

AVALANCHE AWARENESS RAISING IN FINLAND

- DEVELOPMENT OF AVALANCHE EDUCATION CURRICULA

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ABSTRACT: Finland is a country of 5.4 million inhabitants in Northern Europe. Backcountry skiing and free skiing have gained popularity over the past 10 years amongst Finns. Sales of free-skiing skis, touring bindings and avalanche rescue equipment have grown rapidly over the last years. There is also a growing demand for avalanche education and avalanche safety training courses. So far there have been only a few organizations or individuals providing avalanche training for recreationists and professionals. The content, goals and quality of these courses have varied, and no standard education curriculum has been available.

The rounded mountains and hills of Northern Finland provide great introductory backcountry skiing. Fortunately, Finland has had only a few avalanche fatalities inside its national borders, but several close calls have occurred each year. Most avalanche accidents including those that incur fatalities which involve Finns occur outside Finland: for example, in Norway, the Alps or North America.

It subsequently became obvious that Finns would greatly benefit from an avalanche education curriculum developed specifically for Finnish needs in the Finnish language. HUMAK University of Applied Sciences received three-year European Social Fund funding in 2015 from the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and Environment for raising avalanche awareness and the development of avalanche education in Finland. Right from the start, this project received a warm welcome from professionals as well as recreationists.

KEYWORDS: Avalanche education, avalanche awareness, Finland.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article will give an overview of the three-year development project in Finland, which deals with avalanche awareness and related education. The project is managed by HUMAK University of Applied Sciences, and is financed by the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and Environment in North Ostrobothnia in Finland. There are several partners supporting the project, including, e.g. the Rescue Department in Northern Finland, Metsähallitus (Administration of Forests), the Finnish Meteorological Institute, Finnish Ski Area Association, Finnish Ski Instructors Association, Multidimensional Tourism Institute, and many other organizations and institutions interested in raising avalanche awareness in Finland.

2. BACKGROUND

The demand for this development project has risen from the needs in the field. The number of winter recreationists in the fells and mountains has increased over the years in Finland. However, general avalanche awareness and related knowledge have remained fairly limited. Backcountry skiing has become increasingly popular, and several close calls with avalanches occur each year. The Rescue Department in Northern Finland has acknowledged the fact that it needs to be better prepared. Moreover, Metsähallitus (Administration of Forests), which manages most of the avalanche-prone areas in Northern Finland, has become conscious of the organization's increasing role. There is also growing demand from backcountry users and winter recreationists for avalanche safety training courses. The demand for better avalanche knowledge as well as the need for avalanche education is quite evident.

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Figure 1: Typical winter recreation terrain in Northern Finland with avalanche debris in the foreground (photo: Kai Lehtonen).

3. OBJECTIVES

The main goal of the development project is to promote avalanche awareness and develop avalanche education in Finland. The project has three main target groups. First are the organizations and their professionals who need avalanche knowledge at their work. Second are the recreational winter backcountry enthusiasts who visit avalanche prone areas in Finland in addition to other places in the world. The third target group is media and other collaborators who provide communications about winter and outdoor safety in general.

4. ACTIONS TAKEN

The development project started in 2015 with a survey which provided a general idea of the needs for avalanche-based knowledge in professional organizations. It was followed by a two-day Avalanche Seminar which attracted approximately 100 participants each day. The Avalanche Seminar, featuring multiple lectures and workshops, gathered professionals and amateurs alike. The objective of the Seminar was to raise the awareness of avalanches and bring the discussion of avalanches onto a more professional level. The speakers at the seminar were professionals in their field, with topics varying from personal survival stories to land managers' examples of avalanche-prone recreation areas and rescue preparedness. The seminar also provided lecturers from Sweden who contributed important perspectives with more research history based on practical knowledge in avalanche education.



Figure 2: Avalanche Seminar, lecture (Photo: Jussi Muittari).



Figure 3: Avalanche Seminar, rescue workshop (Photo: Eeva Mäkelä).

Actions continued with pilot training courses for specific target groups. The project resulted in the arrangement of eight educational training days reaching nearly 130 individuals who represented the Rescue Department, Voluntary Rescue Service, Police, Border Guard and Metsähallitus (Administration of Forestry), as well as a few ski resort and guiding company staff. These pilot courses were held in locations where avalanche-prone terrain exists nearby and avalanche knowledge is vitally needed. The goal of these training days was to raise awareness of avalanches, provide concrete tools to recognize avalanche terrain, and increase the preparedness for rescues. Feedback on these training days was excellent, and demand for this kind of training was obvious.



Figure 4: Pilot training course participants getting ready for shoveling practice (Photo: Eeva Mäkelä).

Avalanche education material was created for these pilot education courses in Finnish. The general educational and curriculum approach in these materials followed, for the most part, the Swedish and Canadian educational outlook. These countries were taken as models, based on justifiable pedagogical preferences, language skills and the previous knowledge of the Swedish and Canadian avalanche education curricula.

Actions also included *Studia Generalia*-type lectures at two Nature Centers in Northern Finland during the peak winter holiday season. The aim with these lectures was to raise avalanche awareness among tourists interested in winter outdoor recreation. Nearly 80 people attended these events.

Web site (www.lumivyöry.fi) and Facebook have been in an important role during communications about the development project. For example, all the seminar lectures can be found from the website, as well as informative videos from the pilot training courses.

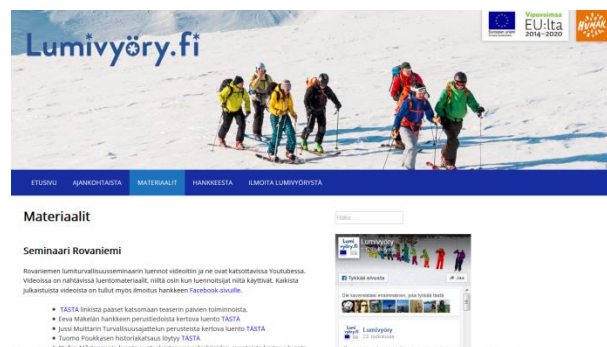


Figure 5: Website and Facebook have been important during communications about the project.

5. ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

At the time of writing this article, the development project has reached its half-way point. There are a couple of main objectives for the remaining project period. First, the outline for educational curriculum will be finalized, and second the educational material will be adjusted. At the same time, there will be discussions and negotiations with international affiliates with the aim to coordinate the curriculum so that it meets the current industry standards. During the winter season (2017) there will be pilot training courses for amateur target groups, such as back-country skiers and youth. There will also be a seminar for future avalanche safety training course instructors. Another important task is to set up guidelines and qualification requirements for instructors. All of these actions will be executed in co-operation with a pool of professionals with a wealth of avalanche education knowledge.

6. IN THE FUTURE

The last objective for the development project is to find a permanent administrative and educational actor to maintain and further develop the educational system. The aim is that avalanche education will find an established position in Finland.



Figure 6: Project poster.

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