Helmet Policy on Tree Top Activities

Go Ape has consulted widely whilst risk assessing the benefits or disadvantages of Go Ape participants wearing helmets. Extensive advice was taken from The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), the Health and Safety Executive (Specialist Group Principal Specialist Inspector for Working at Heights and Construction), from Environmental Health (South Lakeland District Council who acted as Go Ape's 'lead' authority), from the Forestry England's Health and Safety advisors and from other internal and external advisors. They have each taken the view and advised us that the disadvantages of participants wearing safety helmets outweigh the minimal benefits.

The pros and cons of wearing helmets are well documented. The disadvantages of wearing helmets on a ropes course include: risk of entrapment; risk of strangulation; impaired peripheral vision; discomfort causing distraction; 'one size fits all' helmets may result in poor fitting offering poor protection; hygiene issues; creating an unfounded sense of invulnerability. The advantages of wearing helmets are protection to the head when striking a hard surface; protection to the head when struck by a falling object.

The review has considered the nature of the activities operated, historical incident trends, foreseeable risks, and the effectiveness of existing control measures, alongside over 25 years of operational experience and millions of customer visits. On this evidence, we have concluded that wearing a helmet would introduce a greater risk of injury, and potentially more severe injuries than not wearing one.

RoSPA Reports – RoSPA's Chief Inspector of Adventure Play reported that "Head injuries do not seem to be a serious risk on this course, and I see no reason to insist on helmets." (1). A subsequent RoSPA report supported this assessment stating "Use of safety helmets is generally required where there is a risk of objects falling from above. In the instance of this course, it is unlikely that helmets will give any significant protection to the head in the event of a fall to the ground. The use of helmets may lull users of the facility into a false sense of security" (2).

Environmental Health Officer's Health and Safety Report – "I feel it is appropriate to indicate the following general findings and opinions:

- Compliance with general duties under the Health and Safety at Work Act is very well demonstrated by your company.

- The system of management of safety is appropriate to the level of risk and is in line with requirements under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

- Authoritative guidance has been well researched and applied in practice, with improvements beyond this guidance being made by your Company.

- Your approach is in line with Health and Safety Commissions Adventure Activities Industry Advisory Committee "Statement of Risk Perception in Adventure and Outdoor Activities".

Of a more specific nature, I can confirm that all parties agree with the RoSPA view on the use of safety helmets by participants; the disadvantages outweigh the minimal benefits." (3)

Further consultation has taken place with our Primary Authority Cheshire West and Chester council who have issued assured advice and concur with the findings of this policy.

Go Ape's risk assessment concludes that the increased risks (in particular those of entrapment and strangulation) resulting from wearing a helmet outweigh the benefit of a reduced risk of injury to the head. Consequently, helmets are not worn on the Ropes Courses, (except by instructors in training and rescue situations).