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Running the Risk

Examining the risk management practices surrounding the 2011 Kimberley Ultramarathon

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Introduction

Many different risks exist in staging a major sporting event and subsequently, there are various risk management strategies available to event organisers to protect all of the stakeholders involved (Parent & Ruetsch, 2020). Risk management can be defined as 'a proactive process that involves assessing all possible risks to the event and its stakeholders by strategically anticipating, preventing, minimising and planning responses to mitigate those identified risks' (Leopkey & Parent, 2009a: 187).

This chapter explores the key theoretical concepts pertaining to risk management within events development and examines these specifically in relation to the staging of the 2011 Kimberley Ultramarathon in Australia, as a case study. Limited research exists in relation to extreme sporting events and this analysis will benefit event management practice by identifying key areas of risk and recommendations for future consideration and implementation within the staging of similar and events in general.

This event's risk assessment plan and risk identification processes are examined and discussed in relation to the risk management model for major sporting events (Parent & Ruetsch, 2020) and the International Standard Organisation for Risk Management (ISO 31000: 2009). The analysis is based on a Parliamentary Inquiry conducted into whether the event organisers took reasonable steps to ensure competitor safety during the 2011 ultramarathon.

Case study 11.1: Bushfires at the Kimberley Ultramarathon

The Hong Kong based company, Racing the Planet, was created in 2002 by Mary Gadams and stages a number of extreme footraces throughout the world in varied terrain and extreme weather conditions, including the 4 Deserts Race Series (Racing The Planet, 2021). The 4 Deserts Race Series has donated more than US\$750,000 to various charities, primarily focusing on education and healthcare initiatives in the regions in which these races are held (Racing The Planet, 2021).

On the 2nd of September 2011, the Kimberley Ultramarathon was staged by organiser Racing The Planet in the Kimberley outback region of Western Australia. The event attracted a sponsorship commitment from the Western Australian government's events agency and an operating division within Tourism WA, Eventscorp, for an amount of up to \$105,000 with an option for a further two years (Parliament of Western Australia, 2012). Eventscorp also developed a separate agreement with Beyond Action (a Sydney based film company) to film the ultramarathon for inclusion in a proposed documentary series (Parliament of Western Australia, 2012). Beginning at the Emma Gorge airstrip and finishing in the town of Kununurra, the 100km ultramarathon consisted primarily of an off-road course throughout the outback. The race commenced at 8.30 am, with 41 competitors who were given 48 hours to complete the course. Staffed checkpoints were present across the course at varying distances. Five hours into this event, thirteen competitors were confronted by a bushfire, with five of these runners becoming trapped and suffering burns to varying degrees. Two of the women competitors suffered life threatening injuries with burns to between 60-80% of their bodies. Two competitors relayed that the fire that blocked their path was approximately between two and six metres high and expanding 300 metres wide (Parliament of Western Australia, 2012). The Kimberley region is traditionally very dry and spot fires had been present in the area up to three days prior to the event being staged (Cooper, 2011). The Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA) were responsible for monitoring these fires and have been criticised for their failure to adequately control the burning in the lead up to the extreme sporting event, as well as a lack of response to the incident scene itself (Parliament of Western Australia, 2012). A local pilot, John Storey, identified the fire threat while flying over the ultramarathon course a couple of hours prior to the devastating incident and attempted to alert the event organisers, however a failure in communication processes occurred, resulting in the message not being relayed satisfactorily. The FESA were not directly consulted by the event organisers prior to the race and an emergency evacuation plan, involving an ill-equipped media helicopter hired to film the event, was only put in place the day before the event was staged. Emergency services which did attend the incident, including the St John's Ambulance, reported physical access issues which contributed to delayed medical attention being received by the injured competitors (Grant *et al.*, 2015; Parliament of Western Australia, 2012).