



Impact of Rescue Technology on Society
Survey and comments from May 7-8, 2014

When it was announced on May 7, 2014 that SPOT Satellite Devices had been used to initiate 3,000 rescues in the past seven years, and that lifesaving rescues around the globe was now a daily occurrence for the SPOT products, we became curious about the impact of rescue technology on society.

While the value of rescue technology is indisputable, we hosted a survey to ask two questions about its impact. Here was the result:

Do you think Rescue Technology has led to people taking more risks?

Yes - 48%
No - 52%

Do you think Rescue Technology has led to people becoming less self-reliant?

Yes - 63%
No - 37%

Here are comments from participants in the survey...

I would be concerned that this type of equipment becomes a governmental requirement. I am all for safety, but I do not want to be told what I need to keep myself safe. Nor do I like the idea of another way to track me.

SPOT promotional pieces touting the SAR value of their equipment is misleading and potentially dangerous. Repeatability of signal transmission is a key metric to any emergency transmitter and these SEND (Satellite Emergency Notification Devices) devices have never measured up to the stiff requirements of EPIRBs and PLBs.

It is a great mistake to consider a SEND device (SPOT, InSearch, etc) as an emergency transmitter.

They are wonderful tracking devices, but the technology used is not comparable to a PLB for individuals - or an EPIRB for vessels.

One of the very first SPOT users for offshore big boat racing, SoCal based (2006-2011). YellowBrick reqs. by OA's make SPOT redundant for the big distance races (not to mention illegal within some SIs). SPOT still fine for shorter coastal venues.

Great adjunct technology, but self reliance is primary in a adventurous situation.

I think the most common use is for friends, etc to track adventure and travel locations. I agree the spot device will act like an EPIRB if you require assistance, but is that the main reason to purchase one? I don't think so.

It is just giving the risk takers more visibility. If it substantially lowers the cost of rescue, perhaps it becomes so affordable that we might charge for them....

This trend is not new or unique to SPOT or dedicated rescue technology. GPS and cellular phones have already given people the confidence to take these risks. If not for idiot proof navigation who would venture away from their home ports? If not for help being a phone call away who would head into semi remote areas without the proper gear?

Ask the US Coast Guard what they think about SPOT devices. Or your local mountain rescue service.

I think to be fair we have to divide people into two groups (minimum).

Group #1. Those who have been sailors on large bodies of water and have always been self reliant - those 45 plus who developed the skills pre GPS etc. The same is true for back country ski / hike /climb people. That group were always self reliant and the new technology has made life better not less risky.

Group #2. Are not group #1 and through many factors, technology included, have less developed skill in self reliance.

And group #3 of my list of two is true pro/semi pro adventure people who are ready for anything all the time... It's group #2 that are a concern.

Technology saving lives...regardless of circumstances. See nothing wrong in that. Let's be grateful.

I think the benefits of this technology outweigh the down sides. I took a SPOT on a canoe trip of several weeks in remote northern Canada and in Alaska. Attacks by animals are a remote possibility, but a real one. It doesn't replace a gun as a means of self-protection, but it sure increases the likelihood of survival after the initial incident. It also makes any rescue effort much more targeted and efficient.

Far too easy to Push a button and wait for help, spot, cell phone, etc. rather than make sure you can get out, down, back, through your own efforts.

I have a Spot which is used primarily for its tracking capability when doing ocean passages in the South Pacific most often when returning to New Zealand from participating in an ocean race. Most races now require we carry a Yellowbrick tracker for the purposes of promoting the race itself but more often than not these have to be returned at the race finish. The Spot device enables friends and families to see our progress as we return home in the same way they have become used to while we are racing. As a back-up emergency locator beacon it's also nice to have on board but the primary emergency device will remain the two 406mhz EPIRB's carried on board.

In the main I would agree with the editor (Craig Leweck) expressing concern on the increasing reliance on technology to get you out of a spot but there are many factors involved. One is that as the world gets smaller and so many of what used to be very challenging adventures are now

almost routine, folks tend to aim for an ever more challenging option. The more challenging, the more chances for disaster. The SPOT technology is, perhaps [and this needs to be confirmed] a more popular option for terrestrial rather than aquatic adventures -- it does provide a satellite based system which would operate where there is no land line or cell phone service.

Several years ago when I was investigating the system there were three levels of services -- basically the mayday situation, the pan pan situation and a third which is very roughly analogous to the securite situation. These different service steps vary in urgency which is an option that I do not believe is available on a GPIRB or any of the marine radios. Honestly, I am very out of touch with the most recent maritime electronics so I am hazy about safety options available but that is how it used to be. The ability to operate the Find Me Spot device at any one of those three levels provided a very appealing degree of back up confidence, and the cost of the device as well as the cost of monthly service. The world coverage can only have improved in the past four years and it already was really good and very comprehensive.

Alas, I think that many sailors now have no knowledge of, and perhaps no appreciation for, many of the basic seamanship skills that so many were honed on (even day sailing racers) many years ago. Lacking the skills and or knowledge of how to get themselves and their boats out of sticky situations with a degree of confidence, or even the knowledge that only they can affect their own rescue (for whatever reason) isn't, perhaps, the norm these days (the scared sailor is the best bailer scenario) and fewer people are able or willing to try every trick in the book to get themselves out of a really tense mess.

It would seem that more and more people are selling up and sailing out to see the world and, as they have insurance for their very large investment, are more willing to push the button for rescue when bad things happen.

The advent of this type of rescue technology has caused people to be less prepared and less self reliant. With proper preparation for any type of adventure hiking, sailing, etc. one becomes too reliant on dialing 911 and they get rescued, or at least expect to get rescued. This creates a poor mindset and poor planning procedures. These devices should be used as a truly last resort not as a first response.

Rescue technology makes people think they are safer, where as they are not any safer with it than without, and having it doesn't give them a BEAM ME UP SCOTTY exit from problems. Whether this means that they do not prepare as well for the possible dangers on their journey is, I think not; most of the good experienced sailors still do their preparation, most of the others don't and I think this would happen irrespective of the technology.

That which has made people less self reliant, is that, when faced with a problem for which they didn't prepare, or which needs external rescue, they simply activate the rescue technology and await rescue.

I think that SPOT technology for sailors is a convenience, but since there are other functional options already available (EPIRB, AIS, etc.), even though SPOT is less expensive, it doesn't create an environment where sailors are emboldened to be any more foolish than they were before SPOT was put on the market.

Crosswalks get people walking across the street w/o looking both ways. So many technologies/rules/devices created to provide more safety simply lull people into a delusional sense of security. Paranoia is profitable - burglar alarms, SPOT, cell phones, guns are all now required devices for a paranoid nation. It's all good business to keep people afraid of the dark. Don't forget to check the battery on your smoke detector before you go to bed tonight - you could be liable in court for the consequences.

Those risks are often worth taking. For example, my parents in law are lifelong wilderness trekkers. They are able to continue at age 86, because they have a rescue tracker, when they would probably have stopped without it.

The folks using these devices already have a heightened sense of reality. They have invested the time and money to learn professional grade equipment to keep themselves safe. I use the Delorme inReach off shore (post TransPac Honolulu to San Francisco), hiking in the Sierra Nevada Mts and while traveling by car between the Bay Area and Salt Lake. As a TV News Reporter, I have covered countless stories where folks have died because their cell phone failed at critical moments. Trapped surfers, overturned cars, lost four wheelers...You name it. Taking more risk? I think not. Just more lives saved.

I have very quickly adapted to heavy reliance on turn by turn auto nav. When racing the sailboat at night, I still instinctively maintain awareness of lighted nav aids and geographic features but we really just sail the course, fleet, wx and grb info care of the internet.

I suppose a few young mariners may still develop the skills to dead reckon through passages and islands. But for most of us, our situational awareness without the telemetry tools will be insufficient to meet the proficiency that the previous generations considered safe. Don't still find it odd to be sailing an inshore race with several crew tapping away, checking sail track or their messages while off watch?.

I own a SPOT and activate when out cross country skiing on my own or on a road trip, out in my canoe. I treat it strictly as back-up. My attention to safety has not changed. I am a risk adverse type person, 69 y/o who does most of my outdoor activities solo. Friends and family use it to see where I'm at as I put Tracker on most of the time. I'm in my third year with it.

As a SPOT user, I find it gives me a back-up reassurance. It has not changed my behavior. By the way, I am on my second 4 month cruise of BC and SE Alaska in three years. I would have done the same without SPOT. But I very much like having it as do my children and in-laws.

It seems to me that those who say "It won't have ANY effect on ME" are giving voice to their aspirations, rather than making a reliable prediction.

However, as much we want to retain our self-reliance despite effectively being supervised, it seems to me that would require more commitment, not to mention active (and seemingly pointless) effort and engagement -- than would be needed, say, to retain the ability to handwrite fast and neatly in the computer age.

People can have the strongest convictions about not abandoning under any circumstances short of imminent sinking, but the ready availability of a deus ex machina is a test of character I defy almost anyone to pass.

A deus ex machina appearing from the direction of heaven, talking to you in a calm adult voice, with the implicit promise of hot showers and a proper bed within hours, is hardly a fair contest for danger, discomfort, and fear of death.

I traverse the southern Caribbean at least twice a year. We have a SPOT device on board and I've found I have become slightly less safety conscious. I do however think the device is a brilliant technology and will not give it up.

A recent MOB during racing in St Lucia on a colleague's yacht has us all now rethinking wearing PFDs and navigating properly again during island crossings.

What matters aren't the extremes but the norm. A few people will take more risk, some will become less self-reliant but the vast majority I suspect will do exactly the same as they always have but with a slightly reduced risk of catastrophic failure. Most won't imagine they are taking big risks when they really get into trouble, it's usually compound factors eg engine failure AND worsening weather picture. Most boats think in smaller terms of risk, cost/ inconvenience etc. beacons, EPIRBs, radios etc won't help mitigate those risks so people will still be careful. The UK has an amazing SAR network as well as huge coverage by volunteer, all weather lifeboats (Google RNLi), they don't lead to more people heading offshore in a storm - any sailor knows that their ability to help isn't 100% and most would rather not put others at risk or be embarrassed by being rescued.

The general trend toward risk aversion is a product of the toxic combination of failure to understand what statistics mean and a shift toward the 'precautionary principle'. The result is at least three generations that neither understands the relationship between risk and enjoyment nor the key relationship between the likelihood of encountering harm and the degree of harm.

Case in point: tourists cancelling their trips to the Leeward Islands this winter because of a 1:100,000 chance of contracting a non-fatal illness that is approximately as debilitating as a bad flu. Instead they stayed home in New England where their chance of dying in a car accident are only about an order of magnitude less.

Rescue technology reduces the understanding of risk just as pedestrian crossings do. They remove another key part of understanding the risk/enjoyment calculation that we must all make by seeming to make inherently risky activities seem 'safe' because of the increase in control. Sadly this is likely to make it seem more safe for people lacking the requisite skills to undertake activities for which they are not qualified nor sufficiently experienced.

This is a huge problem with motorcyclists who think that because they have a spot they are ready to ride in the Yukon.