
APPALACHIAN SEARCH AND RESCUE CONFERENCE
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To: ASRC Board of Directors
From: Keith Conover, M.D.
Member, Board of Directors

Subject: MRA Region Status

At an MRA Appalachian Region meeting after the ASRC's April Board meeting, I was asked to draft a letter to the MRA about forming the Appalachian Region of the MRA, in which I was to tell them that we wanted to form an MRA Region only if we could keep the MRA Region and the ASRC essentially one and the same, to minimize new administrative work. However, I had a chance to speak with Hunter Holloway, Tom Frazer, and other MRA types at recent NASAR and ASTM meetings. As a result, we came up with a more detailed plan that I presented at the June ASRC Board meeting. The ASRC Board had quite a long discussion about MRA Region status, and since there was a lot of facts and emotion on all the various sides, and many important implications for the future of the ASRC, I volunteered to put together what I hope will be an objective summary of the various positions and the facts.

MRA-- General Background

money.

ASSOCIATE

RESCUE

The MRA is organized into Regions. Each Region ~~is~~ includes both Rescue and Support Groups.

Members of MRA teams are either Rescue or Support. Rescue members meet minimum qualifications as specified by the MRA Bylaws and expanded and interpreted by each Region. Each Region has a considerable amount of flexibility in setting the standards for teams and members, provided (1) each Rescue member and Rescue team is capable of technical mountain rescue, and (2) all Region member teams have wilderness search and rescue as their primary purpose.

ASRC-- General Background

The ASRC began in the period 1972-74. At first, the organization was a wide-spread association of people interested in wilderness search and rescue, sponsoring monthly training weekends. A few years later, the ASRC started forming local Groups to provide an organized SAR response. As stated in the Articles of Incorporation, the primary purposes of the ASRC were wilderness search and rescue and vertical rescue:

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- A. To provide wilderness search and rescue capability, and special technical rescue capability, within the Commonwealth of Virginia and other regions as necessary;
- B. To conduct training programs in subjects related to wilderness search and rescue and special technical rescue;
- C. To conduct training programs in subjects related to wilderness safety and survival;
- D. To serve as a coordinating agency for related rescue and survival information, equipment, and resources; and
- E. To conduct and carry out the work of the Corporation, not for profit, but exclusively for humanitarian, educational, and public service purposes.

In setting up the first ASRC training standards (Dec. 1974), we specifically designed ASRC Certified membership standards to meet the MRA requirements, with the goal of making the ASRC part of the MRA.

Over the years, the ASRC performed only a few rescues, but came to manage more and more searches. Requests came not only for searches in the rugged terrain and bad weather that the ASRC considered its specialty, but in all sorts of rural and even suburban areas. The ASRC's concept of a Quick Response Team for any type of search or rescue was complemented (and mostly supplanted) by the Overhead Team, providing management for search operations.

ASRC--MRA Interactions

The ASRC had joined the MRA in the early late 1970's as a single "team" with two regional subdivisions (the Potomac Valley Search and Rescue Group in Washington, DC, and the Blue Ridge Rescue Group in Charlottesville). When they found that the ASRC was metastasizing and many new Groups had appeared, they decided that the ASRC should really be more of a region, with each ASRC Group being a separate MRA team.

Unlike teams within other MRA regions, however, the ASRC Groups are tightly knit. Operating under a single set of training standards, using a single uniform, and especially having a single command structure for all teams, is a feature of the ASRC not found in any other MRA Region. Because of this, some MRA people pointed out that ASRC teams could certainly use the provision in the MRA Bylaws to decrease the number of members needed for a Rescue certified team when a nearby team is available for mutual aid. Some other MRA people suggested that requiring Group membership in the ASRC as a prerequisite to membership in the MRA Appalachian Region would not cause anyone in the MRA any difficulty.

The initial plan was for each ASRC team to take a MRA test, and for these newly-certified/recertified teams to join to form an MRA Region. We had an MRA test in 1987, conducted by western MRA personnel. AMRG and SMRG passed, RSAR and ESAR were given conditional passes, provided they were retested by the Region. SWVMRG did not take the test, and, due to a recent heavy mission load and possibly lack of interest, BRMRG was unable to field enough of a team to pass.

Current Facts and Positions about the MRA Appalachian Region

- x Overall, the impression one gets from the ASRC Board meetings is that the ASRC wants to be affiliated with the MRA somehow, but not very strongly. There are local variations-- BRMRG seems not very interested, AMRG is very interested, and other Groups fall in between.
- x Some see technical rescue as only a small part of what we do, and worry that emphasis on vertical rescue will take time and energy away from other training that is more directly related to saving loads given our current type of mission load. BRMRG people were particularly worried about this. Others point out that vertical rescues may be rare, but we still need to "preplan" for them. An analogy given at the Board meeting was that searches may be rare in a given county, but the SAR coordinator for the county still has a duty to preplan and train for searches; similarly, vertical rescues may be rare for the ASRC, but still are something we need to preplan and train for.
- x The MRA is not very strong in the East. What benefit accrues to the ASRC by being associated with the MRA? The benefits should outweigh any additional hassle (particularly administrative work) associated with forming a Region. AMRG seems to feel the strongest, believing that MRA affiliation will aid it in its work in Pennsylvania. AMRG has adopted an official position strongly supporting MRA affiliation for the entire ASRC. Few of the people at the Board meeting felt this strongly about it, but most agreed that they would rather have the ASRC become the local MRA region rather than some other assemblage of groups. Some felt that, if the ASRC decides not to continue affiliation with MRA, no one else is likely to take it up.
- x Should joining MRA be an individual Group option, or should it be an overall ASRC policy? Some point out that having some ASRC Groups join and others not will be divisive, going against our policy of doing things as the ASRC, rather than as separate Groups. Others believe that Groups should be free to choose whether to join MRA or not, especially if joining will impose additional training, administrative, or financial constraints.
- x A similar but distinct question compared with the last: should ASRC Group standards and MRA Region team standards be the same? (If we make the ASRC and the Region the same, then we must choose whether to make our current Certified/Affiliate Group distinction the same as MRA Rescue/Support teams, or if not, we must establish new MRA standards in the Bylaws.)
- x Should the MRA Appalachian Region be a subsection of the ASRC, a completely separate organization, or should the ASRC and the Appalachian Region be the same? This depends, of course, on whether all ASRC Groups become MRA teams, and whether we permit non-ASRC teams to join the MRA Region.
- x Everyone agrees that, if we do affiliate with the MRA in any way, we must minimize the administrative overhead.
- x An important point in the question of vertical rescue training and certification of Groups is that, on ASRC missions, Groups don't function like autonomous MRA teams, but as a unified whole. The MRA idea that

each team needs to be able to work a vertical rescue independently seems only of limited applicability to the ASRC. On the other hand, if a call comes in for a rescue not in the course of a search, each ASRC MRA team might be reasonably expected to prosecute a rescue until the other Groups can arrive. Indeed, this was at one time a responsibility of each ASRC Certified Group (see quotes, above) but the BRMRG representatives pointed out that rescue has recently been removed from our promotional materials. Do we want to take vertical rescue away from the definition of an ASRC Group's capabilities, and leave this up to teams in a separate MRA Region?

- x What if some group wanted to join the Appalachian Region but couldn't stand the ASRC?
- x What if we decide to make MRA Rescue Team = ASRC Certified Group, and an ASRC Certified Group couldn't pass the Group test?
- x What if a SAR Group that was not interested in wilderness search and rescue wanted to join the ASRC? (I.e. an urban SAR organization.) The MRA charter limits members to wilderness search and rescue groups.

And Now for the Diatribe . . .

Having now laid out the facts and the various thoughts and priorities I heard at the Board meeting, let me state my own opinions:

(1) The ASRC's primary role should still be wilderness search and rescue, though rural and urban search management, as well as disaster response, are reasonable secondary roles.

(2) For the ASRC, technical mountain rescue is rarely needed for the ASRC compared with search, but is still important and is a capability the ASRC has advertised in the past:

An Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference Quick Response Team can be mobilized within an hour, responding from the ASRC Group which can most quickly provide a qualified team. The composition of this team depends on the nature of the mission, but for a rescue operation, the Quick Response Team is self-sufficient for 48 hours and carries field-portable medical gear, communications equipment, and technical rescue gear, as appropriate to the situation and patient."*

Although the ASRC has a demonstrated proficiency in mountain rescue, we also conduct and manage lost person searches, in the mountains or elsewhere; in fact, we conduct more searches than rescues. . . .

Since all ASRC-certified members are trained in emergency medicine and mountain rescue as well as search, members involved in a search may be rapidly transformed into a rescue team. The ASRC has a regional and national reputation for methodical and safe conduct of difficult rescues, and is the only MRA certified organization east of the Rocky Mountains. Most ASRC members are EMT's, many with advanced life support training (and a few with MD's), and we always work very closely with the local rescue squads.

This guide is concerned primarily with lost person situations, but backwoods situations may occur where the victim's location is already known (e.g. when a hunter walks out to a road to report an injured hunting partner); the ASRC's rescue capabilities are always available for such rescue operations."*

(3) We should continue our affiliation with the MRA. We should do so in a way that makes things as simple as possible.

MRA Region team standards are to be adjusted by the Region to local conditions (i.e. eastern teams have no need for crevasse rescue or knot passing). And, technical rescue is a legitimate need for any ASRC Certified Group. So, why not make the ASRC Certified Group and MRA Rescue Team standards one and the same? It makes things so simple. If we also make ASRC FTL certification and MRA Rescue member certification the same, then the ASRC can be the MRA Appalachian Region with a simple 1:1 correspondence the ASRC and the MRA Appalachian Region, a simple 1:1 correspondence of ASRC FTL's and MRA Rescue members and Groups, and a simple 1:1 correspondence of ASRC Certified Groups and MRA Rescue Teams. (If the sentiment in the ASRC is for having MRA Rescue team standards higher than those for ASRC Certified Groups, then we add a new kind of Group: Rescue. The only distinction between Certified Groups and Rescue Groups would be that Rescue Groups would need to have one or more Rescue Specialist members (whatever that means), have some more rescue equipment, and pass a test with more vertical rescue than Certified Groups. There would be no difference between Certified Groups and Rescue Groups as regards the Board of Directors, votes, etc. Regardless, I still favor a 1:1 correspondence between the ASRC and the MRA Appalachian Region, and between the MRA Rescue Member and some ASRC certification level.)

Thus, the ASRC becomes the Appalachian Region of the MRA. It's still the ASRC, we just add another title. We could make our letterheads read:

APPALACHIAN SEARCH AND RESCUE CONFERENCE

the Appalachian Region of the Mountain Rescue Association

Our defined region would be Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. (When we have groups in West Virginia or North Carolina, we can expand the Region.) Any group in our region that wanted to become an MRA team would join the ASRC. Any member with ASRC Field Team Leader Certification would also have MRA Rescue Certification. All other ASRC members would have MRA Support membership.

* SMRG's 1984 Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference Capabilities: A guide for Sheriff's and Police Departments.

The Bottom Line

I think the critical questions about the MRA--ASRC relationship are as follows (choose one and only one answer for each question!):

1. Should we continue membership in MRA? (Yes/No)

2. Should we set things up so that all ASRC Groups are teams of the Appalachian Region MRA, and all Appalachian Region MRA teams are ASRC Groups? (Yes/No)
 - 2A. If yes, (ASRC = MRA Region), we should set things up so that
 - (A) all ASRC Certified Groups are MRA Rescue Teams and vice versa; or,
 - (B) establish a new, higher category: "Rescue Certified Group."

 - 2B. If no, (ASRC <> MRA Region), we should set things up so that
 - (A) all ASRC teams are MRA Appalachian Region teams, but other teams can join, too; or
 - (B) ASRC teams may decide for themselves whether to join the Region or not, but being an ASRC Group is a prerequisite to being an Appalachian Region MRA team; or
 - (C) Appalachian Region MRA team membership has nothing whatsoever to do with ASRC Group status.