

To: Principal Research Officer
Economics and Industry Standing Committee
WA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY



From: Andy Hewat
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Race the Planet Kimberley 100 Ultramarathon Bushfire Inquiry

Thank-you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry.

As a race director of ultramarathons safety is my primary focus when organising my races. Secondary is that the runners have a memorable experience. As a competitor of ultramarathons I place a significant amount of trust in the organiser that they have done all that is reasonably possible to control or mitigate any significant risk during the event. The nature of our sport means that there are intrinsic risks. And that forms part of the attraction, the chance to challenge ourselves and reach outside of our comfort zone. Most of us lead very safe and secure lives and relish the chance to test ourselves and push our limits. While runners must accept and acknowledge that there are risks involved in trail running, the Race Director is responsible for overseeing the welfare of participants and identifying any foreseeable risks and mitigating, avoiding or removing these risks or if unable to achieve this then cancelling the event.

My Qualifications

I feel I am qualified to comment on the Race The Planet Kimberley 100 ultramarathon disaster because of my extensive involvement in this sport. I have been the Race Director for the Bogong to Hotham 64km ultramarathon (www.Bogong2Hotham.com) in the Victorian Alps for the last 2 years (the race has been held annually for 27 years). I am also the Race Director for the Great Ocean Walk 100km (www.GOW100s.com), now in its fourth year. I have run scores of ultramarathons with sixteen 100 mile races including 3 finishes at Hardrock100 in Colorado (considered one of the toughest 100 mile races in the world) and Western States 100, the original trail 100 mile race in California. I serve as assistant director, medical director or sweeper at several other ultramarathons, including: the You Yangs 50/50, Maroondah Dam 30/50, Mt Macedon Trail Series, The Tan 100km and 2Bays Trail Run. I have worked as a health professional for more than 30 years, hold an Advanced Wilderness First Aid Certificate and served as Occupational Health and Safety Representative (Work Safe Victoria Certified) for 10 years. I am a contributing editor for the

online magazine Trail Run Magazine Aus/NZ
(<http://www.trailrunmag.com/zine/>).

I have little first hand knowledge of the events that took place at the Kimberley ultramarathon so much of my submission will be aimed at how I manage risk in the races I direct and how I expect other organisers to act. I will relate this in context to the events, as I understand them to have unfolded at the Kimberley 100. I have spoken to one of the competitors who was not injured and I have had communications with one of Kate Sanderson's carers. Incidentally, Kate was the female winner of the inaugural GOW100km and had an entry for the 2011 race in October, which obviously she couldn't attend.

Risk Management Plan and Permits

In planning and organising the GOW100s I have to gain approval and permits from several authorities:

Great Otway National Park, Parks Victoria
Port Campbell National Park, Parks Victoria
Otway Coast Committee
Colac-Otway Shire Council
Corangamite Shire Council
Vic Roads
Victoria Police (Head Office and Apollo Bay and Port Campbell)
Ambulance Victoria

I have a thorough Risk Management Plan (Reference #1 attached as a document) that is submitted to all of the above bodies for approval. Any changes or modifications necessary to meet their requirements are made and the Plan is resubmitted. This rigorous process ensures that all foreseeable contingencies are considered and planned for.

It is not only necessary to have plans in place but also to be able to implement them and make tough decisions necessary to ensure the safety of runners. I experienced this first-hand this year when I was forced to cancel the Bogong to Hotham mid-race because of deteriorating weather conditions in the Alps that made it unsafe for the race to continue. Such decisions can be unpopular but safety is always paramount. The Risk Plan is an important document that forms the basis of how to mitigate risk and deal with incidents. A copy of the Risk Plan for my races is available at every checkpoint along the course.

Did Race The Planet have a Risk Management Plan? Did it cover the response to a critical incident such as a bushfire? Presuming they did have a Risk Plan, were the actions on the day of the race consistent with the guidelines in their Risk Plan? I believe that much of the Kimberley 100 was conducted on a private leasehold property. Did this preclude the need for permits from the local governing bodies and emergency services? Were there any permits in place? These are important questions for which I have no answers.

Critical questions

There are several other critical questions that relate to trigger points for cancellation of the race that I feel need addressing. During the pre-race briefing competitors were told about some small fires in the area of the course. The entrant I have spoken to felt this was “glossed over” and the briefing moved on quickly. This runner felt that since organisers knew about the fires and were not concerned that therefore these fires posed no threat. There was no elaboration on what to do if any of these fires did become a threat. If the fires were known about before the race even started why was more attention not paid to this risk and contingency plans discussed with the runners?

One report stated that part of the course had to be remarked because fire had burnt the directional course markers. If so, this indicates awareness by the organisers that the fire was in fact encroaching on the course even before the start. Is this true and if so why wasn't the race cancelled or an alternate course considered?

I heard several reports that runners left the second checkpoint despite there being visible smoke. Did race officials at this checkpoint have concerns? And why wouldn't visible smoke force abandonment of the race at this point?

During the Kimberley race I understand that a local gyro-copter pilot tried to report the approaching fire to organisers. Once this message about the approaching fire from the gyro-pilot was received why wasn't the race stopped and evacuation procedures started?

Communications

Communication between all checkpoints and the Race Director are paramount so that any developing issues can be monitored and acted upon immediately. At Bogong to Hotham where telecommunications are very limited the race is supported by the members of a local amateur radio club. Volunteers hike in and set-up radio communications across the entire course so that the runners' safety can be tracked and reported in real-time. At GOW100s satellite phones are used at checkpoints that don't have regular network coverage. Communication is a key ingredient in safety. All runners are briefed on who to call in an emergency and they all have the emergency contact phone numbers printed on the back of their race bibs and must carry a mobile phone (Reference #2).

I understand that the message from the local gyro-copter pilot was not immediately relayed to the Race Director and was diluted in importance in the process. If this is the case, what level of communication was in use during the Kimberley race? It is hard to understand how a message of approaching fire would not be given the highest priority.

Authorities and Emergency Services

During the organisation of my races I work closely with the Parks Victoria staff to ensure that the trail conditions are as safe as can be expected. I conduct a mandatory race briefing the night before the races and have a representative from Parks Victoria attend to outline any pertinent safety issues. I consult with the Parks duty officer during the race to ensure there are no problems. As the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) is responsible for fire-fighting in the Parks, I consult with them through Parks Victoria on any fire hazards, particularly at B2H that is held in peak fire season in January. In the event of a fire I would defer all authority on cessation and evacuation to the DSE incident controller.

My understanding from reports is that Race the Planet contacted the Department of Environment and Conservation three days before the race to check on the risk of crocodiles in the area. It is also my understanding that the organisers were then told they would need to check with FESA regarding the fires in the region. Was the fire authority, FESA, ever consulted on the fire risk posed by the ongoing grass fires? If not, why not?

Industry Standards

In the health industry there is a strong emphasis on best practice. When something goes wrong we are measured against what is considered to be the industry standard. In ultrarunning there is to some extent a similar practice amongst the conscientious race directors. If you compare the mandatory gear lists for most of the established and respected races they are all very similar. This is not by accident. As race directors we keep abreast of what other organisers are doing. We monitor incidents and learn from ours and others mistakes. We are continually measuring ourselves and our safety standards against others to ensure the highest standards are maintained.

At the time of the Kimberley incident I went to the RTP website to learn more about them. I read their mandatory gear list (which has since been removed) and was alarmed to find the following:

12) MEDICATION Anti-inflammatory medication and mild pain relief for head and foot aches such as Ibuprofen, Aspirin, Tylenol or Paracetamol. Bring enough so that you are not dependent on medication from the event medical team. Note that using other competitor's medication and consuming heavy quantities of painkillers can be extremely dangerous.

While this may not seem significant, the use of Non Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs) such as Ibuprofen and Aspirin has been proven to be dangerous for athletes during endurance events. This has been common knowledge for several years and there is even an international body that meets to specifically

deal with the issue of Exercise Associated Hyponatremia (EAH), which is exacerbated by the use of NSAIDs (Reference #3). RTP were still encouraging the use of NSAIDs twelve months after one of their competitors, Nicholas A. Kruse, died on 3 July 2010, in China from complications due to the heatstroke he suffered on Stage 4 of the Gobi March, a multi-day desert race. I have no evidence that Mr Kruse's death was related to kidney failure or the use of NSAIDs but I would have thought that his death would be enough for them to look at all their safety policies, including the issues surrounding kidney failure (which is associated with dehydration and heat stress) and hence reassess their mandatory gear requirements.

I subscribe to an email discussion group consisting of Race Directors and Medical Directors for ultramarathons from around the world. There was an active email discussion taking place around the time of the Kimberley race specifically regarding this issue. Information sharing of this nature means that organisers with an interest in safety can readily access the latest knowledge and put it into practice.

In respect of the use of NSAIDs the best practice (and I had received legal advice to do this at my races) is to warn runners of the dangers of taking NSAIDs during an ultramarathon in race-pack information and during the race briefing. Not only did RTP not warn runners of the dangers they were still actively promoting this dangerous practice by mandating that runners carry NSAIDs. To me this demonstrated a blatant lack of understanding of risk and risk-management on behalf of RTP.


Conclusion

Even with the limited information I have I can't help speculating that the Kimberley race should never have even started. Once underway there appears to have been further trigger points that should have led to abandonment of the race. It is highly possible that the level of media present and the sponsorship of the race swayed the organisers to disregard common sense and continue with the race despite the dangers. The cavalier attitude displayed exposed the poor planning and execution of risk mitigation procedures by Race The Planet.

Although I am reluctant to introduce more bureaucratic controls, I would love to see an Australian Standards minimum safety requirements established for all trail events. As an organiser, I already have to satisfy multiple stakeholders through permit processes and by demonstrating a thorough Risk Plan so I would welcome one overarching body that could unify this process and once satisfied could provide a permit that met the minimum standards for all local authorities. Unfortunately given the multiple levels of government and differing jurisdictions concerned I cannot foresee this ever becoming a practical reality.

It is important, however, that for the safety of runners, volunteers and organisers that there is accountability and that all events of this nature meet a minimum safety standard. The conduct of Race The Planet clearly demonstrates we cannot simply rely on organisers to do the right thing unless they are held accountable.

Yours,
Andrew Hewat

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Reference #1: copy of GOW100s Risk Plan

Reference #2: B2H race bib back

Reference #3: International Exercise-Associated Hyponatremia Consensus
Development Conferences No1 South Africa 2005 and No2 New Zealand 2007
(<http://www.masvida.com/new/UpLoadFiles/HIPOCONENSO.PDF>) and
(http://overhydration.org/downloads/EAH_Statement_2008.pdf)

THE COMMITTEE HAS RESOLVED NOT TO
PUBLISH THE ANNEXURE TO THIS
SUBMISSION