Group dynamics and decision making: backcountry recreationists in avalanche terrain

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Although avalanche literature emphasizes group communication and decision making, little empirical evidence exists regarding how these groups communicate, interact, and make decisions and how particular behaviors influence decision outcomes. This paper presents a portion of the results of a PhD dissertation whose purpose was to describe and determine the prevalence of the decision-making characteristics of recreational backcountry groups when making a decision of where to travel and ride in avalanche terrain. Decision-making characteristics encompassed communication, decision-making processes, leadership, and group factors. Additionally, the study sought information on decision outcomes and group attributes and explored what relationships existed among the characteristics, outcomes, and attributes. This paper presents findings on attributes, decision-making characteristics, and decision outcomes and the relationships that were found to exist between the characteristics and outcomes. Cross-sectional survey research and a newly created and validated instrument were used in this study. Participants were asked to reflect on one 2009-2010 backcountry recreational outing in which they traveled with at least one other person in avalanche terrain. The study included 524 respondents with approximately 70% reporting on an outing that occurred in Colorado. Significant, positive relationships were found to exist between each of the decision-making characteristics and between the characteristics and decision outcomes.