

It's Good to Walk

You can't eat it, you can't sleep in it and it won't protect you from the rain.
So just what use is a mobile phone in the hills?

ALEC JIGGINS examines the pros and cons.

There you are, walking along, enjoying the solitude and silence of a day in the hills. No radios, no computers, and no phones. It's just bliss.

But then somebody takes a tumble and reality pokes its nose into your silent reverie. You're miles from anywhere. It'll be a while before you can reach a phone box to call out the mountain rescue.

Unless you have a mobile phone of course. Turn it on, dial 999, and stay with the casualty. The mountain rescue team can even call you back, as they make their way up the hill, to check on the casualty.

But as with any piece of electronic equipment, a mobile should only be used as back-up to your well-honed walking skills. And if you can't get reception then you've still got that long walk out.

A less life-threatening irritation is if someone else disturbs your peace and quiet with a ringing phone.

So what do mountain rescue teams think?

Lochaber Mountain Rescue Team

Deputy leader Noel Williams says mobile phones are of greater use than worries about their misuse.

"We had a case last winter where a walker found two climbers who had fallen and were in a bad way. His phone worked and he got through to the police station, cutting two hours off the rescue."

Cockermouth Mountain Rescue Team

Leader Jim Coyle has mixed feelings.

"I'm 50/50 about them. Some of the lads in the teams use them, and they are a life saver. But they have their limitations and can't be relied on.

"They have their problems, like flat batteries. People ring round in panic and wear the battery down, and then we can't get in touch, or they walk into a blackspot and we can't get them back.

"I've been rung up by somebody late at night who was lost, asked him where he was and he replied 'the Lake District'."

Ogwen Valley Mountain Rescue

Press officer Paul Henshall says mobiles are used more to call out the team.

"We find them useful, and have five for the team. The problem we've found is that people will call first, rather than trying to sort things out for themselves. They are useful, but are not a substitute for experience."



Langdale Mountain Rescue Team

Nick Owen, team member, said: "They are good, but they shouldn't be relied on. We often get calls from people saying they're lost, but if they don't know where they are, how are we to?"

"They save the time of running to the phone, but really they are a menace to the people that carry them. It gives them a false sense of security and they aren't aware of the phone's limitations."

The authorities' views

As often happens, some bright spark comes up with an acronym to poke fun at a section of society.

CHUMPS – climbers having upwardly mobile phones – are the latest targets.

To encourage responsible use of mobiles, the Mountaineering Council of Scotland (MCofS) put together an information paper on modern technology. The intended message is delivered bluntly:

"Modern technology – no substitute for experience. Your safety depends on essential basic mountaineering skills, sound judgement and an awareness of potential hazards, not technology."

Another point raised by the MCofS is the spirit of going into the hills. "Why are you going into the hills, and does the carrying of a telephone conflict with this philosophy? What about self-sufficiency and resourcefulness?"

John Cousins, head of training for the Mountain Leader Training Board, is also wary of acknowledging the value of mobile phones.

"People seem to use them for mundane things. They use it as a substitute for experience in their heads. They'll ring up people from the summit just to say they're there," said John.

"Personally if I was walking along and somebody had one which rang, I'd be irritated."

So, quite a mixture of views from mountain rescue teams and outdoor bodies. If you plan to take a phone with you onto the hills, and they can save lives, one of the clearest messages is to take into account that many walkers are out there for the peace and quiet.

But even more importantly, you have to realise that a phone can run short of power, or you may be in an area where you can't get a signal just when you need it most.

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