

Philmont Lessons Learned - Vince Hale, July 2002

Commitment - When signing up people make sure they understand the commitment of money and time. It's not just the fee for transportation and the trek, the cost of gear can easily exceed that. Crew members need to be dedicated to the trek by attending day hikes and especially backpacking trips and teaming activities. The backpacking trips and teaming activities should be mandatory for ALL participants (do not include outsiders in these activities). Make it known that if they do not participate in these mandatory activities they forfeit their place on the trek but must pay ALL the fees, unless someone else can be found to take their place. Yes, this means that they may miss out on some school or other organized activity. Try to work around schedules as best you can, but understand that the commitment to Philmont comes first.

Adults - There should be three adult leaders (over age 30). This reduces the burden of responsibility and gives you more eyes and ears to prevent problems.

Adults and the crew leader should meet after each activity to discuss problems and how things could be done better next time. On the trek, these should evolve into evening meetings to discuss the problems encountered today and how to solve them, the next day's activities, and any anticipated problems.

Be prepared - All adult leaders should learn everything they can about Philmont, the trek, equipment, and first aid. There are several web pages with tons of Philmont information. Read the comments by others who took the same or similar itinerary. Talk at length with people who have been there. Every crew member should read at a minimum the Philmont Guidebook to Adventure.

Conditioning - Treks typically have one or more hikes at least ten miles long at high altitude and on steep, rocky trails. Organize several day hikes of 5 to 20 miles. These should be done building up the distance and weight you carry until you are carrying MORE than 1/3 of your body weight. Be sure to include LOTS of climbing and hiking on rocky trails, up and down steep hills. If you can hike at higher elevations, by all means do it.

It is impossible for the crew to get conditioned together because of everyone's schedule. Conditioning is something that must be done at the VERY minimum four times a week. The boys probably won't have a problem if they are active in some kind of sport like soccer, basketball, rugby, or cross country.

Equipment and techniques - Becoming familiar with the equipment and techniques is probably best done on backpacking trips. Schedule two backpacking trips and make them mandatory. Practice the techniques set out in "The Philmont Way". Get to know the equipment (water filters, iodine, and white gas stoves) and how to use, maintain, and repair it. Eat the foods you are likely to have on the trek. Drink iodine treated or filtered water. Try to schedule the trips when it is cold and/or rainy. You are likely to encounter temperatures from the 30's to the 80's, rain and lightning almost every afternoon, and hail or sleet on occasion.

Teaming - This is probably the most important intangible to making the trek a success. Play teaming games to get the group working together (these can be done on the backpacking trips, too). Participate in Camporee as a team. Arrange for a COPE activity for the group. A test of the teaming might be done on a backpacking trip or day hike where one of the adults "gets" a sprained ankle. Watch to see how the crew solves the problem.

Do not allow any name calling or insulting remarks to be made to other team members. Establish the rules and identify consequences for those who break the rules (cleanup, other person's chore, ...). Use "Thorns and Roses" to identify problems and hopefully the group will come up with solutions. Discuss with the crew some emergency situations and how they might be handled.

Crew Leader - Identify the crew leader early (age 17-21). Work with them to make sure they understand their responsibilities and duties. Let them lead the day hikes and at least one backpacking trip.

Shakedown - At one meeting have everyone bring EVERYTHING they are going to take to Philmont. Make sure everyone has the important items. Check for extra or excessively heavy gear that individuals are carrying. Emphasize that if they are carrying extras (like food, tools, etc.) that they are hurting the whole crew because they won't be able to carry as much of the crew gear. An ounce in the morning feels like a pound at night. Weigh each person and pack with gear. To the pack and gear weight add 8 pounds for 4 quarts of water, 3 pounds for half a tent, and 5 pounds for crew gear and food. This should be LESS than 1/4 to 1/3 of their body weight. The larger more fit members of the crew MUST understand that they will be carrying more of the crew gear and food. The smallest members may not carry much if any crew gear or food. This isn't about everyone sharing the load equally (pulling their own weight); it's about the team succeeding as a whole. Will the crew succeed if the biggest carries all the load? NO! If everyone carries the same amount? Probably not. If everyone carries to the best of their ability – YES!