

When working or playing on the river, safety is always our first priority. We know that most accidents are not caused by one single action, but rather a series of small mistakes, that can ultimately lead to a devastating outcome. It is fair to say then, that our safety is contingent on our ability to see any given situation clearly, and make effective decisions.

We are experts at making decisions. A thousand times a day we decide what to eat, what to wear, what to say, and so on. In recent years there has been a significant amount of research conducted on our abilities to make decisions. And from this research, there are some interesting insights into human beings decision making processes that are very applicable to the river.

Most of us think that a good decision is one that has been thought through thoroughly. When making that decision, we would like to know everything there is to know about the decision and what its outcome will be. *If we are buying a car, how many miles are on it? How many owners? When was the last maintenance?* Perhaps we will even write out a list of pros and cons, and even weigh the potential cost of each. However, for most of our decisions, this technique is not applicable. We either do not have the time or the desire to ponder every possible outcome and rarely do we have all the information.

This is very true on the river. Our decisions must be quick. *Should I go right of the rock or left?* Rarely do we have even a fraction of all the information. *There may be a submerged log in the river right channel.* And we almost certainly have indefinite outcomes. *If I go right, I may float over the log, or I may get pinned.*

Researchers have found that one technique we use to make these quick decisions is to create rules of thumb, or as the researches call it-- a hueristic. These hueristics allow us to make snap decisions by comparing past experiences to make a judgement. An example of the similarity hueristic would be that we know we enjoyed a book by a certain author, then we will decide more easily to purchase a book with a similar theme, plot, or characters.

These hueristics are effective and save us a significant amount of time in our daily lives. However, we should be aware that this kind of decision making can lead us in the wrong direction and possibly cause an accident.

In the outdoor industry, avalanche researchers have been the first to jump on this. What they found in avalanche fatalities was that 95% of the slides were caused by the victim or the victims party. They also found that the group usually had at least one member of the party that was trained and experienced. Furthermore, they found that the group had at least three clues that a slide was possible--there was sliding in the area, the forecast was considerable or higher, there was wind loading, they were skiing in an obvious slide path, there were terrain traps, etc.

From this research, they were able to identify six “heuristic traps” that the victims fell for. The acronym FACETS was developed as a tool to avoid future accidents and can be directly applied to river use.

- **Familiarity Heuristic-** “Don’t worry, I have run this river 100 times.” We are more inclined to take risks if we are on familiar terrain. However, on the river, just as on the mountain, conditions change, and our experience before may not pertain to the current situation.
- **Acceptance Heuristic-**When in a group, we choose not to speak up so that we gain approval from friends and peers. We don’t want to sound scared or overly worried, and we don’t want to go against the grain.
- **Commitment Heuristic-** We have driven four hours and hiked two with these boats on our shoulder. We have come too far to turn back now.
- **Expert Halo Heuristic-** “The lead boater has a lot more experience than I do, and he has been here a bunch, I don’t need to worry.” This, however, may not be the case, and if you are worried, then say so.
- **Tracks (Scarcity Heuristic)-** “This is the last day the river will be at this level, we have to go now.” For avalanche terrain this refers to the possibility of others getting the first run down a fresh powder field.
- **Social Proof Heuristic-** This is the lemming approach. “Everyone else ran the rapid, I should be fine.”

As you can see, these traps can easily be applied to the river. Although the research has not yet been done concerning river accidents, it is a logical conclusion that these factors could have played a role. I am sure you can think of a time that you have said at least one of these things to yourself. Next time recognize that this is a possible trap, and that it may not be applicable for the current situation.