Tracking Guidelines for Lost Victim Search

Ralphie G. Schwartz, Esq.

Use of light

- As with all tracking, try to position yourself so that you are looking toward the sun (the track is between you and the sun).
- In this position, shadows make the tracks most visible.
- If possible, try to track, or cut sign early and late in the day. These are times of low sun angle causing high spots in the tracks to cast the largest (most visible) shadows.
- Nighttime can be a good time to sign cut with a partially shrouded liquid fuel or electric fluorescent lantern.
- The shroud keeps light out of the tracker’s eyes and the lantern can be held low to simulate low angle sunlight.
- During midday, shade the track with something like a broad brimmed hat and use a mirror (on sunny days) or a flashlight (on overcast days) to project low angle light across the track.

General

- Walk to the side of the trail in order to preserve tracks.
- Use a tracking stick.
- Find every track; do not jump ahead.
- Mark the heel imprint of each track with the tracking stick.
- When the trail seems to be lost, flag the last clear track as well as any other important sign groupings such as direction changes.
- If the subject crosses a hard surface, waterway, or any other substrate that will not show sign, perform a perimeter cut to find the point at which the subject left the problem area.

Sign Cutting

Tracking Guidelines for sign cutting from: Search and Rescue Fundamentals, Basic Skills and Knowledge to Perform Search and Rescue, 3rd. ed., Cooper, LaValla, Stoffel

1. If possible, the most experienced trackers should cut sign then continue on Step-by-Step.

2. Use the available light to your greatest advantage. Face the sun, when possible, and cut at a ninety-degree angle to the direction of travel.

3. Team members should space themselves several yards apart, but should stay in visual and vocal contact. A team of 2 trackers works best.
4. Look behind you at frequent intervals, especially if the light is not optimum.

5. You may get only one chance to see a print or sign when cutting sign. Take your time and don’t miss anything. You may not get another try.

6. Do not allow unnecessary personnel in the area where sign is to be cut. Minimize the possibility of the production of confusing sign.

Sign-cutting is performed quite differently than Step-by-Step tracking. Where Step-by-Step requires examination of a small area within one stride of the last track, sign cutting requires a slow, careful visual sweep within a 2 or 3 stride area. Be careful, though, and let your eyes set the pace, not your adrenaline-charged feet.

Good areas for sign cutting

- L.K.P./P.L.S.
- An area where new clues are found
- Anywhere there is evidence that the subject spent considerable time, such as a sleeping spot
- Along travel aids (handrails)
- Seek out areas where the soil will take a good print
- Wet sand
- Firm mud
- Salt flats
- Fields of high grass
- River/creek banks
- Steep embankments
- Dusty roads/trails
- Berm of paved roads
- Game trails, droppings, muddy areas, stream crossings
- Plowed fields
- Fire breaks
- Construction sites
- Places where they would leave sign while crawling over or under something
- Barbed wire/thorns, looking for threads and clothing fragments
- Perform perimeter cuts around areas that will not take a track

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