

INTRODUCTION

SETTING BASELINES: Introduction to Awareness, Signcutting & Tracking

At one time, being able to read tracks and sign was a matter of life and death. Knowing where the food was and what the predators were doing could mean the difference between survival and extinction. Most of us would have to go back pretty far to find ancestry for whom that was literally true.²

— Paul Rezendes

In 2004, I responded to a search in Montgomery County, Virginia. The missing persons were two siblings and a friend who went to a look-out spot on a trail system for a beautiful set of river falls. There was no trail to the bottom because it was just too steep, but they went down to the bottom of the gorge anyway. When they got down, they didn't want to go back up the way they had come. They decided to start walking downstream but night came quickly. I am amazed that they got cell phone reception down there, but they called for help and were given the recommendation to stay put. Our task was to cut for sign around the look-out point. We found their tracks (better yet ... slips and slides) leading straight down a slope on which we had difficulty maintaining control and descending. When we reached the bottom, we moved quickly downstream. We were finding their tracks every few hundred yards on the occasional sand bar that very clearly provided three different footwear impressions. Twenty minutes and a mile later, we found three glad-to-see-us teenagers sitting on a boulder. Tracking is a great tool, but not the only one, that should be used at every search.

INTRODUCTION TO TRACKING

Tracking is an ancient skill that has been called the origin of science.³ We all have ancestors who subsisted because they could find and follow tracks and sign to their prey. These same ancestors survived because they were aware of their surroundings.

Regardless of our individual genealogy, we all have the capacities necessary to detect the passage and presence of another person; that is our natural awareness. As Olaus Murie wrote in *Animal Tracks*, "Man has lost his power of tracking by scent but has developed greater intellectual

2 Rezendes, Paul. (1999) *Tracking and the Art of Seeing: How to Read Animal Tracks and Sign (2nd ed.)* New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers. p. 14.

3 Liebenberg, Louis. (1990) *The Art of Tracking: The Origin of Science.* Cape Town, South Africa: Clyson Printers. p. v.

refinement. He can read a more complex story in footprints than mere identification and direction of travel.”⁴

Imagine a track on the ground as a letter, and several tracks forming a word. Interpreting the tracks to determine the writer, how long the tracks have been there, and many other features bind the words together to form sentences. With practice, these sentences can be put together to form a paragraph. Eventually a story can be constructed from detecting and interpreting tracks and sign. It’s critical to learn to read the story correctly and be aware of the limitations in our abilities to read the sign, clues or tracks that we encounter. Not all sign will be relevant to the missing person.

DEVELOPING TRACKING SKILLS

I joined the Southwest Virginia Mountain Rescue Group in Blacksburg, Virginia, in the fall of 1993. My first official tracking course in 1995 not only hooked me on finding tracks but also showed me that I was missing a lot of what was going on around me. That was the Field Team Signcutter (FTS) course developed and taught by Greg Fuller through the Virginia Department of Emergency Services (which is now the Virginia Department of Emergency Management). I went on to apply tracking and clue-awareness skills as a search and rescue volunteer, and will probably continue to do so until I die. As a VDEM instructor, I am now the course coordinator for the FTS class. I also started the Natural Awareness Tracking School to teach tracking and other outdoor skills outside of the VDEM venue. My website, www.trackingschool.com, has more information if you are interested. I have sought and received instruction from a variety of tracking instructors throughout the United States. As basic as the premise of tracking is, all instructors teach the topic with different perspectives and experience. All of them have something to offer to the science and art of tracking, and none should be dismissed without investigation. You must develop practices of learning from others, recording experiences, using all of the senses all of the time and practicing everywhere. There is no time limit on learning.

A model for learning has been developed that describes at least four stages of learning using four terms: unconscious, conscious, incompetence and competence. Howell describes the four stages this way:

***Unconscious incompetence** — this is the stage in which you are not even aware that you do not have a particular competence. **Conscious incompetence** — this is when you know that you want to learn how to do something but you are incompetent at doing it. **Conscious competence** — this is when you can achieve this particular task but you are very conscious of everything you do. **Unconscious competence** — this is when you finally master it and you do not even think about what you have done, such as when you have learned to ride a bike very successfully.*⁵

4 Murie, Olaus. (1974) *Animal Tracks*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company. p. 1.

5 Howell, William. (1986) *The Empathic Communicator*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press. p. 29. http://changingminds.org/explanations/learning/consciousness_competence.htm. Retrieved April 8, 2008.

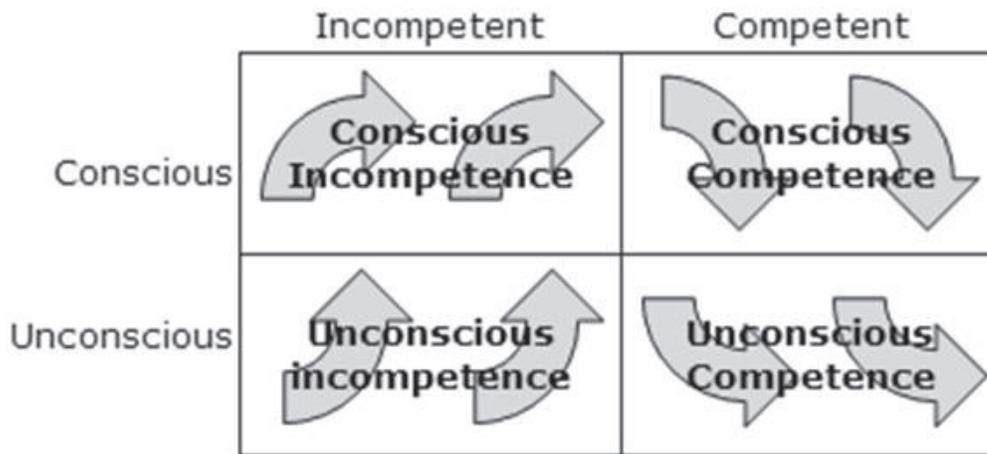


Figure 1-1. A model of learning as the movement through combined stages of consciousness and competence. This model describes the learning process for a particular skill as starting at unconscious incompetence, moving through conscious stages and eventually through unconscious competence.

This book may get you through unconscious incompetence into conscious incompetence. But reading about a topic can't get you through conscious competence. That, for tracking, takes dirt time. Any and every topic in this book could be studied for hours, days, even weeks and months, and certainly years. Remember that this book is on foundations: fundamentals of tracking and awareness upon which field practice can be built. As Ty Cunningham has said, "The stronger the foundation, the sturdier the house."⁶

One step in the growth of a tracker is to help dispel the myth and mystique of a person who has supernatural skills that no one else can gain. This can be done by educating others on the fact that tracking, signcutting and awareness are teachable and learnable skills. Dime store novels and tinsel town movies have exacerbated the myth of the perfect, unerring, all-knowing tracker. This philosophy has also been perpetuated by people taking introductory (one day or one week) courses and subsequently calling themselves trackers. If someone states that they are a tracker, ask them about their skills, especially as they apply to searching for missing persons. It is entirely practical to ask about his/her training, certifications and practice, and if s/he maintains a logbook of his/her tracking experiences.

There are many traits that are important to a tracking student. Among these qualities — that are either inherent or developed — are curiosity, perseverance, patience, quietude, confidence, the ability to analyze and the ability to recognize your limitations. It is okay to say "I don't know" to yourself or someone else about seeing or interpreting sign. Acknowledging your limitations will benefit the missing person and search mission more than making up an answer to artificially fill a void of information or lack of experience. As Charles Darwin stated in *Descent of Man*, "... ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge."⁷

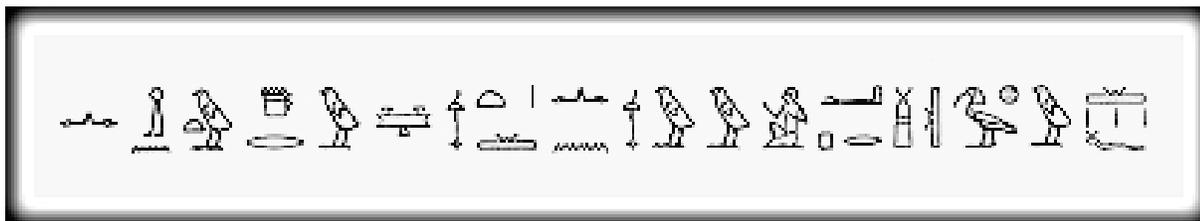
⁶ from personal communication.

⁷ Darwin, Charles. (1872) *Descent of Man*. New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, Inc. p. xx introduction.

It has been my experience that one of the first realities that a new tracking student learns to accept is that not only do signcutting and tracking work, but also this art and skill is not learned overnight. This can be very frustrating for some and not “everybody” can learn to cut for sign and track effectively and efficiently. But many wonderful, challenging and rewarding years are in front of you if you chose to continue your education in tracking.⁸

— Greg Fuller

One of the skills you should develop is to recognize the limitations of your abilities — i.e., know what you know, and know what you don't know. Understand what your training is, and perform only at the level to which you have been trained.



No limit may be set to art, neither is there any craftsman that is fully master of his craft.⁹

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This textbook is intended to introduce you, the student, to the core knowledge and skills of awareness, signcutting and tracking needed to perform as a clue-aware member of a ground-search field team. The text is designed for education before, during and after taking the Field Team Signcutter (FTS) course. It's a companion to the FTS course and presented for academic study only. This work is broad in nature, in that it encompasses a wide variety of topics related to tracking. It is a practical guide that can be construed as a mile wide and an inch deep — literally and figuratively scratching the surface of many areas that you may encounter while looking for clues of the missing person. I have repeated some points throughout the text to emphasize the importance of these concepts.

This book helps explain what to look for, how to look for it, and what to do when you find it. It's a survey of a wide variety of topics in tracking. A book can take you only so far in understanding these topics. That intellectual understanding will be integrated with knowledge when you practice, when you spend “dirt time” applying the points addressed in this text. Books by Bob Carss and Jack Kearney have many sufficient and challenging field exercises for you to work on and gain dirt time.¹⁰

8 Fuller, Greg. (2001) *Foundations for Awareness Signcutting and Tracking Student Workbook and Manual (Revision 8)*. Onancock, VA: self-published. Introduction.

9 Instruction of Ptahhotep, <http://www.eyelid.co.uk/hiromenu.htm>. Retrieved April 8, 2008.

10 Carss, Bob. (2000) *The SAS Guide to Tracking*. New York, NY: The Lyons Press.
Kearney, Jack. (1978) *Tracking: A Blueprint for Learning How*. El Cajon, CA: Pathways Press.

Setting Baselines

Each chapter in this textbook begins with criteria set forth in the current Virginia Department of Emergency Management Search and Rescue program standards for Field Team Signcutter as approved by the Virginia Search and Rescue Council in 2007. Currently, the accepted standards can be found online at <http://vasarco.org/>. You will find that there are sections of material that, at first glance, appear to be repeated in different parts of the book. Even though repetition is education (and emphasizes the importance of certain concepts, as I mentioned above), there are actually differences in the similar sections. There are so many variables involved, and many overlap; the recurring sections address important topics from different contexts. As Greg Fuller explains in the introduction to his manual, “Almost all of the information and experiences received in one ‘component’ of tracking bleed into other tracking areas. Also, the more [you practice], quality practice, the better and longer the retention. **Awareness, signcutting and tracking are perishable skills. Use them or lose them.**”¹¹

I won’t describe many field exercises in this text for a couple of reasons. Again, this book is a supplement to the FTS course. Objectives of the FTS course are to develop skills to — among other things — find sign, clues and tracks; interpret an approximate age of the sign; determine direction of travel; and possibly follow the line of sign left by a missing person. I recommend that you take the FTS course and/or work on those exercises put forth in Mr. Kearney’s and Mr. Carss’s books. As Charles Worsham¹² included in his teaching, the best tracking book is the one that you write as a collection of your notes from your tracking experiences and observations.

YOU NEED MORE

Don’t take anything written or described in this book as the final word. As Greg Fuller wrote in his manual, “You are expected to, and must, prove everything that you are taught in this [textbook] for yourself.”¹³ Reading provides information that is interesting, but practice will provide you with applicable experience. If there is anything in this manual that isn’t useful, or — even worse — wrong, please communicate that to me. If there are any concepts or explanations that you believe should be added, please let me know. “Any input that you give that will make this [text] better, will help future students and improve our overall goal of **finding the lost or missing person, safer, faster and in better condition**, and will be greatly appreciated.”¹⁴

I am, and likely always will be, a student of tracking. I am also, and likely will always be, a student of teaching tracking. Your questioning subject matter in this text can also improve my ability to communicate it. As written by Aldous Huxley in *The Art of Seeing*, “Printed instructions can never replace the personal ministrations of a competent teacher; nor is it possible, in a short book, to indicate exactly how much stress should be laid on any given technique in any given case But ... a gifted and experienced teacher will certainly make the discovery much more expeditiously. And yet, in spite of this, printed instructions still have their use.”¹⁵

11 Fuller, Greg. (2001) *Foundations for Awareness Signcutting and Tracking Student Workbook and Manual (Revision 8)*. Onancock, VA: self-published. Introduction.

12 Charles Worsham, Tracking classes taught in Madison Heights, VA, 1999.

13 Fuller, Greg. (2001) *Foundations for Awareness Signcutting and Tracking Student Workbook and Manual (Revision 8)*. Onancock, VA: self-published.

14 Ibid.

15 Huxley, Aldous. (1982) *The Art of Seeing*. Berkeley, CA: Creative Arts Book Company. p. 47.

There are two hidden dangers in writing a book of this sort. The first is that whenever something is set in print, it takes on an aura of sanctity and finality. The written word is taken as the final authority. However, the art of tracking is not static and unchanging; new ideas and techniques are being tried continually. It is therefore hoped that this text will be used as a guide and not as a gospel. Use it as a starting point from which you may develop your own individual tracking skills that perhaps go beyond the rudiments presented herein.¹⁶

INTROCLUSION

As a conclusion to the introduction, this book is intended as a textbook for the Virginia Department of Emergency Management Search and Rescue program Field Team Signcutter course. Each chapter is outlined according to the FTS standards approved by the Virginia Search and Rescue Council in 2007. This book is not a complete explanation of every topic and variable you will encounter while studying and pursuing sign, tracks and clues. The text lays and explores the foundations of many topics encountered while attempting to detect and interpret the general sign and potential clues in the search area. Let's go forward and explore what we can in written form, remembering that the best instruction on finding and interpreting sign resides in the field practice (dirt time) of looking for, finding and studying, sign, clues and tracks.



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16 Robbins, Roland. (1977) *Mantracking: Introduction to the step-by-step method*. Montrose, CA: Search and Rescue Magazine. p. xiii.