

Avalanche Disasters in the Historic Record; A Survey of Cultural Attitudes in Western Civilization

Adam Brown

Colorado Mountain College, Prescott College, Vail Powder Guides, Leadville, CO, USA

Avalanches have existed for as long as snow has covered mountainsides. As such they are a natural phenomenon of infinite age. Avalanches become natural disasters when people are involved. Injuries, fatalities, damage or destruction to property, loss of natural resources, even the devastation of whole communities from hamlets to cities are losses to humans. Natural phenomena are seen as a natural process or cycle. A natural disaster is a human concern. Avalanches as natural disasters have occurred for as long as humans have lived in, worked near, traveled through, gone to war in, or played among snowy and steep surroundings. The documented record of avalanches affecting people in Western Civilization precedes the Christian Epoch, and extends to the present. This paper will explore the historical record of avalanche disasters and consider common themes and threads that connect the avalanche events as: Military related; Community related, involving transportation, work, and habitation; and finally, Recreation related. At various times throughout history, reactions to such disasters reflected common themes or cultural elements of an era. Considering this Zeitgeist related response to avalanches, historically as well as in the present is the primary focus of this study.