

OUR VIEW

Public interest demands details

When people die in a heat wave, should their names, addresses and race be a matter of public record?

At least 83 people died from hyperthermia in the July heat wave. Some, most, or perhaps all of those deaths were likely preventable. Yes, there were government warnings about the heat wave. Weather broadcasts said it was coming. Still, many Oregonians don't have air conditioning. Never really needed it. Older people are especially vulnerable to hyperthermia. The body just can't regulate the temperature from the environment and their body temperature keeps climbing.

Two media outlets — The Oregonian and The Portland Tribune — requested the names and addresses of the people who were confirmed to have died from hyperthermia during the heat wave. The Oregonian also requested the races/ethnicities. The state medical examiner said no.

The argument was those records are conditionally exempt from disclosure. That basically means they are exempt from being made public unless there is a good argument that the public interest demands it. The medical examiner said releasing the records could make future death investigations more difficult. Families may not want to cooperate if they know the results may be made public. And in these incidents some families had asked the information be kept private.

But there is an interest in knowing more about who died. With the information requested, the public could better understand if people in some geographic areas or of some socio-economic background or minority status were disproportionately affected. The public then could hold their government accountable.

The Oregon Attorney General's Office agreed with that argument, at least a version of it, and ordered the release of the records. In the order, it noted it has required the medical examiner to disclose "the name, month and year of birth, date of death and cause of death for each person whose death was determined to be a homicide" for similar reasons of public interest.

It's not clear yet if the recent order will be challenged in court.

We agree in this case the public interest outweighs the medical examiner's argument. But what do you think? You can write us a letter to the editor and send it to editor@eastoregonian.com.



Risk and reward in the backcountry



BILL ANEY
THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

Outdoor adventures can restore the soul, inspire beautiful art, poetry and music, and change lives for the good.

They can also end in tragedy.

I read several recent reports of people coming face to face with nature with dramatic results. One was a Michigan woman who died while on a guided rafting trip in the Grand Canyon, swept away from an established campsite by a flash flood. Another was a man in southwestern Oregon who wandered lost for 17 days before being rescued; he thought he was taking a simple 1/4-mile hike from his car to a lake for fishing. One tragic loss of life, one incredibly fortunate rescue, both the result of a natural quest for adventure in the backcountry.

Kathy and I have had a few of our own close encounters of the natural kind. Perhaps the experience that impacted us the most happened while we were teenagers. We were climbing Mount Hood with the Portland-based Mazamas group, hoping to summit the peak and thereby qualify for membership in the club and gain access to the club's mountain cabin.

It was a bright sunny Memorial Day weekend, and as we neared the final pitch to the top of the mountain we were instructed to attach our crampons and rope up. We tethered ourselves to a half

dozen other climbers to traverse across a steep, icy slope. Kathy and I were tied about 10 feet apart in the middle of this string of climbers, halfway across the slope, when we heard the screams of "Rock! Rock! Rock!" We recognized this as the universal warning that there were rocks careening downslope. Our fellow climbers on the left scampered left and those to the right scrambled right, leaving Kathy and I hung out like marionettes on a string and directly in the path of the tumbling rocks. We hit the snow and tucked into fetal positions as snow and scree began flying over and landing on and around us. We both felt a tremendous sharp tug on the rope before the noise and chaos ended.

I remember hearing people to the right of me crying out "Is she all right?" and people to the left of Kathy yelling "Is he okay?" We dug ourselves out and found that a large boulder, about 4 feet in diameter, had landed and stopped directly on the rope between the two of us, jerking us towards it. I couldn't see Kathy and she couldn't see me, so we were incredibly relieved to find that neither was injured. We each had about 3 feet between us and the rock. Our group had to all untie to pull the rope through from under the rock to free it, allowing us to continue across the slope and eventually to the summit.

We realized how close this was to tragedy — a couple of feet one way or the other and one of us wouldn't be around to continue our life together, get married, have and raise our kids, and be each other's best friends for life.

One point of this story is that having public lands and backcountry gives us

the opportunity to explore and experience nature in the raw, including all the risks and rewards that go along with it.

To be sure, more experience allows us to better recognize risks, be better prepared, and consequently have even more successful outings. Still, there are risks, and sometimes bad outcomes.

Mother Nature is indifferent about all of this. She is not malicious, nor is she benevolent. She just is. Experienced backcountry adventurers don't see their encounters with nature as battles, but rather as a sort of cooperative effort; they take what nature gives them, learn to work with that, and are better for it.

Too many mosquitoes at the lake? Make camp on a small knoll where breezes keep the insects at bay. Facing a steep trail with innumerable switchbacks up a rocky open slope? Get an early start to complete the climb in the shade. Worried about losing your bearings while traveling off trail in the backcountry? Learn to use the sun and your own shadow to keep a relatively straight course instead of traveling in circles.

We are so fortunate to have millions of acres of public lands in our backyard for rest, play and rejuvenation. With this comes responsibility for our own well-being in the backcountry, including preparation, experience, flexibility and knowing our limits. This often means the difference between tragedy and a good story to tell.

Luck should be the last thing we rely on to get home safe.

Bill Aney is a forester and wildlife biologist living in Pendleton and loving the Blue Mountains.

YOUR VIEWS

Round-Up, Happy Canyon should lead the COVID-19 charge

Sadly, Umatilla County is a state leader in low COVID-19 vaccination rates and high infection rates (an obvious correlation). That makes our county a perilous place for large gatherings, such as Round-Up.

The Round-Up and Happy Canyon directors need to do all they can to make their events as safe as possible for the volunteers who make Round-Up happen, as well as the fans and the community. I suggest a good starting place is for all the directors to get vaccinated against COVID-19, if they haven't already, and then share their decision with the public while strongly encouraging volunteers and fans who haven't been vaccinated to follow their lead.

More vaccinations could go a long way toward ensuring there will be a Round-Up this year, protect our chil-

dren too young for vaccinations and improve the chance of an uninterrupted school year.

Here's a suggested slogan: Protect the Round-Up and the Pendleton community (and possibly save your life) — please get vaccinated.

Hal McCune
Pendleton

Let's not reward bad behavior

Inmates outside the walls of Two Rivers Correctional Institution for a family play date — what?

Forthcoming is a date to have inmates, also known as adults in custody, to be allowed at Hermiston Spray Park. Reportedly, the inmates will be allowed time with their families at the park. So who approved this reward for bad behavior? Was it the Oregon Department of Corrections? Citizens of Hermiston? Good questions, but what I

do know is this citizen doesn't approve of this recipe for complete disaster.

I found out by accident of this event and was stunned that someone thought of this as a wonderful idea. Perhaps someone has an agenda for promotion at the prison. Maybe this isn't the first such event where "Joe Public" didn't need told. Why be secretive if this is so great? To say that I'm unhappy about this is an understatement.

Inmates were sentenced for offenses by a judge, after a fair trial, so now it's OK to thumb your nose at the judicial system? Rewarding for misconduct is never a win. It teaches people that accountability doesn't matter. While this is my thought, I have a hard time believing other citizens know about the event or think this is a positive thing for Hermiston.

We are a community of doers and movers. Let's move this out of the possibility of being a reality Hermiston.

Karen Primmer
Hermiston

EDITORIALS

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