LIVING ON THE EDGE

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My first attempt ended in failure. We were not sure enough of ourselves and, as such, were not prepared to push to the point where we felt we were almost out of control. I stepped back down to my previous foothold and shouted down to Rob that I was coming down. I had had enough for today and so had he. It was 1973 and Rob Simcocks and myself were attempting to climb Crookneck's East Face—one of the more impressive climbs of the Glasshouse Mountains in southern Queensland *(Crookneck and Mt Beerwah pictured)*.

Dabbling in bushwalking whilst studying physics at Queensland University in the early 1970s (some might say dabbling in physics while studying bushwalking), I was continually attracted to the art of rockclimbing—pushing myself as far as I could gymnastically on cliffs to see what I was capable of climbing. Competence on rock is a useful skill for bushwalking but not necessarily an essential one. Rockclimbers take this art to extremes and, for several years, I decided to follow the pursuit. During this time, I learned the intricate maneuvres on rock which would allow me to climb seemingly impossible vertical and overhanging cliffs and, as well, learn to use the specialized protection equipment which would ensure my climb was a reasonably safe one.

The learning experience was not without it dangers but by carefully progressing from easier to more difficult and riskier challenges, the dangers were minimized and, in fact, almost eliminated. After a couple of years I was climbing safely and confidently over terrain which only a short time previously would have put my life in extreme danger.

Failed challenges lurk deep within the mind and demand one day to be resolved. That *one day* was not far off—the very next year in fact, 1974, and this time with Gary Huish, I arrived at the base of Crookneck with more determination and more skill than in previous attempts.

The first section went easily and I arrived at the well-known loose column of rock with little difficulty. For me, this was now all familiar territory. Reaching over the loose block, I carefully pulled myself up in such a way that I could gain progress without dislodging it. It wobbled as I stepped up and I was happy to move on to firmer stances. The block would stay in place for many years, helping people over this blank section. I heard one day it came off and now this part of the climb is lacking a foothold. I'm not sure what climbers now do at this spot.

My previous high point was well above this block; in fact at the large overhang which attempts to bar the way to the easier final third of the face. Wedging myself in the crack below this roof, I was able to reach up over my head and clip my rope into two old pitons which had remained there since the first ascent in 1959. They were rusty and looked weak and I was sure they probably would not hold my body weight had I fallen. My previous anchor point—a good one, was about three metres below me. If I were to fall now and the two old pitons give way, then I would plummet six metres before the rope pulled me up. This would be a serious fall if it were onto flat ground but it was no big deal up here. I was fifty metres above the ground and overhanging it. If I fell now I would simply end up in space hanging from the rope and totally unhurt. I could then climb back up to where I was and try again.

Although I knew the old pitons offered me little protection, I clipped into them anyway—maybe they would slow my fall at the very least.

I looked down and saw Gary staring up intensely as he slowly payed out the rope as I moved up into what felt like oblivion. This was all new territory for me and my heart began to race. I drew level with the old pitons and stared at them. Were they of any use? Above me were several committing moves before I reached the wide stance about five metres above the overhang. Once I swung out onto its lip there would be no return.

It was time to go. I reached up and found the good handhold which I had been told was there and then, slowly using my arms, pulled my body upwards and outwards over the yawning chasm below. The old pitons were level with my waist now and just as they disappeared from sight below the overhang I saw them bend under the strain of the rope and worse, one of them break off and jangle down the rope.

I have never felt more exposed. It was enough to send panic shooting through veins but somehow I controlled the fear as I had learnt to do on easier climbs and pressed on upwards towards what I hoped would be better footholds before my arms gave way with exhaustion. I had known the old pitons would guarantee me little extra security but seeing them buckle at the worst possible time was almost too much. It was only through my previous experiences on easier climbs that I could now deal with this, assessing the situation quickly and knowing the best action to take. And this action was simply to keep climbing, knowing there was easier ground up ahead. Besides, there could be no going back down the overhang!.

The remainder of the climb went smoothly. Gary came up fast and, psychologically aided by a rope from above, had little difficulty at the overhang that had almost brought me unstuck. In a gathering thunderstorm, we climbed quickly to the summit, drenched by the sudden downpour but extremely happy that we had met the challenge we had dreamt of for some time. We descended the easier normal route as quickly as we could to avoid lightning strikes which seemed to be all around us.

It is now the new millennium and over the intervening years, Crookneck or Mount Coonowrin as it is officially known, has played host to many thousands of ascents. Not all have been by the East Face. Most have been by much easier routes—and there are many on this mountain. It has been a valuable tool in presenting both a physical and mental challenge and in the process helping to hone many personal skills. People go to risky places knowing there is potential danger there.—both objective and subjective, and gain great satisfaction in overcoming the challenges these risks present. Subjective dangers are the ones we put ourselves in because of our stupidity or lack of skill. Objective dangers we can do little about. These are the events of nature such as rock fall, lightning strikes and in wilder and higher mountains than the Glasshouses, avalanches, freezing temperatures and a lack of oxygen. We know the objective dangers exist on mountains, as they do in many aspects of our life, but we face them with skills and knowledge which minimize their impact on us. And these skills and knowledge are hard won through practical experience and training.

People cannot be protected from objective dangers by keeping people away from such hazards. Dangers are forever present in one form or another throughout our daily lives. It was therefore something of a shock that I read at the end of 1999 of the Queensland Government's closing of Crookneck to further climbing due to the high risk of rockfall. If such a move was not so serious I would have had a quiet giggle to myself about the over-protective society and left it at that. But if one piece of public land can be closed on such flimsy grounds then others can easily follow.

Governments may have a role in pointing out objective dangers and this can only be welcomed as it is, for example, with road safety issues. Individuals can then *learn* to manage these risks as best they can. If it is fear of litigation that has prompted government to act in such a heavy handed manner, then governments should address the problem of inappropriate litigation, returning the issue of responsibility to the individual. I can only hope that by the time you read this, the foolish decision to close a park on these grounds has been reversed and once again individuals can get a feel for living close to the edge.