RECREATIONAL RISK ; LIVING DANGEROUSLY HAS REWARDS, RESPONSIBILITIES:

The blizzard of snow making new news in Colorado this week is burying old news about Mount Hood in Oregon, where two climbers were last heard from on Dec. 10.

This old story -- now muffled by a veil of deep snow -- made me wonder why all climbing parties on killer peaks aren't required to carry emergency locator devices. The cost for these pocket-sized devices isn't a problem. They're available at a reasonable rent at base stations at Mount Hood and other ice-clad summits.

The problem is that mandatory use of personal locator devices is opposed by members of the search-and-rescue community. They're concerned that such devices would give climbers a false sense of security or that endangered climbers might be reluctant to activate their devices, fearing the high price of rescue.

Based on my own experience, however, I think there's something else going on. Being out of touch while in the wilderness is simply part of the allure because it increases the risk.

There are plenty of good reasons to climb mountains that have nothing to do with the natural high of risk-released hormones. For starters, there's the spiritual high associated with lofty summits, especially icy, lonely ones. There is also ambition, machismo, technical achievement, the excuse to purchase new gear, the challenge and, for geologists, the collecting of rock specimens. Finally, there is the opportunity for climbers to join an outdoor club where the gravitational attraction for each other approaches that of enlisted military veterans, and for much the same reason -- exposure to risk followed by survival makes for social super glue.

Taking risks is an essential part of human nature. Otherwise, our African Australopithecine ancestors would likely have starved to death on the savannah for fear of being eaten by great cats. Without taking risks, my European Homo sapiens ancestors might have frozen to death, rather than evict a cave bear from a future home. Without taking risks, my American homesteading ancestors would never have set foot on the northern Great Plains. This biological predisposition to risks continues to be manifested by shady activities such as illegal gambling, insider stock trading, recreational shoplifting and covert adultery.

Psychologists have had fun trying to understand risky behavior. According to Marvin Zuckerman, who helped establish a theory of sensation seeking, there are four different sub-traits involved: a willingness to take physical risks, a need for new experiences, an ability to overcome normal inhibitions and a low tolerance for boredom. Many people score average to low on these behaviors. I know I would score high, having done some alarming things when young and being the kind of guy whose midlife adjustment is to let his gas tank hover just above absolute zero. All the climbers I’ve known would probably score high as well, especially my former student advisee who died in a fall while climbing.

Society benefits when individuals assume personal risk. Consider: the inventor who mortgages a home to develop a new product; the oil company that spends millions to earn billions; the surgeon who attempts a novel procedure on a consenting patient. When the inventor fails, the oil well comes up dry or the patient dies, society isn't expected to pay.

Not so with search-and-rescue operations for stranded climbers on mountains known to kill time and time again. Though routine wilderness searches are often assisted by skilled and heroic volunteers, most involve a public price tag so high that charge-for- rescue laws are being implemented in
several states, including Oregon. I wonder what I paid in taxes for the military helicopter that crashed on Mount Hood while attempting a rescue in 2002.

I’m not suggesting that we quit searching for lost climbers. The urge to rescue one another is as much a part of human nature as the urge to take risks. What I’m suggesting is that personal locator devices be used to keep rescue costs down and to save the lives of climbers who, ironically, risk their lives in the name of recreation.