

# Making Good Programming Decisions in the Face of Media Hype

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# Overview

- Intended Audience: Entrepreneurially-minded operators of outdoor and environmental education programs
  - Faced with need to make decisions in complicated, contradictory world about matters well beyond their control.
- Apogee and Apogee's Problem
- Media & Hype
- Practical Exercise
- Decision-Making & Risk Management
- ***BLUF: Don't let media hype drive your programming decisions***

# Caveats

- Talking about the media generally is like talking about fish generally – there are indeed a lot of fish in the sea.



- One person's hype is another person's sacrosanct truth.
- No hard facts – or even conclusions – here.
- Can't remove my own filters.
  - ...And my jokes are terrible.
- Not addressing what to do when *you* are the subject of the hype.



# About Apogee -

- Small, for-profit LLC started in 2001
  - Reputation-driven
- Apogee runs 19 itineraries – largely non-technical trekking, bike-touring, and community service
- Growing every year, with about 600 students last summer on 53 different trips
- 2016 – introduced two new trips:
  - Scottish Highlands (to run with two other European itineraries)
  - Costa Rica (to run alongside Puerto Rico trip)
- Goal is safe programs

# Our 2016 Season Dilemma

- Apogee's biggest enrollment months are January, February, and March
- US headlines in November and December 2015 dominated by terrorism
  - Bataclan Massacre in Paris
  - San Bernardino Shooting
- Headlines in January and February (and most months since) dominated by Zika virus

# A Dilemma Because...

- More than 15% of our revenue generated in Europe
- 10% in the tropics
- Canceling these trips would be a significant hit to the bottom line
- Also – in late December, we went to print with more than 100,000 catalogs – each with pages dedicated to:
  - Costa Rica Language & Service
  - Caribbean Service Adventure
  - Europe Coast to Coast
  - Alps Explorer
  - Scottish Highlands Explorer
- In other words, with 17 itineraries last year, nearly 30% of our programs were potentially affected by our decisions with regard to Zika and terrorism.

# What to do??

- Run our European and tropical trips as though nothing was happening in the world?
- “Give in” to fear and cancel everything?



- By late January, we were getting anxious parent inquiries about zika and terrorism almost daily.
- It was:



- What is Media Hype?
- There's this:



***Focused, cumulative media attention resulting in perhaps unwarranted and outsize importance for a fact that may nonetheless be true in itself.***



# Not Just the Tabloids

- Media is business.
- Business is, increasingly, media.
- Through sponsorships and ownership businesses push products and agendas:
  - Washington Post owned by Jeff Bezos – founder of Amazon
  - Koch Brothers – owners of very successful business and promoters of conservative causes – now major sponsors of “Marketplace” on NPR
- “If a paper serves a liberal community, it is likely to lean left, and if it serves a conservative community, it is likely to lean right... *Instead, like other business owners, they maximize profit by giving customers what they want.*”
  - NYT – “Media Slant: A Question of Cause and Effect” - GREGORY MANKIOW, MAY 3, 2014 – quoting work of economists Mathew Gentzkow and Jesse Shapiro

# Media Is...

- Pushing agendas and looking for profits.
- A slobbering, click-hungry monster that feeds on our fears and lusts...



- The media can also be:

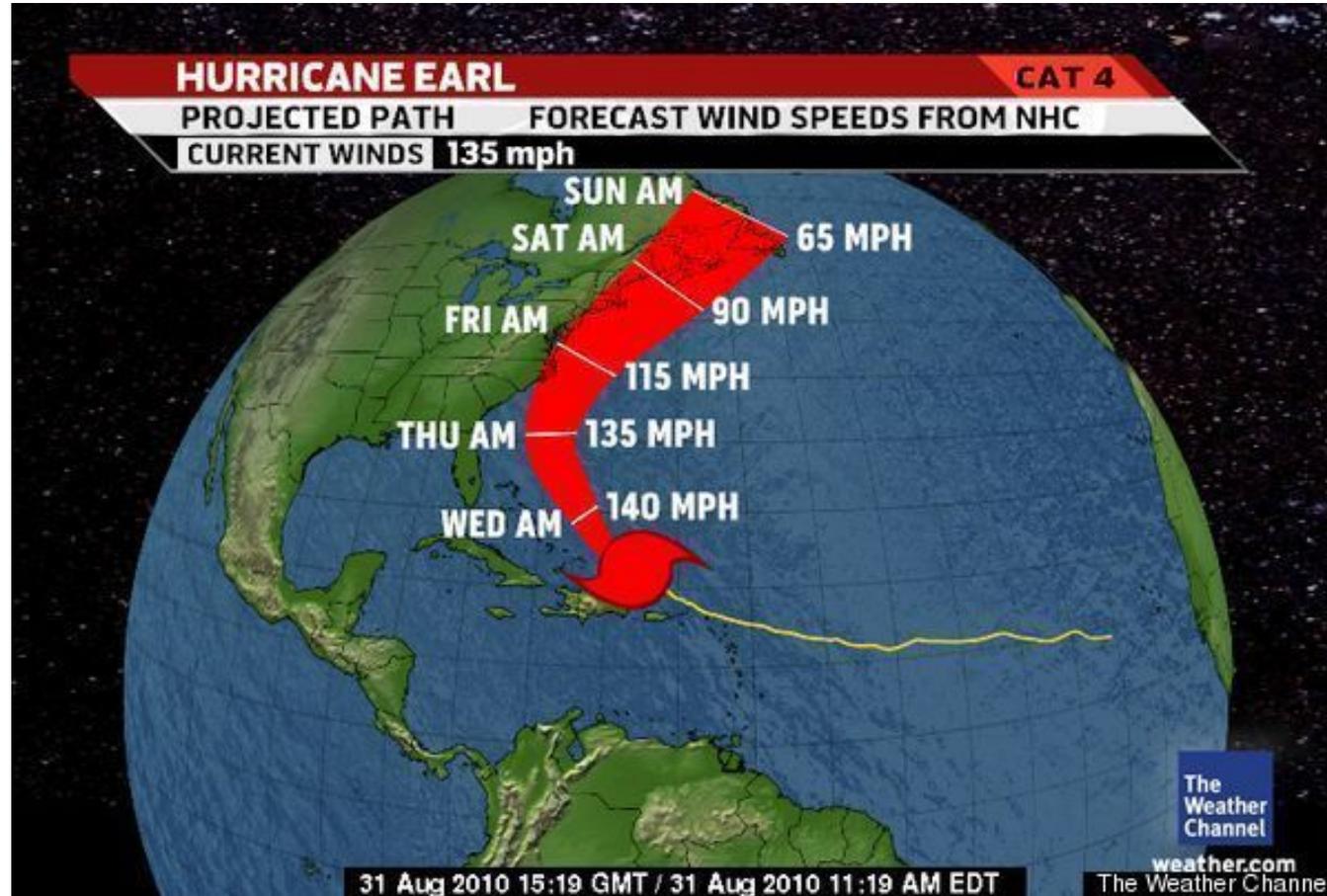


# Examples of Media Hype

- Celebrity – Outsize Importance to Relatively Minor Events (see, e.g., Brangelina)
- Politics – Shallow, relentless election coverage (see, e.g., Clinton emails and/or Trump's 1995 taxes)
- Sports – Shallow, relentless coverage of inanities (see, e.g., Deflategate)
  - **97** articles about Deflategate in NYT
- Weather Channel naming winter storms – and CNN, etc., playing along
- The tough case of zika virus

- Then there's the Daily Mail – Headline 10/5/16
- “Skull-shaped tropical storm Matthew kills 11 in the Caribbean and bears down on the South East as millions evacuate or batten down the hatches before devastating 'direct hit'”







# WRMC Hype-Ready Crises

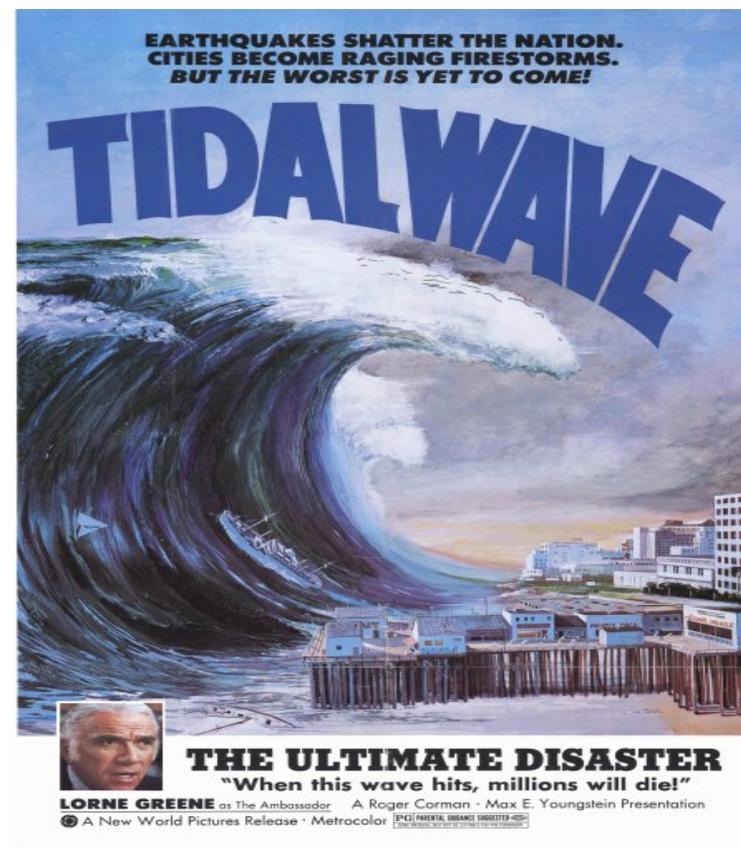
- Media Looking for Attention-Ready Incidents
  - Rafting Accidents with Loss of Life
  - Bear Maulings
  - Shark Attacks
  - Storms and Tornadoes
  - Wildfires, Avalanches, and Volcanoes – Populated Areas
  - Celebrity Involvement
  - Anything on Video
  - Bonus points for combos: see, e.g., this month's video from MT bear mauling made national news

- Unfortunately, however, sometimes the attention is merited and they're right on the money:
  - See, e.g., Hurricanes Katrina and Not-Hurricane Sandy (and – sort of – Hurricane Matthew)
- So what is one to do!?

# Zika Virus

- Serious health concern...
- ...& one tailor-made for media exploitation:
  - Travel and exotic locations
  - Fears of mosquito
  - Pregnancy anxieties
  - Tragic clickbait in microcephaly
  - Sex
- 2016 CDC Statistics (as of 4 Oct 16)
  - 26,000 cases between US and US Territories
    - 90% asymptomatic
    - Vast majority of symptomatic cases result in minor fever that dissipates within days
    - 23 Birth defect cases in US / US Territories
    - 39 Guillain-Barre Syndrome (1/10<sup>th</sup> of 1%)
    - By comparison, about a million cases of scabies in the US every year

- Zika has been around for years – known since the 70s.
- New York Times
  - One article (about hepatitis) mentions zika in 1972
  - Second article about zika in Micronesia in 2007
  - Two articles in late December 2015.
  - And then -



# New York Times – January 2016

- With the outbreak in Brazil and tropics, a tidal wave of coverage
- New York Times – January 2016
  - 25 Articles
  - Four separate articles on each of January 28 and 29
- “Vaccine for Zika Virus May Be Years Away, Disease Experts Warn” – NYT January 29, 2016

# NYT – February 2016

- Shortest month of the year:
  - 39 Separate Articles
  - “Zika Virus a Global Health Emergency, W.H.O. Says” – Feb 1, 2016
- NYT – March 2016 – No Slowing Down
  - March 1 – “Study Finds Strong Evidence of Link Between Zika and Temporary Paralysis”
- Through October 6, 561 NYT articles alone!

- Evidence of other companies making programming decisions:  
“Zica Car Will be Renamed, Tata Motors of India Says” – NYT, Feb 2, 2016



“Tata, based in Mumbai, said in a statement, ‘Empathizing with the hardships being caused by the recent ‘Zika’ virus outbreak across many countries, Tata Motors, as a **socially responsible company**, has decided to rebrand the car.’”

- Don't be confused – definitely not a marketing-driven decision!

# Compare to Chikungunya

- Chikungunya a problem in PR over last two years – little to no attention
  - High fever
  - Rash
  - Joint pain that can last for months or years
  - About 70% of people who contract CHIK are *symptomatic* – compared to about 90% who are *asymptomatic*
  - Anecdotal Vieques: “the whole island” had chikungunya, “no one” had Zika
- All the way back to November 2014 to find a substantive piece about chikungunya in NYT: “A Mosquito-Borne Virus Sweeps the Caribbean” – November 4, 2014
  - Nothing since

- Why the difference in coverage between the two diseases?
  - Chikungunya:
    - No microcephaly
    - No sex
    - No easy-to-pronounce name
  - Zika undoubtedly a problem – but does it merit 560 more articles than chikungunya?
  - You – media consumer – are much, much more likely to read about zika (and absorb ads on the way)

# Exercise

- Four Groups

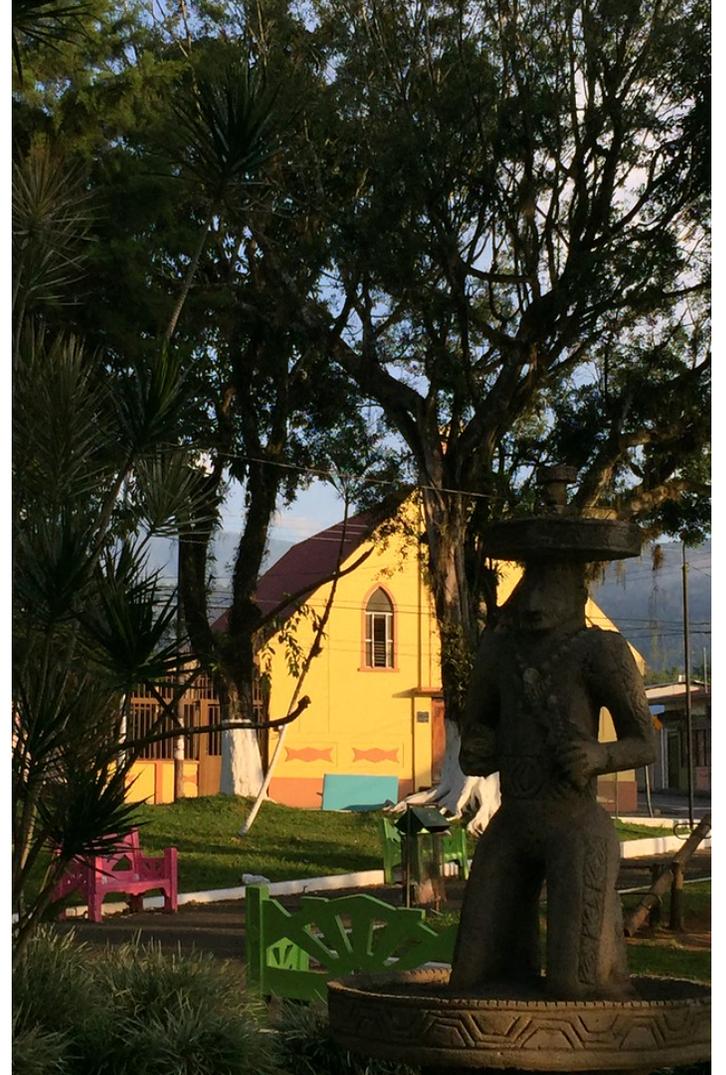
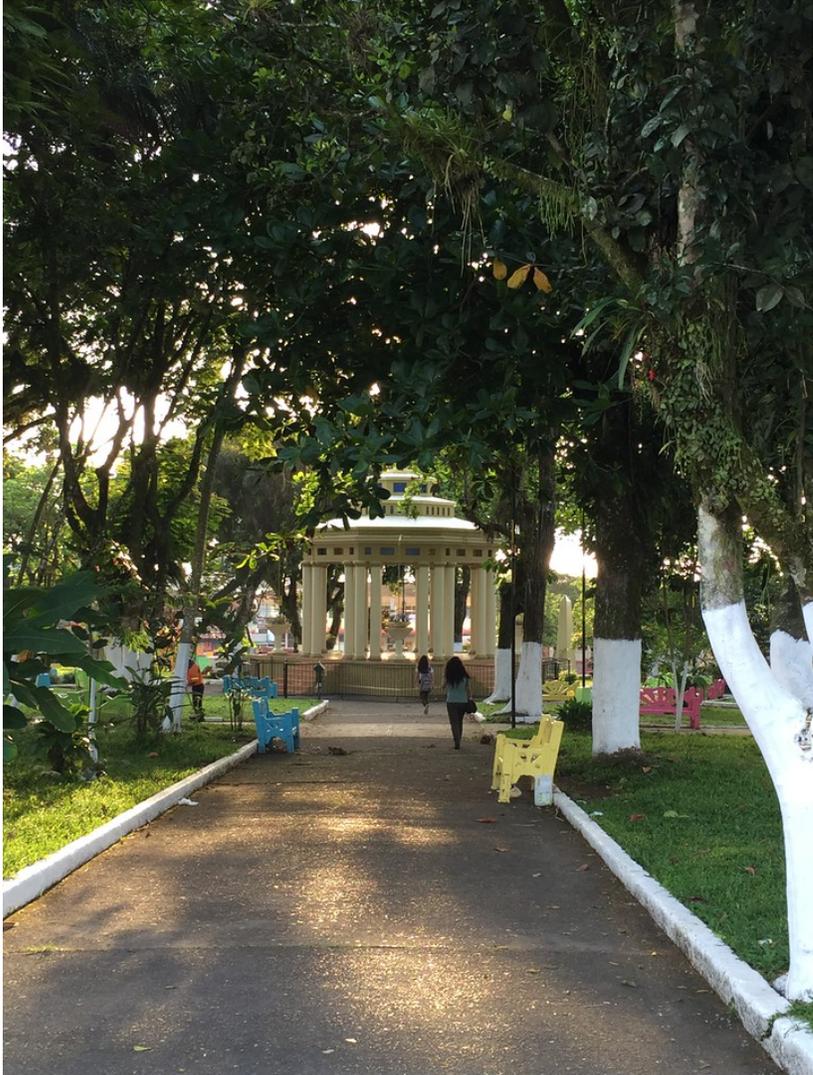
- Group A: The Forward-Thinker - Left-leaning, progressive magazine focused on environmental and social issues
  - Group B: WRMCNN - Centrist cable-news channel very similar to CNN – 24 hour news cycle
  - Group C: Outdoors Magazine – focused on outdoor lifestyle, strikingly similar to Outside Magazine
  - Group D: Salty Semesters – Administrators of small Salt Lake-based operator of international, experiential-education semester and gap-year programs for young people. Growing, for-profit – first year offering semester programs in Central America.
    - Specifically, you have your first language and environment program in Costa Rica outside of small town of Turrialba. Starts on September 10 with 5 staff members and 25 students.
- It is now September 1.

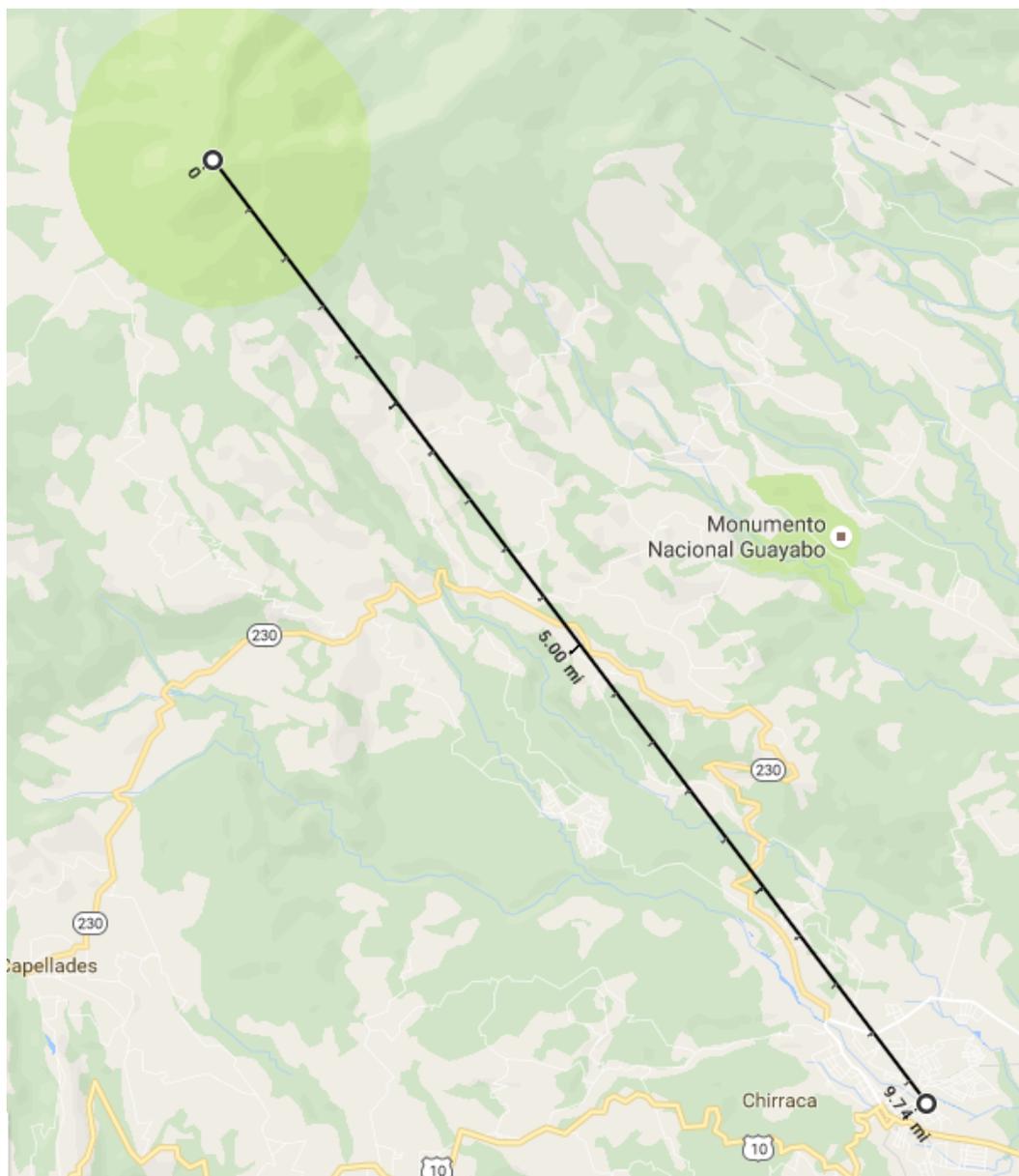


# Costa Rica and Turrialba

- Close to 5 million people in Costa Rica
- Close to 1 million people in metropolitan San Jose
- About 30,000 people in and around Turrialba
- Main industries are agriculture (bananas and coffee) and eco-tourism
- Notable for being one of the first countries in the world to rely entirely on renewable energy sources (principally hydro and geothermal)

# Lovely Turrialba





# Eruption!

*Adapted and fictionalized from Tico Times, September 13, 2016*

**September 1:** Eruptive activity at Turrialba Volcano resumed today with **two new explosions**, one of which reached nearly 4,000 meters (13,100 feet) in height, according to reports from the National University.

The first eruption of Turrialba, some 50 kilometers east of San José, occurred at 2:53 a.m. and lasted about 15 minutes.

The explosion launched ashes, gases and incandescent rocks into the air to about 1,000 meters (3,280 feet) above the volcano's crater.

The second explosion occurred at 11:32 a.m. and spewed material about 13,000 feet into the air, the agency said.

Reports were received of **ash falling in communities north and west of San José** and as far away as Alajuela province.

The second explosion lasted about 13 minutes. The explosion also launched a large amount of gas, ash and rocks into the air.

Ashfall over the runways at Juan Santamaría International Airport prompted an **indefinite closure** of the airport at 1:15 p.m on September 1.

Maroon 5 guitarist and family were with a volcano tour group that has **not been seen since** the eruption. No other injuries or missing persons have been reported, but volcanologists say conditions remain **highly unstable** and are very concerned about **additional eruptions**.

Normal wind pattern blows east to west. **Tropical storm conditions forecast within next week** that will bring heavy rain and north to south wind with gusts up to 50 km/hr.

# Be the Media!

- Within your organization's paradigm, write an article of about 100 words that reports the event.



# Our Decision

- Recall our dilemma – in light of concerns about terrorism and zika, what do we do about our planned European and tropical trips?
- In the end, we decided to run it all in Europe and in the tropics, with limited modifications to programming and upfront communication with our client families.

# How did we get to that decision?

- Simple Risk Assessment:
  - What is the likelihood of any given outcome?
  - What are the likely consequences of those outcomes?

# Our Case - Europe

- Outcome: Chances of involvement in terrorist incident?
  - Extremely low probability of involvement
  - Not different from catastrophic van accident (except chances of van accident are much higher)
- Consequences: High potential consequences if involved in a terrorist incident
- Assessment: Safe enough to proceed

# Our Case - Tropical Trips

- Outcome: Relatively *high* likelihood of undesired outcome - a zika infection
- Consequences:
  - Infection not likely to be severe for our population
  - Had to sort through a lot of information and differing reports before we arrived at that conclusion...
- Assessment: After consideration, we found risk to be about the same as other tropical diseases (chikungunya and dengue at the top of the list)

# Modifications

- Europe:
  - No going up Eiffel Tower and similar areas
  - No extended visits to public areas in large European cities
  - No hanging out in public spaces of airports for longer than necessary
  - Enrolled in STEP – monitored world events
  - Transparency - Clear, upfront communication with families ahead of time and during
- Tropics:
  - Itinerary modifications
  - Equipment list modifications
  - Increased training
  - Post-trip zika testing for staff
  - Continual monitoring of CDC (decision would likely have been different with a stronger travel warning)
  - Transparency - Clear, upfront communication with families ahead of time and during

# Mini-Exercise

- Taken from real life with a factual liberty or two:
- Six-day St. Croix River trip with no access to cell phones or media – group of two leaders and 10 Maine kids between 12 and 14.
- Sat phone – but policy is for outbound use only. HQ has no way to reach group other than calling rangers and asking for emergency contact
- Two days after trip starts, downstate media starts blanket coverage on TV, print, and radio reporting on manhunt for serial child abuser in the area, specifically mentioning St. Croix River.
- You're getting calls from parents – what do you do?

# Decision-Making and Risk Management Analysis

- Assess the situation – cut through loud buzz
  - Read the news, but rely on government sources rather than media accounts
  - On the ground information from local sources
  - Consult with industry colleagues and competitors
- Rationally assess the risk
- Consider potentially affected parties – legal and ethical concerns
  - Students
  - Staff
  - Negligence? Cover your sixes with good liability-release docs
- Communicate clearly – early and as often as necessary
- To what extent should financial considerations shape the debate about your action?

# Conclusion

- Control the narrative with your own forthright communication.
- Sift through the muck and arm yourself with information.
- You know your organization better than anyone.
- Move ahead with confidence.