Understanding Travel Behavior in Avalanche Terrain: A New Approach

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ABSTRACT:
To date, most studies of the human dimensions of decision-making in avalanche terrain has focused on two areas: post-accident analysis using accident reports/interviews, and the development of tools as decision forcing aids. While both methods inform our study of decision-making, each has limitations with respect to construct validity (Are we actually measuring what we think we are measuring? i.e. decisions), and the role the decision tools play with respect to forcing vs. enhancing decisions.

We present an alternate method for understanding decision-making in avalanche terrain. Our project combines GPS tracking and logbook surveys of backcountry skiers as a method to describe and quantify travel practices in concert with group decision-making dynamics, and demographic data of participants during daily excursions into winter backcountry. Data gathering for this small pilot project took place during winter 2012/2013. We will present findings that shed light on real time decision making while traveling in potential avalanche terrain and small group decision-making practice.

METHODS:
• Overview: Pilot study in 2011/12 Winter
• Volunteers selected
• Completed pre-season survey
  • Demographics
  • Experience
  • Qualifications etc.
• Using handheld GPS to record ski tours
• Complete logbook after every trip

• Data analysis:
  • Demographic survey analysis
  • Terrain analysis (GPS tracks onto DEM) (Figure 1)
    • Slope
    • Aspect
    • Trip length / duration

RESULTS & DISCUSSION:
We only present two relationships. The first is based on slope angle and posted avalanche hazard (Figure 2), and the other is slope and our “goal” parameter (Figure 3), which is a proxy for the commitment heuristic (McCamm 2004).

Figure 2. Slope angle (°) for the median, 90th, 95th and 99th Percentile of terrain travelled (y axis), plotted against posted avalanche hazard rating (x axis), coded; 1 for low, 2 for moderate and 3 for considerable.

Figure 3. Slope angle (°) for the median, 90th, 95th and 99th percentile of terrain travelled (y axis), plotted against the parameter “goal”, where a coded response to “Did your assessment of the snowpack affect the day’s goal?” with the response scale 1 = not at all, to 10 = very much.

Initial results indicate that there were: (1) A weak negative relationship between the angle of slope skiers negotiated and the avalanche danger rating, and (2) Given a favorable avalanche hazard report, or assessment of local snow conditions, that skiers adjusted their goal upward – i.e. Their assessment of the snowpack affected the day’s goal, in an upwards (more steep) direction. Transferability of these results are limited due to the homogenous and expert nature of the group.

NEXT STEPS
• For the 2012/13 Winter we have launched a new, Crowd Sourced data collection campaign to expand this work and enable greater exploration (i.e. a more heterogenous group)
• We will use a smartphone application called SkiTracks to track people more easily and enable rapid sharing of spatial data.
• We will use a smartphone optimised survey tool to allow for easy and rapid completion of the daily post trip survey / logbook.
• We hope to collect hundreds, maybe thousands of tracks from all around the World
• For more information, or to participate go to: www.montana.edu/snowscience/tracks
Or scan our QR code

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: We would like to thank all of our volunteers that tireless tracked their ski tours and completed their daily logbooks to provide us with data for this project. We also want to thank Mazamas for a research grant to support this pilot study and the Montana State University Undergraduate Scholar Program for supporting Ellie Southworth, to help with the data analysis. Without this assistance this work would not have been possible.