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# When GPS Leads to S O S

By DAVID ROBERTS

Watertown, Mass.

THE proliferation of cellphones, satellite phones, emergency locator devices, GPS, and similar technology has led to an epidemic of backcountry rescues for people who have called for help they don't need, risking the lives of rescuers in the process.

Search-and-rescue outfits around the country are grappling regularly with "false alerts" and novices' getting in over their heads because they think gadgetry guarantees safety. More and more folks are carrying personal locator beacons, or P.L.B.'s, into the backcountry. With the push of a button they can send out an emergency distress signal, but no information about their predicament.

Matt Scharper, search and rescue coordinator for the California Emergency Management Agency, calls the locator beacons "yuppie 911's," adding, "You send a message to a satellite and the government pulls your butt out of something you shouldn't have been in in the first place." Nick Parker, a veteran of 45 years of wilderness rescues in Alaska, said in an e-mail: "The real issue is one of training (or lack thereof), and of our dependence on gizmos to save us. People expect a rescue in the same way they expect a fire engine or ambulance to come when they dial 911."

Consider the case that unfolded in the Grand Canyon in 2009. Four hikers in a remote part of the canyon pushed the emergency help button on their SPOT satellite tracking device. When rangers helicoptered in the next day, the hikers declined evacuation, saying they were worried about running short of water. The next day the hikers pushed the button again. Another copter team arrived, to hear the complaint that the water the men had "tasted salty." On the third day, the gang pushed their button a third time. Fed up, the rangers loaded the miscreants onto the helicopter. The group's leader was cited for creating a hazardous condition.

Though few instances are quite so outrageous as the Grand Canyon fiasco, false alerts are becoming commonplace. In 2010, there was a rash of rescue calls in Grand Teton National Park,

with hikers asking for help down the mountain. One asked that hot chocolate be flown in.

Last October in Yosemite, several hikers on the Cables route on Half Dome pushed on in the face of a gathering lightning storm. On the summit, hypothermic, they called for a helicopter rescue, only to be told that the rangers couldn't fly in such weather. "I was freaking out and thought I wasn't going to make it," one of the stranded men later said. The next day, 20 hikers on Half Dome called 911 to ask for a rescue in similar conditions.

In some European countries, inexpensive rescue insurance covers the costs of all rescues, while in others, those rescued must pay for the help, especially when "victims" are thought to have been negligent or to have cried wolf. But in the United States, charging hikers or boaters for unnecessary rescues is an option seldom pursued. "We don't want people not to call for a rescue because they think they can't afford it. Then they're likely to get into deeper trouble and trigger a more dangerous rescue," says Jeff Sparhawk, public information officer for the Rocky Mountain Rescue Group, a search-and-rescue team based in Boulder, Colo.

Despite his cynicism about "yuppie 911's," Mr. Scharper sees a silver lining. "P.L.B.'s have saved a lot of lives," he says. "And as the technology develops, the problem will partly solve itself. Instead of a '911 hangup' — a beeping distress signal attached to GPS coordinates — "we'll be able to text back and forth. We'll be able to talk a lost hiker back to safety without going out to get him, or putting any rescuers at risk."

As a longtime mountaineer and teacher of wilderness skills, I'm more pessimistic. I believe that the "gizmos" are not themselves to blame for unnecessary rescues — the problem is that the devices have engendered a radical shift in the concept of adventure. Hikers, skiers and boaters not only expect to be whisked to safety at the push of a button, they regard this luxury as an inalienable right. In Wyoming in January 2010, a skier at Grand Targhee ventured out of bounds at the resort, got lost, sent out a cellphone distress call, but died of hypothermia. Despite a heroic effort by the Teton County Search and Rescue team, his heirs sued the team for \$5 million.

Far more people are now venturing into the backcountry without even minimal survival skills. Many carry gadgets they think of as get-out-of-jail-free cards. More of them than ever before will be rescued from their own incompetence. And too many of their rescuers will be endangered, injured or even killed.

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