The most skilled riverboarders take to riding river currents underwater for distances of up to 60 metres, completely disappearing from view. The duration of these 'squirts' is defined partly by the rider's ability to hold his or her breath.

Over the past seven years, Serious Fun — a Queenstown-based riverboarding business — has taken 7000 clients down the Kawarau River, and is currently enjoying 25 per cent annual growth. With no national regulations defining the safety requirements of riverboarding, company director Jon Imhoof designed his own safety systems, trained the guides, defined the river's limits, and hasn't killed

anyone in the process. Besides his almost paranoid safety programme (he is originally from the United States, land of litigation), Imhoof believes riverboarding has one key advantage over most other white water activities: "Our clients cannot fall out of the river."

It's a question of attitude: riverboarders and sledgers are psychologically prepared to be in the water from the minute they leave the shore, and are clearly piloting their own vessels. Rafters generally expect to remain aboard their boat, responding to the instructions given by the guide, who takes all the responsibility. Imhoof believes the sense of self-responsibility his activity forces upon clients reduces the risk factor significantly.

"Most rafting clients assume that a rafting guide is going to look after them at all times," says Imhoof. "This is just not possible if the boat flips. In riverboarding, the clients are responsible for getting themselves down the river. We are there to show them how, and we make them aware of that."

In Haddock's terms, Imhoof is attempting to transfer some of the responsibility for risk from his guides to the clients.

The other major factor in reducing risk is Imhoof's approach to incident reporting: "I disagree with the statistical approach to river deaths — the rationale that accidents are going to be a statistical function of the number of clients taken on a particular trip. In reality, accidents [any injury or loss] are a function of the number of incidents [any time the leader loses control of the trip]. The only difference between an incident and an accident by our definitions is luck or the lack of it. Any incident is an accident that luckily didn't happen."

By deliberately and methodically identifying hazards and minimising incidents (as is required by the Health and Safety in Employment Act — see box, above), Imhoof believes he has a method for managing all but the inevitable accidents that are simply a matter of bad luck.

"We consider an incident to be anything that causes a guide to lose control of a group. That could be a client losing a fin, or someone heading down the left side of the river when the right side was planned. Each incident is written up at the end of each trip and analysed for the best recommended mitigating action."

Imhoof's incident reports are kept in the company's shuttle vehicle to allow guides to assess the state of the river based on the experience of the previous group.

Imhoof also insists on high qualifications levels for his guides. Based on skill level and experience, they are assessed annually. Three different levels of quali-

fication define the roles a guide can perform, and are enshrined in the company's operations plan.

Setting high standards has two benefits: safety and competitive advantage.

"We do want to be the best in the game," says Imhoof. "We have increasing competition and one of our strengths will be our safety record." He believes regulation of riverboarding is inevitable, in the same way it has developed for rafting, and would like to see his company's standards used as the model.

"Naturally we would like to see the safety standards set as high as possible, because we are prepared to meet them. It has cost us a lot of time and energy to define the standards, to document the methods we use to meet them, and to ensure we are sufficiently skilled. It will be difficult, and certainly expensive, for new entrants to the business to meet the safety standards we have set. To extend our advantage we also intend to exceed the standards by a factor of two."

The onus is very clearly on adventure operators to have the most water-tight safety management procedures that they can. If no activity-specific regulations exist (and it is unlikely that they will for all but the most major activities), it is up to the operator to develop them in accordance with the Health and Safety in Employment Act.

If a competitive advantage is to be gained, operators must set safety standards high and develop them before the competition. They must also ensure that the standards they adopt will be considered acceptable for their particular industry, so there is a need to cooperate with other operators.

Finally, in a delicate balancing act, they must retain that necessary element of perceived risk, while reducing the real risks to acceptable levels.

Visitors to New Zealand, like domestic tourists, expect to survive the commercial adventure activities they undertake. Any less is just not good enough. **M**

Adventure and the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1993

The Health and Safety in Employment Act spells out the responsibilities employers and employees have in ensuring that all workplaces are safe, making a range of safety management actions mandatory. The Adventure Tourism Council (a member division of the NZ Tourism Industry Association) has prepared a safety self-audit questionnaire for the adventure tourism industry which interprets the requirements of the HSE Act into a simple and thorough checklist. Copies of the safety self-audit are available for \$50 from the Adventure Tourism Council, PO Box 3589, Christchurch. Fax 0-3-374 5983.

Adventure tourism self-regulation

The Adventure Tourism Council is developing a standards assurance programme to accredit operators who demonstrate that they meet a minimum standard under their sector's code of practice. This is an alternative to government imposed top-down control, which tends to be both expensive and restrictive.

The process involves each activity sector developing its own code of practice, identifying the minimum expected of an operator under four principles: legal, safety, environmental and customer service. This self-assessment is reviewed by an external assessor for final approval and the resulting accreditation used as an icon to demonstrate that the standard has been met.

Those companies that book clients have been looking for such a programme to act as a guarantee of the quality that can be expected. Several major organisations have indicated their support by agreeing to book only with accredited agents.

This is a demonstration of the power of the industry acting in concert and is possibly unique worldwide — searches conducted by the programme partners, NZ Tourism Board and KPMG have failed to find anything but regulatory controls in overseas markets. **Geoff Gabites**