

The Whale Foundation honored me at the Spring Guides Training Seminar, asking me to chair a panel on “Mutual Respect and Safety.” That sounded pretty innocuous. Dull, even. I agreed to do it. But when I found out what the panel was convening to discuss, I was stunned and saddened. Here is the gist of what I said:

I’ve been involved in the river community for some thirty-five years now. I don’t plan on leaving any time soon. I’ve received more from this community I than I can ever repay. Consequently, I’ve put a lot of my energy not just into river trips, but into the community itself, through work with GCRG, through writing, through speaking. I believe in this community, and know we are a talented, intelligent, creative, and caring lot, a group of truly outstanding individuals. So I had gotten it into my head that we were above some of the common failings of the world above the rim. Turns out we’re not.

The problems of the world are everywhere. We are not immune. I’m not saying that the river community is especially fraught with problems. We aren’t. But we do have the same problems everyone else does. Should anyone doubt that, the Whale Foundation was founded as a direct result of Whale, a boatman with depression and substance issues who took his own life. He was one of us. We got problems. But I do see two things that make our relationship to those problems unique:

One is that we exist on the River for a week or two, sometimes longer, in an instant society where we dictate and enforce reality. This may repress some problems that exist elsewhere, whereas other problems may take on surprising magnitude and heft. Same problems, unique manifestation of those problems.

The other unique thing is that the Whale Foundation came into being. Rather than bury our heads in denial and let the chips fall, many in our community chose to turn and address these issues. Alcohol, depression, drugs, job stress, health care—these are universal problems. One can address issues three ways: *ignore* them and hope they go away; be *reactive*, and only deal with incidents after they happen; or be *proactive*: acknowledge problems and begin addressing them before they recur. The Whale Foundation is choosing the latter.

The problems we are here to talk about today— issues of mutual respect and safety—are likewise not unique to us. They differ from the problems I mentioned above in that *those* are problems we inflict primarily on ourselves, though others may be affected. Today we’re here to talk about the problems we inflict on *others*. I wish we did not have to deal with them, but the fact is: we do. They are here.

The issues comprise a broad and troubling field, involving boatmen, trainees, passengers, and staff back at

the office. Problems range from adultery and underage involvement, to hazing and trainee abuse, to sexual harassment, coercion, and assault. All of these tend to amplify when alcohol is involved. You may be a witness who does not know how or when to intervene; you may be being preyed upon by another; or you may be the abuser that has convinced yourself that this is okay. It's not. These are ugly things—things that can not only damage the entire trip, but can permanently alter a person's life.

Please note: the Whale Foundation is not suddenly going on a great crusade or trying to become the morality police. The opposite is happening. Members of the community have been coming to the Whale Foundation with these issues, asking for help. Today we are beginning the conversation on how to deal with these issues.

Many folks feel that interactions between “consenting adults” are okay—those mutually agreeable escapades covered by the old saying, “What goes down on the River, stays down on the River.” That's all well and good. But what we are talking about today are issues that go beyond “consenting adults.” Lest an issue slip by unnoticed, let's spell them out:

Adultery is frowned upon most everywhere for a reason: although the two folks involved in a tryst are almost certainly consenting, someone else is by definition involved. And whether or not that someone is on the trip or back at home, that someone is probably not consenting and is almost always getting hurt.

Underage relations are taboo because this society has judged that people under 18 are not “adults” nor are they old enough to “consent.” That's why they call it statutory rape.

Hazing is often a fraternity-type thing, doing unto the new inductee what was done unto you: making the newbie do things beyond their share, inflicting humiliation upon them, or just being an all-out turd to them. This can be sexual or non-sexual. It can be dangerous. We've all seen it, and at times it has run rampant. It can be cyclical, but cycles were made to be broken.

Sexual harassment can be as seemingly innocent as an offhand innuendo; it can be more pointed and intentional; and it can range into unwanted physical contact. It includes things said and things done, and can go from irritating to humiliating to terrifying.

Sexual assault is the big one. That's when someone imposes sex on another not because their victim desires it, but because the victim fears for their job, their safety, or well-being. We also call this rape. Because that's what it is. It's not just a felony: it's dead wrong.

Each of these issues has a confusing flip-side as well: Married or underage individuals may find a guide extremely attractive and come on aggressively. New guides may work overly hard or try to sleep their way

to the top, then, finding their efforts unproductive, become vindictive and accusatory.

All these gradations are present in our community. Every one. Each manifests a loss of respect: for another, for the trip, for the community, for oneself. It is well past time to begin addressing this openly and honestly. We should neither over-react nor under-react, but act we must.

The Whale Foundation is responding on several fronts.

1) Because information on these issues is often either gossip, unreported, or confidential, we have prepared an anonymous questionnaire. We are asking all members of our community to fill it out and return it. For these purposes we do not want to know *who*. We just want to know *what* you are seeing, even if that is nothing at all. Initial response indicates that—although by most counts things are not quite as bad as they once were—these issues are real and in need of action. If you have not filled one out, please contact the Whale Foundation for a copy.

(www.whalefoundation.org, info@whalefoundation.org, or 928-774-9440)

2) We are talking openly about these issues in hopes that it will do two things:

a) It will raise awareness and make it well known that this is not okay by any stretch of the imagination.

Perhaps by discussing what is okay and what is not, we can work toward more of an honor code within our profession. Take the time to talk to other staff members about what they have seen or experienced. You may be surprised.

b) It will let folks know that there is someone to talk to if you are involved in an uncomfortable situation. You are not alone, and we do care. Call. (Help Line: 866-773-0773.)

3) We are presenting a seminar this fall, called **Mental Health Training: Sexual, Substance Abuse, and Hazing Issues**. We'll announce the date in the next BQR along with further details. We hope guides from every outfitter will be able and willing to attend.

The bottom line: this is a tremendous community and by pulling together we can make our lives on the River far better. The last thing the Whale Foundation wants to do is to tell people they should no longer have fun down there. (That would count me out.) We should all have an insanely good time in that most wonderful and powerful of all places. But if having a good time means someone else has to have a bad one—that's a problem. Come in and talk to someone.

Brad Dimock

for

the Whale Foundation

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