

Chapter 12

Mountain Leadership

Is a leader born or made? Experience shows that most people can become competent leaders, provided they acquire the necessary skills, experience and knowledge. But not everybody can do everything, and not every leader might be capable of leading the same standard of outing: a good leader therefore knows his own limitations even as he tries to overcome them and develop his leadership qualities further.

Since no manual or set of rules can turn a person into a leader, this chapter merely aims to make you aware of some of the responsibilities and problems attached to leadership. A theoretical background is of little worth, however, unless it is supported by experience, common sense, and a willingness to abandon the rule book when it is inappropriate to the situation.

Leadership — an acquired skill?

Becoming a leader

Leadership is a learning process, not a product which is bought or acquired easily. The key element in this process is adequate personal experience, which is all that will enable you to assess a given situation accurately and to decide on the correct course of action. The learning process which leaders and potential leaders undergo can be divided roughly into four stages, each representing a higher level of competence than the one preceding it:

The 'unconscious incompetence' stage

The 'unconsciously incompetent' potential leader is unaware (or does not care) that he lacks the skills necessary to be a leader. He is quite happy to go on outings as member of a group and to take part in all the activities of the group, without wishing to assume any leadership role.

The 'conscious incompetence' stage

When a potential leader wants to begin to lead outings himself, he usually realises that he lacks the requisite skills and confidence. For this reason he decides to embark consciously on the process of acquiring these skills and, should he be successful, will be well on his way to becoming a competent leader.

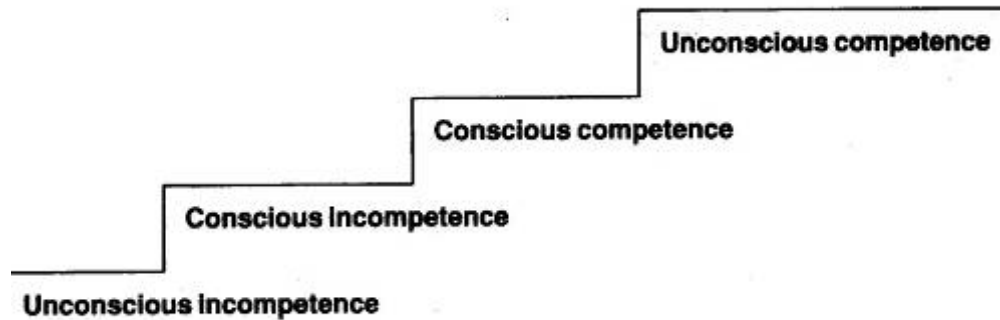
The 'conscious competence' stage

Equipped with basic leadership skills, the aspiring leader starts to lead low-risk trips. However, he often still has to think consciously about the application of leadership skills, possibly referring to notes or acting under the guidance of a more experienced mentor. It takes a number of years before he reaches the next stage, namely the unconscious competence stage.

The 'unconscious competence' stage

By this stage, the experienced leader is able to perform most of his leadership tasks effectively without having to think consciously about them. He has developed 'mountain sense' which allows him to cope automatically with most problems and challenges.

During the learning process, therefore, basic leadership skills form the foundation on which more advanced skills are continuously being built, until these skills can be applied automatically and effectively in any situation.



Mountain Leadership

Basic management and leadership skills

Management is the art of getting other people to do what you want them to do, in such a way that they also want to do it. Certain business management principles can be applied equally successfully to other fields, including mountaineering. The basic skills to be considered are planning, organisation, leadership and control (POLC).

Planning

One of the leader's main responsibilities is careful planning of any hiking or climbing trip to the mountains. The following are some of the many questions the leader needs to consider during the planning process: where to go, when to go, what to do, how to get there, what to take, whom to take, how many people to take, and what to do if something goes wrong. (Chapter 5 deals with the specifics of route planning.)

During the planning and preparation stage you should bear in mind that all planning should:

- Be flexible, allowing you to adapt to changing circumstances.
- Be an ongoing process which does not stop once the outing begins but carries on throughout the trip, adjusting to changing circumstances.
- Seek to anticipate problems and consider the possible courses of action open to the group in various situations that may arise.

Organisation

Organisation refers to the process of getting the members of the group to carry out the actions necessary to achieve the aims of the group. A good leader delegates tasks in order to free himself from routine work and in order to involve other members of the group in the planning and execution of activities. The following tasks, for example, could easily be delegated:

- Organising transport.
- Organising access and permits.
- Keeping a record of purchases of supplies, petrol, etc.
- Organising food and other supplies.
- Organising equipment.

It is not enough to issue an instruction: you must ensure that all your instructions are clear and concise and that they are heard and understood by everybody. It is easy, for example in a strong wind or next to a noisy river, for some people to fail to hear instructions, with potentially disastrous results. The members of the party should therefore know that they must acknowledge all instructions, either by repeating them or by means of hand signals.

Leadership

Decision-making is the quintessential leadership skill. As the leader, you need to make hundreds of important and less important decisions, based on careful observation of the group and the environment.

You should constantly be aware of the mental and physical state of each member of the group. At the same time, you have to note changes in the environment, for example a change in the weather. This calls for deliberate and constant use of your powers of observation.

A good leader, however, does not try to make every decision: he makes the important ones. The group should participate in as many decisions as possible.

If, based on your assessment of the present situation and your experience in similar situations, you decide to change the original plans of the group, you should inform the members of the group and then proceed with the new course of action. If time and conditions permit, you should first discuss your decision with the members of the group, suggesting the new course of action and explaining as carefully and tactfully as possible what factors have caused you to deviate from the set plan. In an emergency, however, or if no consensus can be reached, you have the final say

- that is why you are the leader.

Sometimes, based on your assessment of a situation, you may have to make an unpopular decision; at such a time it helps to remember that your primary consideration should always be the safety of each member of the group and not personal popularity or the achievement of an objective.

Control (or checking)

Although you can and should delegate tasks, it remains your responsibility to see that they are in fact executed correctly. Such control, or checking, is particularly important in cases where mistakes or omissions may prove dangerous or fatal. It may, for example, be necessary for the leader himself to check all equipment before the party sets out on a trip, particularly if beginners or children are involved. As stated earlier, you need to make sure that your instructions are heard, understood and acted upon.

Control also refers to the constant monitoring by the leader of the condition of each member of the group. This can be done simply by asking direct questions — for example, 'How are you feeling?' — and through careful observation. Remember, someone suffering from hypothermia may claim that he feels fine, while his condition is steadily worsening.

An unobservant leader could happily continue up the mountain trail, oblivious to the fact that some of the members of the group are suffering from exhaustion, heat-exhaustion, hypothermia, or any of a number of conditions requiring attention.

Planning, leadership, organisation and control do not represent separate, discrete skills. In practice, by integrating these skills with your accumulated store of leadership knowledge and mountaineering skills, you will acquire the ability to react instinctively and effectively in every situation, including emergencies.

Awareness and observation

The importance of continuously observing the environment and the group should be re-emphasised. Watch out for changes in the weather, difficult terrain ahead, and any other environmental factors that may have an effect on the group. Excessive heat, cold, wind and wet can all be equally dangerous, and it is essential to act before circumstances force you to act, since by then it might be too late. Anticipatory actions on your part might include ensuring that everybody is wearing sufficient wind- and weatherproof clothing to prevent hypothermia, seeking shelter in good time, or retreating from a mountain before the condition of a person with incipient altitude sickness leads to an emergency.

Carefully note non-verbal signs of distress among members of the group. Each individual in the group should know that his enjoyment is more important than pushing on at all costs.

As weather conditions deteriorate you should become increasingly sensitive to and aware of the physical and mental state of every member of the group, including yourself. This implies that you should possess the physical and psychological resources to continue functioning effectively under the most adverse conditions.

Leadership styles

Leadership from the front

This is the most commonly adopted style of mountaineering leadership: The leader is a force putting the group along from the front. Unless care is taken, the tail-enders may suffer.

If you become separated from the bulk of your party, you will lose touch with their condition and will tend to base your decisions on an inaccurate assessment of the state of the group. Thus one may find the group members, on the verge of collapse, blundering along behind a blissfully confident and unaware leader.

In dense mist it is best for the leader to lead from the front to ensure correct navigation and to select the most suitable ground to walk; the next most experienced member of the group will be the rearman.

Leadership from the rear

Here the leader will be available to encourage the weaker members at the back. The danger to be guarded against is that the stronger members of the group may walk on so far ahead that the leader loses control.

When 'leading from the rear', you also need to know the terrain so well that you know when to return to the front to guide the group through difficult terrain.

This style of leadership requires the leader to exercise a great deal of control in order to maintain eye or voice contact with the front end of the group. An experienced deputy will have to be appointed to walk at the front, and he will also need to be given detailed instructions as to where and when he should make halts. A good rule to follow, particularly with novices, is that every member in the group should always have eye contact with the person in front and behind him.

Leadership from the middle

This compromise probably represents the best leadership style in most situations. You are in contact with all the members of the party most of the time. You can observe and communicate effectively. You can easily control the people at the front, while maintaining contact with those bringing up the rear. You can easily move to the front or the rear, as circumstances require and depending on your assessment

of the group and the terrain. You can give support where it is needed and yet allow others to exercise some initiative as well. Your knowledge and experience are therefore always at the service of the group. This style of leadership also allows you to talk to all members of the group during the hike, to find out more about their views and desires, and to involve them more closely in the decisions you make.

While it is a more democratic, less authoritarian style of leadership, it still depends on proper control for success. Both a rearman and a route leader must be appointed beforehand (these tasks can be rotated) and their duties made clear to them.

Splitting up a group

NEVER ALLOW THE GROUP TO SPLIT UP, UNLESS YOU HAVE AN ABSOLUTELY COMPELLING REASON FOR DOING SO!

This point cannot be emphasised enough: a cursory examination of South African mountaineering accidents and emergencies in the past shows that allowing a party to split up has played a contributory role in many of the disasters in which lives were lost in our mountains (it is highly instructive to read *Dragon's Wrath*, by R.O. Pearse and J. Byrom, in this regard.)

In an emergency, of course, you may have to allow part of the group to seek help or to search for a missing person or persons. If you choose to do so, do not send out a group consisting of fewer than two people; in the case of larger groups, appoint a competent leader for each subgroup and give them clear instructions regarding what they should do and where they should go (see also Chapter 11, *Emergency Procedures*).

A hiking trip should never be rushed, except in the case of 'endurance hikes' or similar excursions. Encourage the tail-enders of the group and do not leave them to their own devices — they are sure to become exhausted and depressed. They can also easily fall behind and become separated from the group.

Ensure that all members know they should have eye contact with the person in front and behind them at all times — this is particularly important in rainy or misty conditions. Keep the group together and never send any member of the group anywhere alone.

Leadership knowledge and skills

The knowledge a leader needs to acquire to improve his leadership competence and skills can be divided into three broad categories:

Technical knowledge

This includes knowledge of equipment, the mountains, the weather, the terrain, food, first aid, emergency procedures, navigation, camping skills, etc. In this regard, formalised training courses such as those presented by the MCSA and certain other outdoor organisations have an important role to play. Books and manuals such as this guide can provide a useful theoretical perspective.

Above all, however, experience, acquired in all weather and terrain conditions is the best teacher. A good way to obtain such experience is to join an organisation or club where you can 'serve an apprenticeship' by going on a number of trips with hikers or climbers who are more experienced than yourself.

People knowledge

This refers to your understanding of other people. Such knowledge is expressed in your ability to communicate effectively, to be sensitive to the needs of others, and to be firm, friendly and fair in all your dealings with them. Once again, experience of, and exposure to, as many people as possible and in as many situations as possible is the best teacher.

Mountain sense

Mountain sense includes both the above-mentioned types of knowledge, and more. It is the ability to base decisions on technical expertise and knowledge of human nature, coupled with observations of the environment and the group, in order to plan a safe and enjoyable wilderness experience.

Mountain sense represents the sum of your experience and knowledge, the integration of all your discrete leadership qualities, skills and abilities. The actions of a person with mountain sense appear automatic and instinctive, because they are based on a rich store of internalised knowledge and experience and are expressed as the ability to act decisively and correctly even in an emergency.

Qualities of a good leader

- **Experienced**—there is no substitute for experience.
- **Confident** — people have confidence in someone who has confidence in himself. Confidence grows with experience.
- A **keen observer** of people and the environment.
- **Flexible** — he is willing to change his plans if circumstances require it.
- **Unselfish** — he places the interests of the group first.
- Aware of his **own limitations**.
- **Responsible** — he considers every decision in the light of how it might affect the safety of the group and can distinguish between what is difficult and what is dangerous.
- More **interested in people** than in objects or objectives — he does not allow his interest in the mountains to overpower his interest in the group.
- **Capable of introspection** — he knows himself and why he wants to lead.
- **Careful** — he does not take unnecessary chances.
- **Honest**.
- **Systematic** — he approaches problems in a logical, systematic way.
- **Calm** — he does not lose his temper or his presence of mind.
- **Tactful** — he never makes sarcastic remarks and takes into account that people's abilities differ.
- **Self-critical** — he is always prepared to admit a mistake and, above all, to learn from his mistakes.
- **Decisive** — he does not postpone decisions.

- **Consistent** — he abhors favouritism and the arbitrary application of rules.
- Sincerely interested in every member of the group as a person.
- **Fit** — if the leader is unfit, he may become too exhausted to identify potentially dangerous situations or to respond correctly in such situations.
- A **lover of nature** — the leader's example largely determines how much or how little damage his group does to the natural environment.
- Blessed with a good **sense of humour**.

Leadership and responsibility

The primary responsibility of a leader taking a party into the mountains is to bring his party back alive and well; a secondary responsibility is, as far as conditions permit, to lead and assist the party to achieve its objectives.

When you are formally in charge of a group, you assume responsibility for the safety of each member of the group. This situation is very different from an informal hike with friends, when each person is assumed (legally, as well, in the case of adults) to be competent to assume responsibility for himself.

While you should involve the group in as many decisions as possible, you are on your own in as far as you bear ultimate responsibility for all decisions and for all the group's actions. In the normal course of events, group participation in decision-making is vital, and the responses of the group to your suggestions help to determine the course of action of the party.

During a crisis or emergency, however, the leader often has to make important decisions alone, and this is where his skills, knowledge, previous experience, and careful and continuous observation of the situation prior to the emergency should enable him to assess various alternative courses of action and to choose the best one.

Adventure and misadventure

It is vital to strike a balance between what is dangerous (but perhaps exciting) and what is safe (and perhaps dull). This is difficult, for concern with safety can easily turn into a stifling, regimented and rigid insistence on compliance with rules and regulations, in the process destroying the spontaneity, enjoyment and freedom of the party. This is true both while leading a group and while in a training situation in the outdoors.

Colin Mortlock, in *Adventure Education and Outdoor Pursuits* (F. Middleton & Son, 1973) states that any Outdoor Pursuit has four broad stages. The first is recreation, where the level of participation is far below the normal abilities of the person and there is minimal involvement in terms of emotion, skills, mental control and concentration. Fear of physical harm is absent

The second stage is skills learning. A person feels in control of the situation but is using his experience and abilities to overcome a technical problem. Although the person is in control, he knows that he may still be in a potentially dangerous or strange environment, and fear of physical harm is therefore not completely absent.

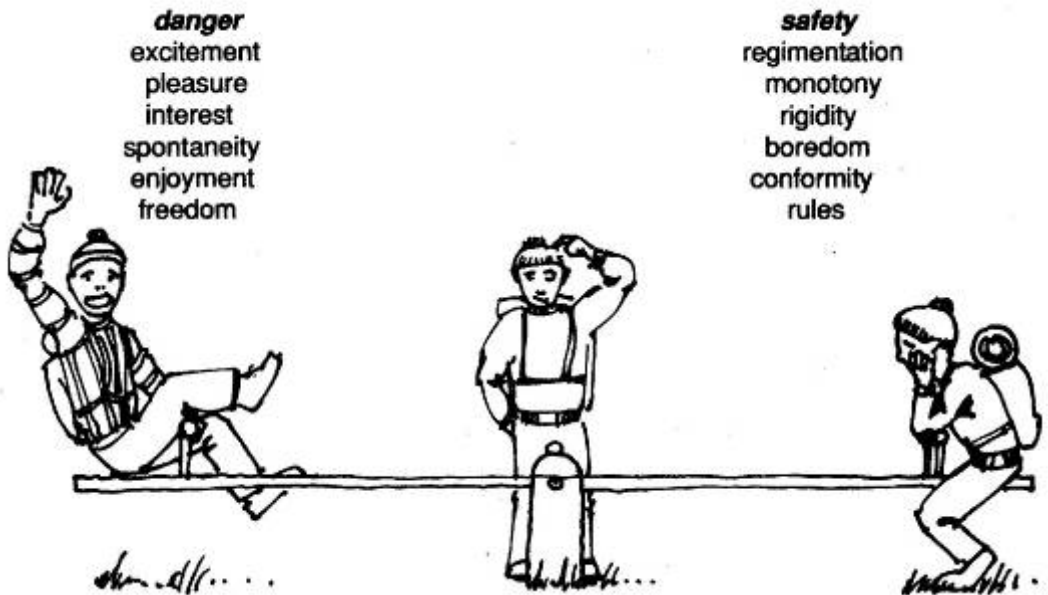
The challenge can be overcome with effort and without incident; it has been pitched neither too low, nor too near the person's personal limitations.

The third stage, adventure, Mortlock defines as follows:

'This is the stage beyond, and often just beyond, the skills learning stage. The person has sudden fear of physical harm and no longer feels complete master of the situation. He feels, however, that he can, with considerable effort on his part, and given luck, overcome the situation without accident. He accepts that his skills are about to be tested. He is conscious of a definite degree of uncertainty as to the outcome, and feels, as it were, poised on a knife edge between success and failure. If he succeeds he has experienced adventure. He has found himself in a situation which becomes firmly etched upon

his mind — perhaps forever. He has feelings of satisfaction, if not elation, about the result. The degree of satisfaction and pride is proportional to the scale and intensity of the adventure.'

Since 'adventure is a state of mind', Mortlock maintains that young people and novices should experience adventure in an environment of apparent danger, rather than real danger. A training situation must, therefore, clearly be well planned in advance, and the leader should be familiar with the trail, gorge or mountain which he is planning to use for training purposes. It is also important to remember that each person has a different threshold of adventure.



The leader's dilemma: striking a balance between what is dangerous and what is dull

While adventure is the most important stage for educational purposes, the leader and trainer must also know that their involvement in adventure could very quickly lead to misadventure, which Mortlock describes as follows:

'This is the final stage [of an Outdoor Pursuit] — when the challenge is in any way beyond the control of the person. In ultimate form the result is death, but between death and serious injuries on the one hand and adventure on the other, there are various degrees of both physical and psychological damage. It is possible and indeed not infrequent in practice, to experience misadventure without any form of physical injury The classic case of this type is the person trying, or being made to try, something that involves a degree of technical skill, or degree of control over his fear, that is beyond his abilities. Fear tends to be of an extreme nature in misadventure, as the person is unable to control it completely.'

In a training situation, or when dealing with a group of youngsters or novices, the stage of misadventure must be avoided. As Mortlock notes:

'The penalties in real danger situations are obvious and emphasize that if adventure is to be an acceptable form of education, then it must work principally in an apparent danger environment.'

Everybody should have a good time

Never lose sight of the abilities of the individuals who are your responsibility. More than anybody else, you will determine whether a good, safe time is had by all. As stressed in the chapter on route planning, while you should try to ensure beforehand that the group is up to the demands of a hike, during the hike you will also have to adapt the route and the pace to the terrain and the ability of the group.

Never assume:

- That the members of the party can do what you can do.
- That they want to do what you want to do.
- That they feel the same as you do — e.g. hot, cold, tired, bored, comfortable, eager to push on, etc.
- That they know what to do — particularly if they are novices. You may have to do all the thinking for them, without regarding this as an onerous duty.

When training objectives, plans and goals become your primary concern, as opposed to enjoying the great outdoors together with people whose company you like, it is perhaps time to reconsider your priorities. Everybody should have fun, including the leader.

At the same time, you are at the service of the group. If you are not prepared to accept this role, or if it interferes with your personal aims and ambitions in the mountains, you should not be leading a group in the first place, and you should instead seek out others who share your specific aims.

The leader of a hiking party unfortunately often gets less time to enjoy the outdoors than the members of his party, particularly if he is in charge of beginners or children. He must at all times be aware where everybody is, he must plan the route and observe the weather, and he must watch the individual members of the group and note signs of fatigue or distress. However, all these duties are part of the overall responsibility of the leader, which is to ensure the safety of the members of his group at all times.

Conclusion

Even a so-called 'born leader' only becomes a good leader through experience. Spending time in the mountains is essential in order to develop 'mountain sense', that instinctive ability to recognise danger or to extricate oneself or your group from difficulties.

Visit the mountains in fair weather and in foul, and, instead of sticking to the same well-worn trails year in and year out, expose yourself to as many different outdoor environments as possible. The best way to do so is to join a club or group of similarly adventurous, experienced people, to go with them to the mountains, and to observe them and learn as much as possible from them. The Mountain Club of South Africa and a number of other hiking and climbing clubs provide you with this opportunity.

Once you have gained sufficient experience and begin leading your own excursions, you will no longer have yourself only to consider in all things. Your duty will be to put the comfort and safety of others first, and never to stop learning.

A leader's job is a tough one. He must know what needs to be done and have the confidence to do it. He must combine the qualities of a manager, a diplomat, a judge, a problem-solver, a weatherman and an amateur psychologist. He must be experienced, patient, friendly, fair, prudent, calm and confident. In short, he must be all things to all men. Nevertheless, to the leader alone belongs the satisfaction of competently and safely guiding a group of individuals, of sharing with them his personal love of and respect for the wilderness, and of sharing in turn their enjoyment of it.

Bibliography

This book is heavily indebted to one of the standard reference works on mountain leadership — Eric Langmuir's excellent work *Mountaincraft and Leadership*. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then the present work lavishes extravagant praise on Mr Langmuir's book.

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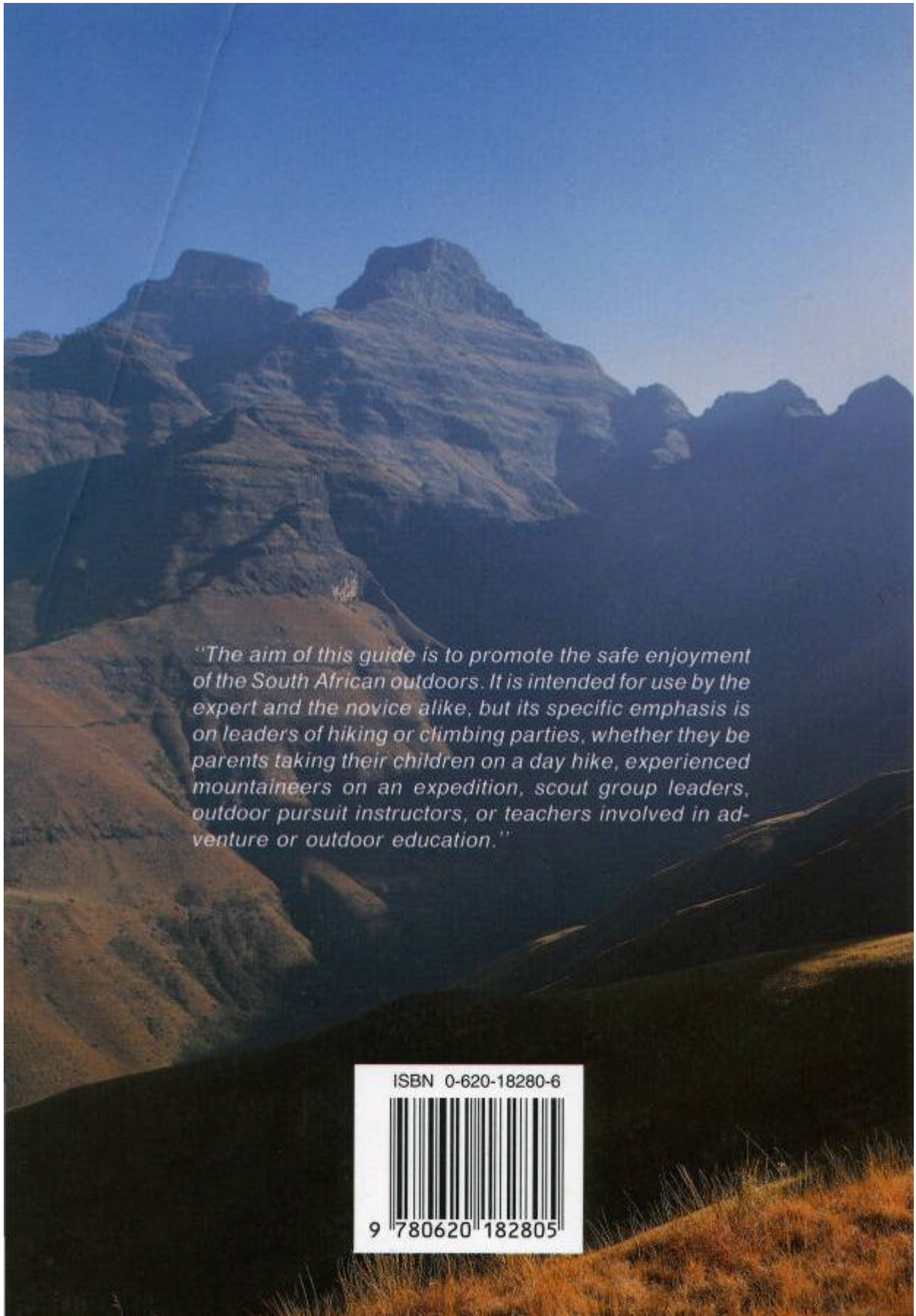
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"The aim of this guide is to promote the safe enjoyment of the South African outdoors. It is intended for use by the expert and the novice alike, but its specific emphasis is on leaders of hiking or climbing parties, whether they be parents taking their children on a day hike, experienced mountaineers on an expedition, scout group leaders, outdoor pursuit instructors, or teachers involved in adventure or outdoor education."

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