



CRISIS CASE STUDY

MANAGING A LIGHTNING FATALITY AT NOLS

Please note: Some details in these slides have been modified or removed from the original deck due to the nature of the incident and to protect the privacy of those involved



KATIE BAUM METTENBRINK

NOLS RISK MANAGEMENT DIRECTOR
SHE/HER



SHANA TARTER

MANAGING DIRECTOR, DIPLOMA IN
CLIMATE MEDICINE, UNIV. OF COLORADO
SHE/HER



AGENDA

- Describe what happened
- Review the NOLS Crisis Protocol in relation to the incident
- Reflect on what we experienced and learned
- Questions



This is a difficult and emotional topic.

Take care of yourself as needed.

Please exercise discretion and respect in discussions after you leave.



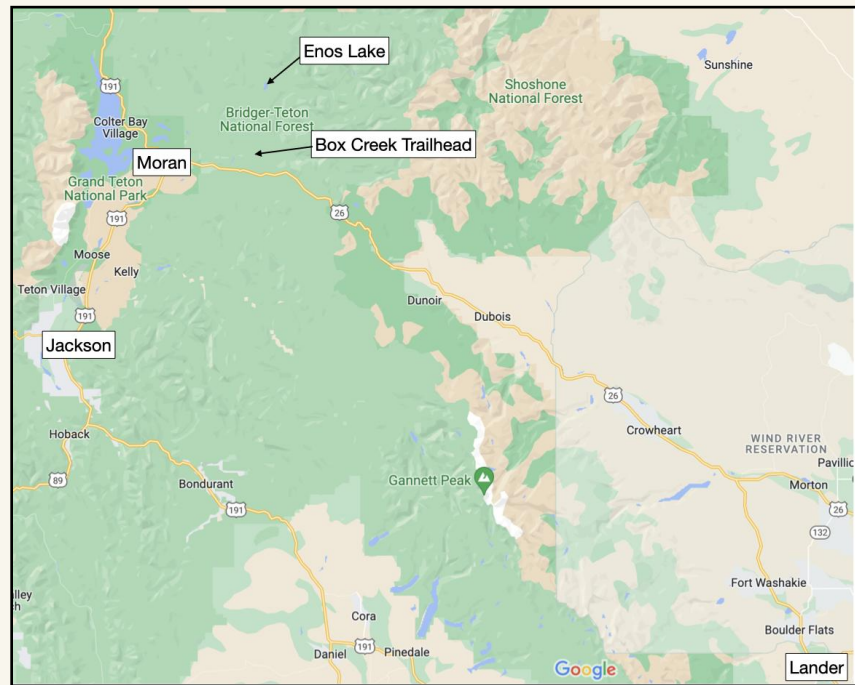
THE INCIDENT

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THE INCIDENT

BACKGROUND

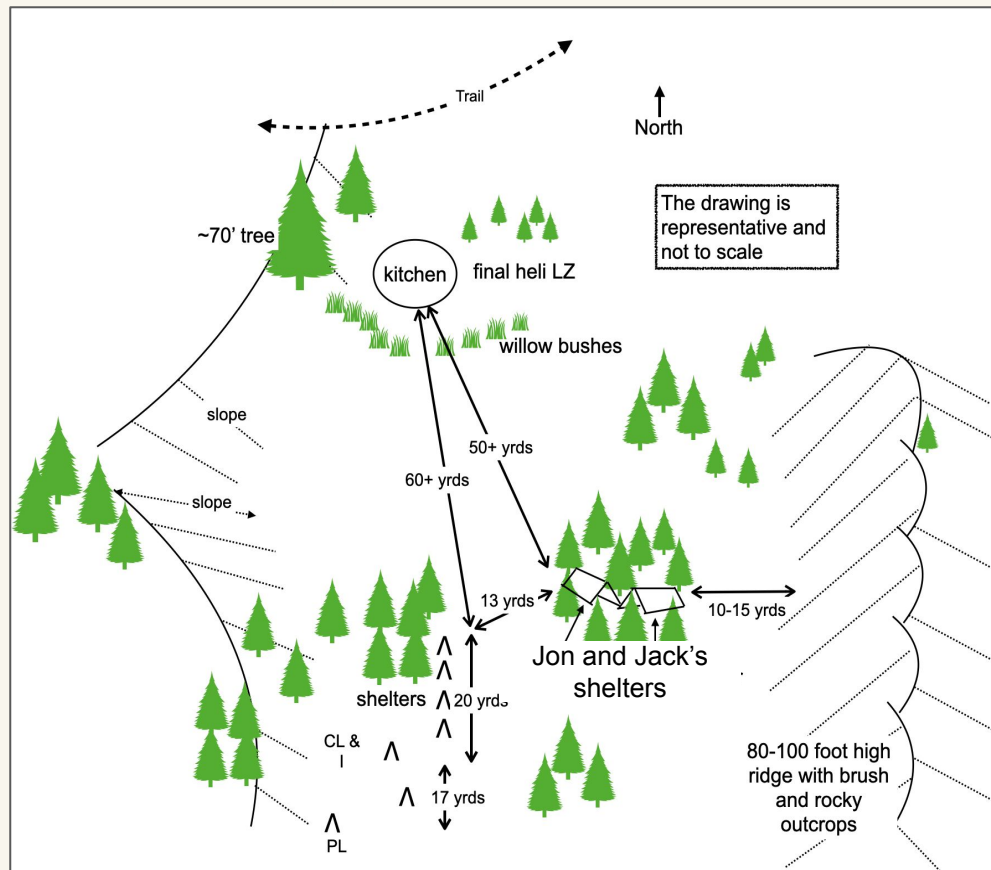
- Course started on July 21, 2022
- 30-day Outdoor Educator Course
- 10 days WFR course; 20 days backpacking
- Absaroka Mtns Wyoming.
- Incident occurred on 4th day of backpacking section.
- Fair weather



THE INCIDENT

Day 4 of Backpacking

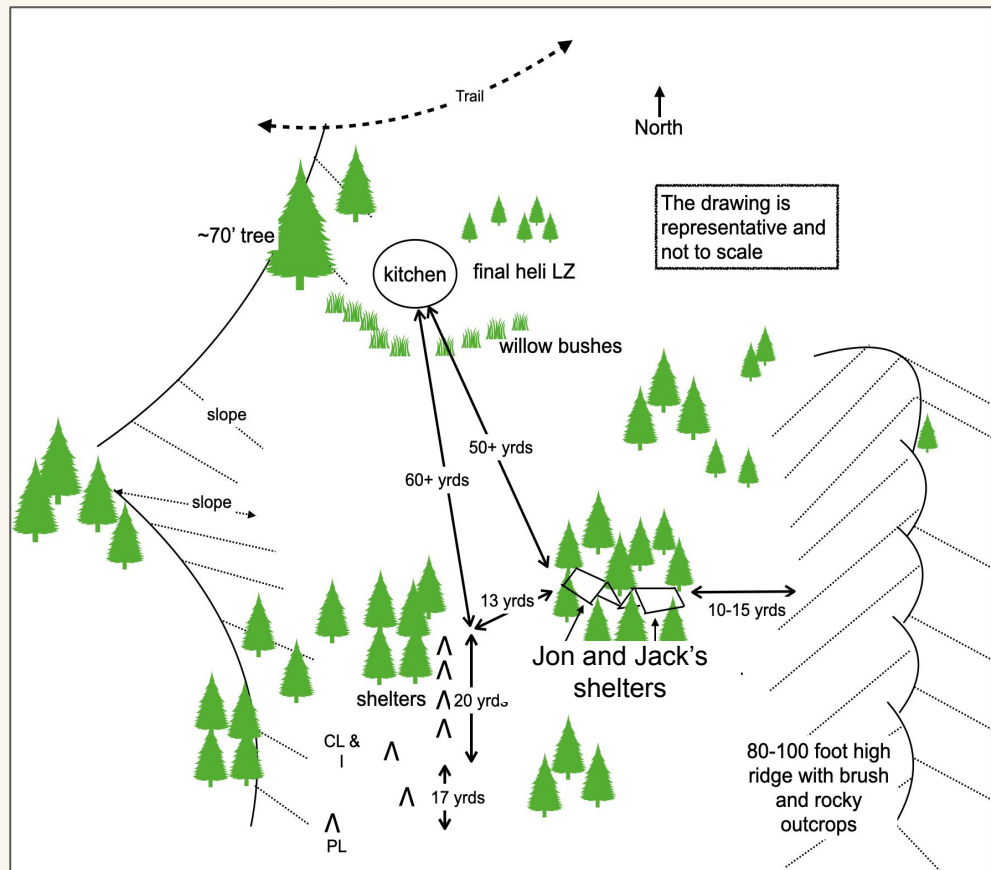
- Made camp midday
- Light rain then clear
- 4:30 pm dark clouds and rain
- Instructors discussed lightning practices
- 5:35 rain stopped



THE INCIDENT

Day 4, 5:48 - 5:55 pm

- Lightning seen in the distance then passed
- More lightning and thunder
- Instructors reviewed lightning position with students
- Storm arrived; ran to shelters



THE INCIDENT

Day 4, 5:55 - 6:00 pm

- **5:55 pm** everyone in lightning position in shelters, heavy rain
- 2 bolts of lightning and thunder
- **6:00 pm** 3rd flash and bang simultaneously
- Student A was thrown back, conscious but dazed
- Student B unresponsive
- Student A began CPR and yelling for help
- Another student heard yelling, ran to students A and B, got more people, started helping with CPR



THE INCIDENT

Day 4, 6:00 - 6:35 pm

In the Field	In Town
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These details removed (see title slide)



THE INCIDENT

Day 4, 6:35 pm - 8:52 pm

In the Field	In Town
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CRISIS LEADERSHIP

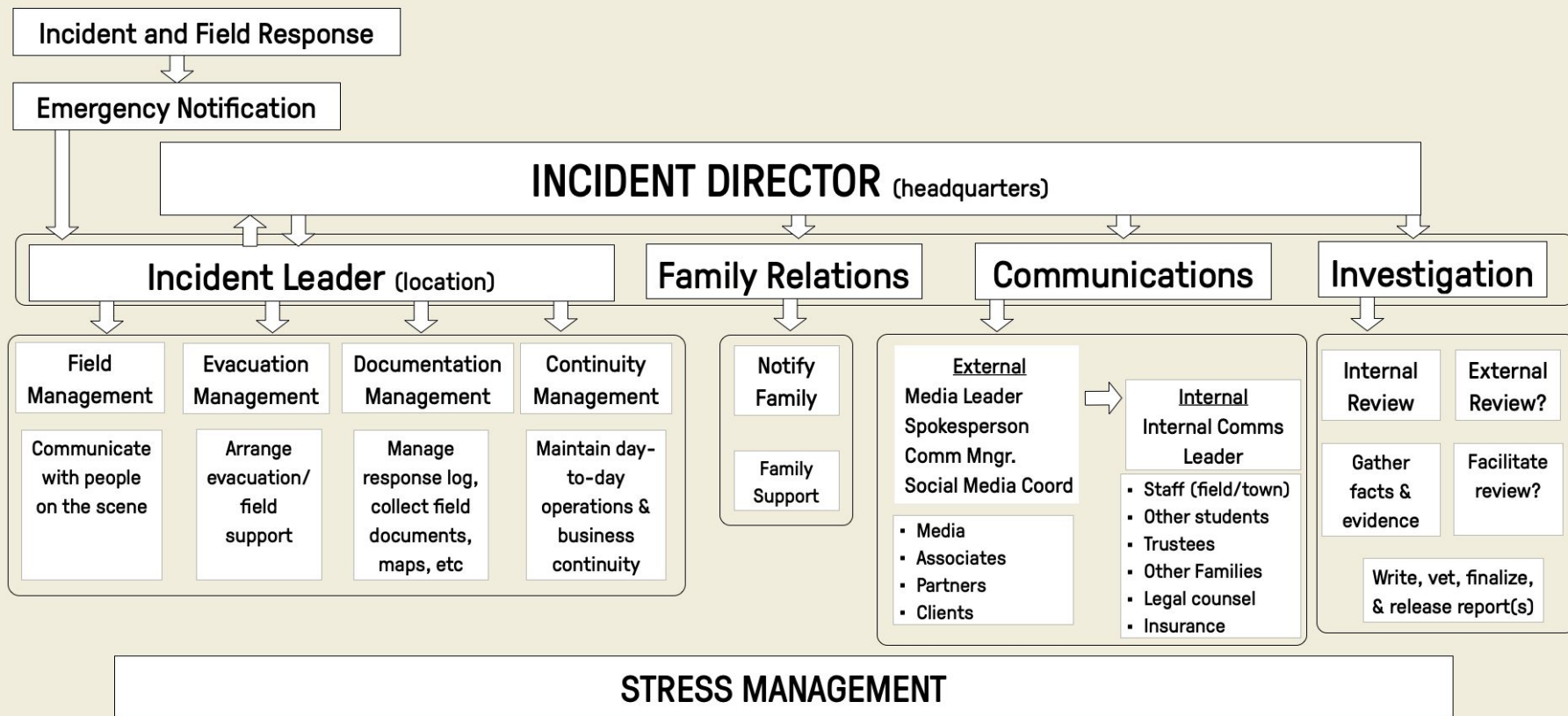
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CRISIS LEADERSHIP

- Established leadership and assigned critical roles within the first hour
- Hybrid meetings - team gathered in person and via Zoom
- Ultimately, 25 people involved for about two weeks
 - A few people for much longer, including some with ongoing responsibilities



CRISIS LEADERSHIP



ROLE OF LEGAL COUNSEL

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ROLE OF LEGAL COUNSEL

- Support the crisis team
- Listen, coach, review
- Provide guidance on
 - Collecting witness statements
 - Preserving evidence
 - Documenting the scene
- Potentially interface with the insurance carrier's legal counsel
- Remind the team to do the right thing and lead with compassion



SUPPORT OF THE GROUP

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SUPPORT OF THE GROUP

- Field fatality protocol and psychological first aid
- Age and group dynamics
- Return schedule and debrief
 - Shower, sleep, connect with loved ones
 - Stress debrief
 - CPR and med protocol convo
 - Factual interviews
 - Departure



SUPPORT OF THE GROUP

- Funeral and other financial decisions
- 3-3-3 Traumatic Exposure Protocol (Responder Alliance)



3-3-3 EXPOSURE PROTOCOL

3 DAYS
POST INCIDENT

3 WEEKS
POST INCIDENT

3 MONTHS
POST INCIDENT

FAMILY NOTIFICATION AND RELATIONS

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FAMILY NOTIFICATION AND RELATIONS

- NOLS President notifies the family
- Plan the message
- Be timely and have some facts and information
- Offer support



FAMILY NOTIFICATION AND RELATIONS

- Notified the family two hours after student was struck
- Informed family he was deceased 52 min after the first call and shared details about where he was being taken
- Had another director “sit in” on the calls
- Offered other support



FAMILY NOTIFICATION AND RELATIONS

- Two directors met parents in *[a town near the incident]*
- Provided a factual summary of the incident
- Spent most of the day and evening with parents
- Assisted them in making arrangements
- Sent students, instructors, staff, and trustees to memorial service
- Have remained in contact with parents

COMMUNICATION

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COMMUNICATION

- Roles: Communications lead, spokesperson, internal comms, media consultant
- Began crafting a summary of known facts and key messages within the first hour
- Identified audiences, needs, and sequence of messaging by midnight
- Messaging reviewed by Incident Director, Legal Counsel, media consultant
- Worked with a media consultant to refine our press release
- Deceased student's name was initially released by *[agency name removed]*



COMMUNICATION HIGHLIGHTS

By midday on August 3rd we had notified:

- NOLS Board and Advisory Council
- Employees
- Families of students and instructors on this course

We also focused on

- Plans to notify other courses and business partners
- Customer service staff message point training and content
- Scheduling an all staff meeting for August 4 and again on August 10



PRESS RELEASE

**Dear NOLS Community,
we are deeply saddened
by the recent
death of a student.**

**We are currently working
to support the
individuals involved.**

**You can find updates in the
adjacent press release.**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

22-year-old Student Dies After Lightning Strike

Lander, Wyo. — Wednesday, August 3, 2022 —
In the early evening of August 2, 2022, a 22-year-old student on a NOLS Outdoor Educator Course was struck by lightning while in camp in the Absaroka Mountains, Wyoming.

[VIEW NEWS RELEASE](#)

[FAMILY STATEMENT](#)



FAMILY STATEMENT

We are rocked by grief at having lost our dear [name removed from public version of slides]. [Name] loved the outdoors and found peace in the physical exertion it takes to climb to a remote place like [location removed], so far from the city home he grew up in. We know in his last moments he was with others who shared his passion for the wilderness and helping others. And he was doing what he loved best — being outdoors, in awe of the beauty of nature.

We thank you for respecting our privacy at this unimaginable time.

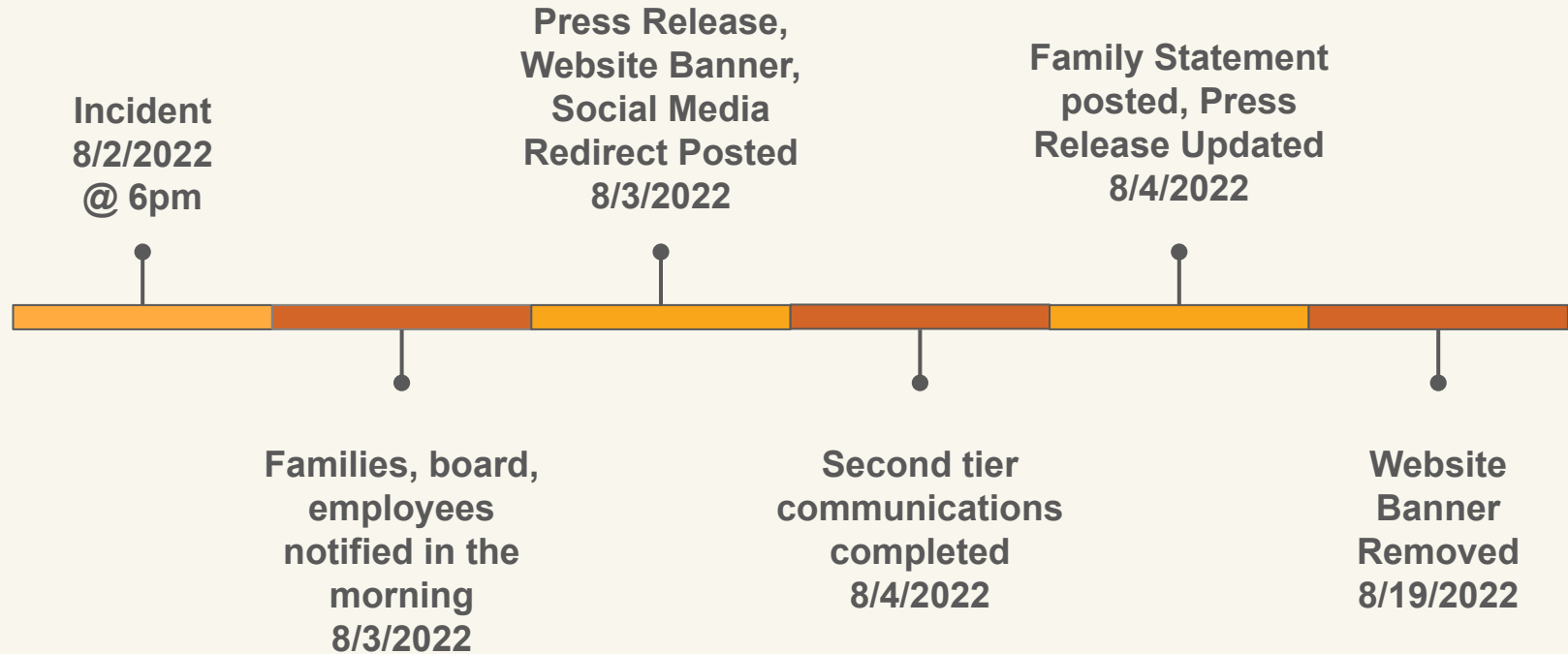


COMMUNICATION - MEDIA

- Redirected all inquiries to the press release
- Shut down all outbound marketing initiatives
- Tracked media articles - 67 known articles in 10 days post-incident
- Designated spokesperson ultimately did 3 interviews in 5 days



TIMING of PUBLIC INFORMATION



INCIDENT REVIEW

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INCIDENT REVIEW

Three phases of NOLS internal review

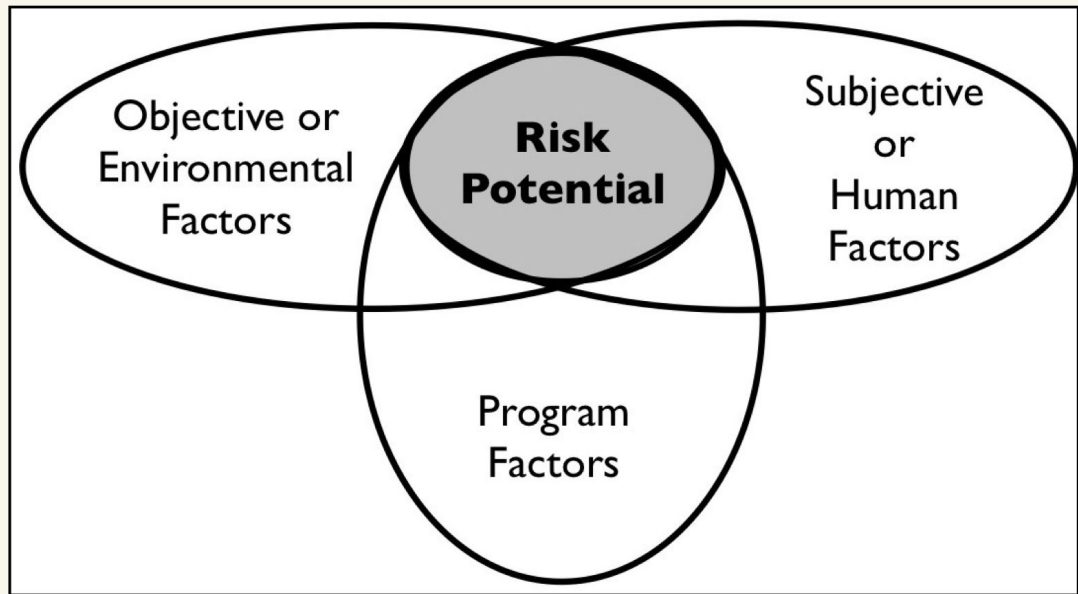
1. Gather facts
2. Analyze the incident
3. Write a report



INCIDENT REVIEW

Internal Review Report

1. Factual account
2. Analysis
3. Conclusion
4. Recommendations



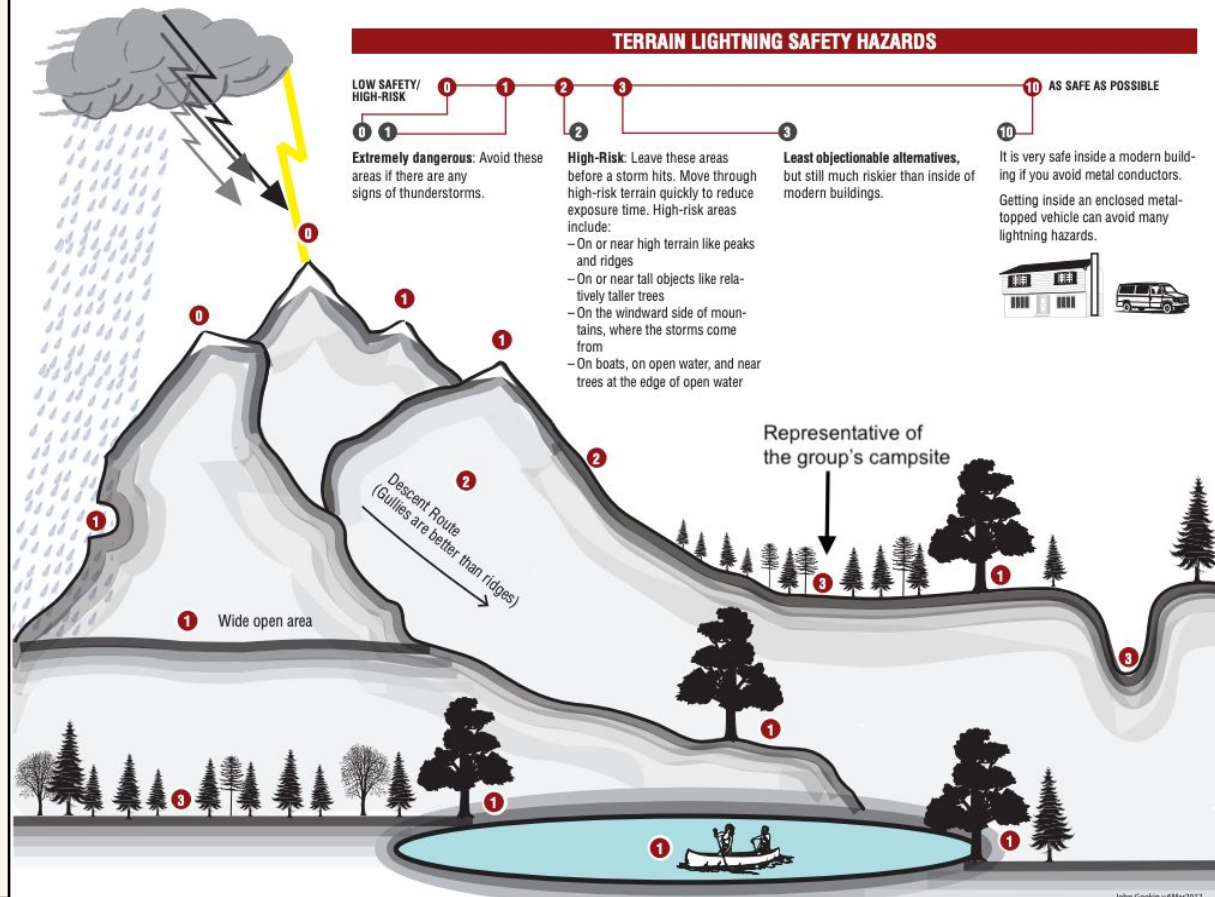


REVIEW CONCLUSION

- This unfortunate incident was an act of nature; lightning practices were followed; and no place outdoors is “safe” when lightning is present.
- The instructors functioned well as a team, were situationally aware of the changing weather and the threat of lightning, and took appropriate action.
- The students who came to *[student’s]* aid were brave and if he was going to survive it would have been because of their quick and selfless actions to provide CPR.
- *[Name removed]* was a high performing student and his love of the wilderness shone brightly.

BACKCOUNTRY LIGHTNING RISK MANAGEMENT

No place outdoors is safe from lightning. Lightning is an objective hazard. Your behavior can reduce the risk of that hazard harming you.





REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Review lightning curriculum and practices for consistency
2. Consider providing expectations regarding when lightning practices are taught on courses
3. Summarize key aspects of lightning practice info in written materials for instructors
4. Address decision making for stopping CPR in the field
5. Increase administrative capacity and skills in psychological support

ACTION STEPS

1. Identify roles for your crisis team in advance.
2. Arrange for professional services (i.e. attorney, media consultant) in advance so they can be contacted on short notice.
3. Understand legal issues and what needs to happen in the immediate hours and days after a serious incident.
4. PRACTICE with your crisis plan regularly and keep it up-to-date, especially as staff turn over.



THANKS



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INCIDENT REVIEW REFERENCES

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2. Gookin, J. et.al., Backcountry Lightning Risk Management (brochure with NOAA, National Weather Service, and NOLS) (2013)
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