

Winter Use Regulations Baxter State Park

The Friends Policy Committee has been reviewing concerns of former and current Board Members about the Winter Use Regulations in BSP. The rules impose many restrictions on activities above tree line and are primarily designed to protect climbers from harm and reduce hazards and costs associated with rescue. Many members who use the park in the winter believe that while the intent is understandable, several of the rules result in unreasonable limitations that may in fact result in increased risk and certainly impede enjoyment of the wilderness values of BSP. Generally issues center around mandatory requirements concerning equipment, minimum party size, climbing and travel restrictions.

Since current members of the Policy committee have limited experience with above tree line winter use, we asked a sub-committee consisting of Jon Huntington, Bill Bentley, Jon Tierney, Jon Loyd, and Howard Lake to review the BSP rules and provide us with some recommendations. Jon Huntington gathered winter mountaineering and backcountry use information from Mount Rainier (National Park Service), Kluane National Park and Reserve of Canada which includes Mount Logan (Parks Canada), Inyo National Forest and the Mount Baker – Snoqualmie National Forest (The National Forest Service) and compared their requirements and equipment lists with those from Baxter.

In the above parks and forests “required” equipment or “prohibitions” are largely related to resource protection. Examples include: bear canisters above tree line, no campfires in certain locations, pelleted food for pack animals to limit introduction of invasives, camping only on durable surfaces or designated sites, carry in/out, use of “blue bags” for fecal waste.

Back country users and mountaineers are usually required to register and have a permit. Registration and check-out are to facilitate rescue as well as to limit the number of users and are voluntary in some circumstances. Permits are generally to assure collection of a fee but may have some educational significance as well. They may include recommended equipment and other information including contact information but except for the solo climb permit on Rainier, they do not appear to have a “denied” line or require review by a climbing ranger. Rainier does require parental permission for climbers under 18 but does not require registration unless climbers intend to go above 10,000 feet or spend time on the glaciers. Mount Logan requires climbers to register and to watch an informational video.

Individual safety concerns are generally addressed through warnings, education, recommendations and limitations of liability. For example, Mt Rainier’s winter climbing information includes the following: “Winter storms on Rainier are frequent and severe, with high winds, deep snow and extremely poor visibility. Winter conditions generally exist from mid-September to mid-May. All parties attempting a winter ascent *should* (emphasis added) be experienced in winter mountaineering, avalanche forecasting and rescue, and be familiar with the intended route of ascent and descent. The maximum

party size is 12. A minimum party size of 4 is **recommended** (emphasis added). A party size of 2 is required unless a solo permit is obtained. An extensive recommended equipment list is included with additions for winter mountaineering.

Baxter State Park appears to rely more heavily on mandatory regulation of climbing equipment and decisions than do parks where the risks are at least equal if not more severe. At a minimum FBSP would like to see the following rules amended.

BSP 43B – Rev. 10/03 Required Equipment

Baxter State Park's regulations list required equipment. While most of these requirements are items that would be included by any responsible winter camper, the axe, camp saw, outdoor thermometer and wind-chill chart are of questionable benefit. Other items may or may not be necessary and their inclusion and or use should be left to individual judgment. The other cold-environment/winter wilderness destinations we reviewed do not require particular equipment. FBSP suggests the following rule change:

The following is a list of recommended equipment for both individuals and teams. (Reproduce the list with modifications.) In so far as possible it would be helpful to have all recommended equipment for both individuals and teams on one list. A format might be similar to the "10 essentials" with appropriate seasonal additions for individuals and groups and those traveling above tree line. The very comprehensive existing booklet of recommendations and information about winter travel could be merged with this list.

Winter Trip Permits issued to individuals and teams arriving in the Park with insufficient equipment as determined by any ranger may be revoked. This would allow the ranger to turn back people who clearly are not prepared.

Prohibition Against One-Day Trip to Chimney Pond

BSP's current rule requires winter parties going to Chimney Pond by way of Roaring Brook to stay at Roaring Brook the first night. While this may be appropriate for some, others are capable of reaching Chimney safely without the stopover and should be free to make that choice. FBSP suggests the following:

Parties traveling to Chimney Pond by the Chimney Pond Trail must arrive at Roaring Brook Campground not later than 3:00 PM. Parties arriving after 3:00 PM may be denied permission to proceed. (My guess is that this may be a scheduling situation with the bunkhouses at Roaring brook and Chimney Pond ALH) *Perhaps we could say that if conditions are not favorable for a one day trip, the party must remain at roaring brook and be prepared to stay in a leanto if there is no room at the bunkhouse?*

Minimum Party Size

BSP currently requires a minimum party size of 4 (which may consist of separate teams of two who remain in auditory or visual contact with each other) for winter mountain hiking and climbing or ski-mountaineering or snowboarding above tree line or for

camping at Chimney, Russell or other outlying sites. A minimum party of three is required for overnight activities below tree line at roadside campgrounds and campsites.

Our members believe that mandatory party size could in fact be detrimental to the extent that a weaker member may be included in order to make the minimum. Other cold-environment/winter wilderness destinations do not require a minimum party size except that Rainier requires a solo permit. FBSP suggests a rule change as follows:

The minimum recommended size of parties on any overnight winter trip anywhere in the park is four (4) people. Solo activities anywhere in the Park require special permission and submission of the Solo Trip Request Form.

An additional possibility might be to have a two tiered permit system where the more experienced holders of an "A" level permit would be allowed to make more choices regarding gear, travel time, party size etc. A "B" level permit would suggest a higher level of oversight.

I also reviewed BSP's 2006 search and rescue data. It appears that a total of 6 people in 5 incidents required rescue services during the winter season. There is no clear indication that party size or required gear were /were not a factor. On 2/19 a climber was injured in a fall on Abol slide. On 2/23 - 24 two climbers mistakenly entered Witherle Ravine while descending after dark. They were evacuated by helicopter. On 2/28 a climber was evacuated from Chimney pond following a slip and fall injury. On 3/6 a climber was evacuated from Roaring Brook with a groin-knee injury. On 3/17 a climber was evacuated from Chimney pond with blistered feet. One Courtesy Warning was issued to a party climbing above tree line with 2 rather than 4 people on 2/4.

Friends members believe that winter mountaineering is an activity where participants must assume responsibility for risks and outcomes and that while the park may have an educational role, their primary responsibility is preservation of the resource. Ultimately it must be the responsibility of the user to make decisions based on sound judgment and knowledge of modern mountaineering practices.

Action Items?

Education opportunities for members

Appropriate gear

Search and Rescue

Winter camping/climbing/snowshoeing/teleskiing/boarding trips

Winter Walk in the Park

Rescue Insurance options

American Alpine Association