

## RESCUE AND CIVIL PROTECTION

### Volunteer Rescue Services

Ready to Help

Agnieszka Wójcik



*Pursuant to article 29 of the Act on the Fields of Government Administration of 4 September 1997, the minister of interior and administration is in charge of the tasks concerning mountain and water rescue. The following subjects perform those tasks: the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service, a specialist nationwide association, the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service, a specialist association performing rescue actions on the area of the Tatra Mountains and Spisz-Gubałówka Range, the Voluntary Water Rescue Service, a specialist nationwide association and the Masuria Rescue Service, as a physical training association conducting rescue actions on the area of Masurian Lake District.*

### **Service Demanding Expenses**

The statutory tasks of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service – helping people whose health or life is in danger in the mountains, preventing accidents in the mountains and protecting natural environment – are performed by seven regional groups: Beskidy Group, Bieszczady Group, Jura Group, Karkonosze Group, Krynica Group, Podhale Group and Wałbrzych-Kłodzko Group. The headquarters of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service executives – the Board and the chief – are in Zakopane. As much as 60 percent of the costs spent on the functioning of the mountain rescue service are covered by the means from the national budget. The remaining 40 percent include means from sponsors, specific grants from the local governments and own funds earned by the rescuers. “In 2010 the means from the national budget will be reduced and will cover 50 percent of the costs. We cannot understand such decisions; despite the crisis in Poland those decisions cannot be justified. The situation makes the rescuers think rather where and how to find lacking money, instead of dealing with rescue. It is good that our organisation enjoys much public trust, which is reflected in the fact that people and institutions of good will and heart support us financially and materially,” says Jacek Dębicki, the chief of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service.

The work of the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service is also financed from several sources. Having signed the agreement on the rescue activity in the Tatra Mountains and Spisz-Gubałówka Range, the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service receives an annual financial grant from the Ministry of Interior and Administration. Similarly to the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service, in the case of the rescue service in the Tatra Mountains, the grant constitutes about 60 percent of its budget. “The money is intended mainly for salaries, current expenditures and investments,” says Adam Marasek, a rescuer and long-time deputy chief of the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service. He adds: “The amendment to the Nature Protection Act introduced a provision enabling the national parks to give to the rescue organizations acting on the area of the parks as much as 15 percent of the profit from selling entrance tickets. The sum given to the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service constitutes about 15 percent of our budget. All the money is intended for the maintenance of a Sokół helicopter which is stationed in Zakopane. Unfortunately, it does not cover totally the costs of its maintenance.” The Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service has to rely also on some sponsors who give them money or donations in kind, e.g. fuel. “Sponsors have a right to indicate a specific goal they want to spend their money for or the goal is chosen by the Board of the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service. Donations from sponsors constitute about

15 percent of our budget,” says Adam Marasek. The means from their own business, mainly from the rescue protection of ski slopes, competitions, ordered trainings, commissioning and certification of ski routes, constitute further 10 percent of the budget. Sometimes it is possible to obtain additional means for purchase of specialist equipment or for trainings. “In 2005 we obtained money from the Marshal’s Office of the Małopolska province to buy and equip an off-road Land Rover. Together with the rescuers from Slovakia we won resources from the EU INTERREG 3a programme for joint trainings and purchase of specialist equipment. Every year we remain uncertain whether the grants from the Ministry of Interior and Administration will be high enough, whether there will be sponsors eager to help us and nothing unexpected will happen, e.g. a failure of the helicopter, which can take a significant part of our budget,” says Mr Marasek. “Such an association as our rescue service should not be financed in about 30 percent by sponsors. This is the place for an obligatory insurance for tourists and skiers, which has been obligatory in other countries for years. Additional funds should be spent on additional regular posts for rescuers, as currently it is getting more difficult to rely on volunteers. Next, it would be necessary to increase expenses on trainings, on replacing used equipment with new one or on preventive activity,” adds Mr Marasek.

The Voluntary Water Rescue Service was created in 1962, after the transformation of the Rescue Committee functioning by Polish Swimming Federation established in 1922. Currently, the Voluntary Water Rescue Service is a developed organization with regional units in all the 16 provinces in Poland. The regional units are divided into field units. Within the units there are operational groups (on the level of provinces) and intervention groups. The Voluntary Water Rescue Service acquires funds for its activity from the membership fees (30 zloty per person for a year). It obtains also subsidies from commune offices or town presidents. The amount of the subsidies is different in different parts of Poland and, to a great extent it depends on the activity of the chiefs of particular field units. The specific grants, e.g. from the Ministry of Interior and Administration, are spent on specialist rescue equipment on the central level, while the subsidies from marshal’s office are spent on the level of a province. The Voluntary Water Rescue Service makes profit by training lifeguards or distributing statutory materials, like membership cards, IDs or swimming certificates.

### **Working Together**

The Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service employs 105 professional rescuers. They are supported by 1,184 volunteer rescuers and 276 candidates. “Professional rescuers, who are available 24 hours a day all year round, are the core of the rescue service. They are supported

by volunteer rescuers who are on duty together with professional rescuers, participate in actions and rescue missions or provide rescue service on ski slopes,” says Jacek Dębicki. In the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service there are 207 rescuers; 29 of them are professional rescuers employed there. The remaining rescuers are volunteers. “Over 100 persons out of them are our older friends who do not do rescue duties because of their age or health condition. But in summer and winter season, some of them are on informative and preventive duty in Kuźnice or on Kasprowy Wierch. They inform tourists about the condition of the trails, possible threats or they simply advise them where to wander safely,” says Adam Marasek. The remaining persons are the acting rescuers who are obliged to work at least 120 hours a year in the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service, being on duties and participating in rescue actions. During summer season and – to a greater extent – during winter season the most active volunteer rescuers are employed in the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service. In this case they are on duty on ski slopes or in mountain hostels. Volunteers constitute majority in the Voluntary Water Rescue Service. Every lifeguard is obliged to work at least 20 hours a year as a free service. However, often it is more than 20 hours, as those who have the rank of a junior lifeguard and want to become lifeguards can work only in this way – many managers of swimming pools prefer to employ persons who have at least the rank of a lifeguard of the Voluntary Water Rescue Service.

To become a mountain rescuer it is necessary to be adult, in the best of health, in great shape, be calm, resistant to stress arising from unexpected events and be able to make decisions in case of emergency. It is necessary to have a clean record, to be a good skier or to be able to climb through caves and to know perfectly the topography of the area one wants to work in. “Of course, some skills are gained together with experience during the years of service,” says Jacek Dębicki and he adds: “Since 2009 it has been necessary for all the rescuers to pass the Cooper test, which is a test of physical fitness. They will have to pass this test every year. Moreover, stamina of the training and course participants is tested, as all the elements of mountain rescue require high physical fitness.”

To work effectively, the rescuers have to be properly trained. The training systems are designed to raise qualifications of the rescuers all the time. “Starting with the detailed topography of the Tatra Mountains, through different rescue techniques and servicing increasingly complex rescue equipment to medical issues, all the subjects are covered during specialist trainings in air rescue, climbing rescue, cave rescue or avalanche rescue. The emphasis is put on the comprehensive training for professional rescuers who are the instructors for the volunteer rescuers,” says Adam Marasek.

The training system combined with the participation in the actions allows the rescuers to learn new rescue skills, which is equal to gaining higher rescue ranks and overtaking an increasingly broader scope of activities and responsibilities. Apart from purely rescue qualifications, some rescuers acquire additional qualification, e.g. of a diver, avalanche dog handler, tourist guide, ski instructor or an instructor of the Polish Association of Alpinism. Several rescuers of the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service specializing in avalanche hazard have undergone a specialist training allowed them to assess the avalanche hazard levels. Their knowledge and skills are used to forecast and rate the levels of avalanche hazard, which is an obligation of the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service imposed by a resolution of the council of ministers. Some rescuers are the experts assessing the hazards on ski runs and are entitled to issue safety certificates for those slopes. The candidate's period in the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service lasts at least two years. In this time it is necessary to complete a first degree course and obtain first aid qualifications in the Medical Training Center of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service. When a candidate meets those requirements, he can take the oath to the team leader and become a fellow of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service, i.e. a mountain rescuer. "In the following years of service, rescuers raise their qualifications by participating in specialist courses and trainings. They obtain next ranks: of senior mountain rescuer, mountain rescue instructor and the highest rank: of senior mountain rescue instructor. This takes usually 3 to 5 years from the oath. Most rescuers remain senior mountains rescuers. The best become instructors – they are the elite of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service," says the chief of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service.

Syllabus of the trainings for mountain rescuers does not include psychology courses. "Experience from the rescue actions in the mountains has not indicated such a need. There have been several incidents when the rescuers participating in rescue action required some help, e.g. after the death of their fellow rescuers in the avalanche in the Karkonosze Mountains or the death of the refugee children in the Bieszczady Mountains," says Jacek Dębicki. He adds that there is a specialist psychologist who is a rescuer of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service. If necessary, the psychologists from the State Fire Service or Police can help.

The Voluntary Water Rescue Service recruits lifeguards from a high number of young applicants. The fittest, most responsible and committed of them become lifeguards. The requirements are very high. To become a lifeguard of the Voluntary Water Rescue Service it is necessary to be at least 16 years old and the rank of a junior lifeguard of the Voluntary

Water Rescue Service; during the entrance exam one has to swim 100 m freestyle in less than 1.5 minutes on the front and to cover at least 15 m underwater without breaking the water surface. Having passed the final exam, a lifeguard is able to use water rescue techniques, primary rescue equipment and to administer first aid. He knows how to conduct basic preventive activities and how to provide safety on the water areas and facilities: lidos, swimming pools and water parks. Participation in next trainings and passed exam allows the lifeguards to obtain the rank of a swimming pool lifeguard, inland water lifeguard or coast lifeguard. The courses for those ranks are prepared by the field units all over Poland. “At the request of the Board of the Voluntary Water Rescue Service, the courses for the rank of a senior lifeguard, junior instructor, instructor and instructor lecturer are organized on a central level by a regional unit: for many years this has been the Voluntary Water Rescue Service of the Podlasie province and its Training Center in Rajgród,” says Konrad Piotrowski, deputy coordinator of the operational groups of the Voluntary Water Rescue Service. The Voluntary Water Rescue Service organizes also specialist trainings, giving authorization in the scope of ice rescue, for a watercraft operator, hovercraft rescuer, landing-field organizer or pool auditor. “Additionally, especially in the sea resorts, there are conducted exercises concerning rescue and first aid. Moreover, rescue actions are simulated to enable the rescue team to harmonize and the individual lifeguards to learn how to stay calm during a possible rescue action. Such exercises have also a positive influence on the awareness of people swimming or relaxing by the water, who observe them,” he adds. Every three years the lifeguards are verified – their physical strength and theoretical knowledge are checked. When it comes to the instructors, every three years they participate in the unification of instructor’s ranks. “In 2009 there was a training on first emotional aid, which was organized on the central level. Leaders of the operational groups of the Voluntary Water Rescue Service participated in this training. The aim of the training was to encourage them to organize such trainings for the lifeguards,” says Konrad Piotrowski.

### **Equipment and Statistics**

The means of transport of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service include 110 off-road Land Rover Defenders, four wheel drives: Škoda Octavia, Chevrolet Captiva, Volkswagen Bus 2.5 TDi, ATVs and snowmobiles. The Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service has also the equipment for height rescue, cave rescue, water crossing and specialist means of winter transport, like toboggans. For the digital and analogue radio communication the rescuers use Motorola devices.

The Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service has a helicopter adapted for actions in the mountains serviced by Heli-Seco company from Świdnik. “The helicopter is used mainly for the actions in the mountains, although it helps also in the case of more serious accidents on the area operated by the hospital from Zakopane,” says Adam Marasek. The Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service has off-road vehicles: five Land Rovers (including one equipped like an emergency ambulance), four 4 x 4 Škodas, two Volkswagen 4 x 4 mini buses and specialist vehicles: snowmobiles and ATVs transporting equipment, rescuers and the injured. “In difficult winter conditions we support the medical emergency service with our vehicles, as they do not have such means of transport and are not always able to get in place with their ambulances,” says Adam Marasek. The Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service has also specialist rescue equipment to deal with accidents on the walls, in the caves, tourists’ or skiers’ accidents, avalanches and Recco system to search for people buried in snow as a result of an avalanche. “We have avalanche rescue dogs handled by our fellow rescuers,” says Mr Marasek and he adds: “Our rescue equipment is of the same quality as the rescue equipment used by the rescue services in the Alpine countries – of course on the scale of the Tatra Mountains.”

The Voluntary Water Rescue Service has floating equipment – rowing boats, rowing and motor boats, hybrid boats, RIB motor boats, pontoons, watercrafts, canoes and rescue boards. The emergency equipment includes “węgorz” rescue belts, rescue cans, rescue heaving lines or lifelines. Moreover, there is medical equipment and additional equipment, e.g. providing communication or necessary for diving.

In 2008 the rescuers of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service took part in 1,712 interventions, 2,317 rescue actions, and 100 rescue missions. In 43 cases it was necessary to use the help of the helicopter of the Medical Air Rescue. They helped 4404 persons in total; unfortunately they did not manage to save 38 persons. The number of interventions, actions and missions has remained stable with the difference not higher than 100 cases. Despite the fact that the equipment, mainly skiing equipment, and the physical condition of the rescuers are increasingly better and their qualifications are higher, the number of accidents is determined by an increasing number of people taking up sport and tourism. The Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service registers the highest number of accidents in winter. They constitute about 2/3 of all the accidents in the mountains and involve different forms of skiing. “For years we have asked people fascinated with skiing to be reasonable, thoughtful, to obey the skiing code and use ski helmets. The rescuers of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service have been obliged to use the helmets for four years, serving as a good example for other skiers.

Since the current season it has been obligatory also for children and teenagers under 16 to use helmets,” says Jacek Dębicki.

“In 2008 we rescued 2,029 persons, including 1,838 Polish citizens and 191 foreigners. As many as 1,868 of them were injured, including 1,344 persons seriously injured. 112 persons required to be transported to hospital. We searched for 35 persons and we brought them back from the mountains. Eleven persons died in the Tatra Mountains,” says Adam Marasek.

To bring help, the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service organized 125 rescue missions with a higher number of rescuers and 1,899 actions where the number of rescuers was lower. The helicopter transported 184 persons from the mountains.

In 2008 there were six climbing accidents, 250 tourist accidents, 1,693 ski accidents and 4 avalanche accidents in the Tatra Mountains. The rescuers spent 4,318 hours on the rescue actions and missions. “The number of tourist accidents in the Tatra Mountains has remained stable for several years, although the accidents depend on the conditions on the trails. In the recent years the number of climbing accidents has declined,” says Adam Marasek.

### **Tourists’ Sins**

Tourists do not obey basic safety rules, ignore threats, overestimate their own abilities and skills, are reckless, cannot assess properly the conditions and difficulties in the mountains, are in bad shape – these are the main sins of the persons hiking in the mountains mentioned by my interlocutors. It turns out that tourists are often unaware of the fact that mountains can be dangerous and, when they go on a hike, they do not know how to behave in the case of a sudden change of conditions. Therefore, both the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service and the Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service conduct educational and preventive activities to change this situation.

An e-learning project “Safe in the Mountains” and “Safe in the Mountains in Winter” has been active on the website of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service for several years. The project participants can learn many valuable tips concerning safe behaviour in the mountains. Moreover, every regional group of the Voluntary Mountain Rescue Service conducts educational actions addressed to school children, combined with educational paths in the mountains. Together with the sponsors, they prepare posters, tablets, brochures promoting safe behaviour in the mountains and on ski slopes.

The Tatra Mountains Voluntary Rescue Service organizes talks at schools and invites school groups to their headquarters. The rescuers teach children the rules of safe tourism and skiing. “We are a co-author of educational films; in the mass media we inform people about the

conditions in the mountains, the rules of safe tourism, avalanche hazards. We organize avalanche courses addressed to young people,” says Adam Marasek.

The fact that the Plus mobile network operator introduced the emergency notification system and 601 100 300 emergency number for the mountains has contributed to the improving safety of the tourists. “Direct contact with the casualty allows us to determine his condition and locate him relatively precisely, which significantly shortens the time necessary to reach such a person and help him. The campaign promoting the emergency number in the mountains has been conducted for several years and we can assume that most tourists know the number. This assumption is confirmed also by the statistics – 70 percent of all the notifications,” assesses Jacek Dębicki.

Nevertheless, Adam Marasek emphasizes that there is a problem concerning this number. “Some tourists go hiking convinced that since they know the phone number, the rescuers would come and help them on call, which is deceptive. I would strongly recommend everyone to prepare well for every trip in the mountains, both when it comes to the physical strength and the equipment.”

The most undesirable and improper behavior of people by the water’s edge includes disobeying the pool’s regulations, first of all the provision forbidding them to drink alcohol, and ignoring the commands of lifeguards. “When the weather conditions do not permit safe bath, which is indicated with a red flag, tourists leave organized pools and go to unguarded places, where there are no limits,” says Łukasz Koperski, head of the operational group of the Voluntary Water Rescue Service from the Pomerania province. It is also necessary to mention here that people do not take adequate care of their children. It turns out that it is quite a common situation in the sea resorts when small children get lost in a crowd on a beach and later are able to walk several kilometers, not necessarily in the proper direction, just to find their parents. “Prevention is the basic task of the lifeguards of the Voluntary Water Rescue Service. The goal of the regulations and provisions specifying how to use a pool is to limit the number of situations posing a threat to health or life of people spending their time by the water’s edge. Obeying the rules makes the relax there safer,” concludes Łukasz Koperski.