[photos] Off-piste slide in Zürs, Austria. [Seth Lightcap]

Crafting a Common Language to Save Lives

Project Zero aims to eliminate avalanche fatalities
by Michael Sudmeier

Earning your turns is far sexier than attaining an education. And today, it's far easier to snag backcountry equipment than the knowledge needed to use it safely. As a result, there's no shortage of stories involving uninformed and ill-prepared riders venturing into the backcountry—be it crews loitering in terrain traps or friends sharing a single beacon, shovel and probe.

For riders eager to enhance their education, there's an abundance of information—and sources for it—in competition and conflict with one another. Rather than providing a solid foundation for backcountry travel, this often creates confusion and missed opportunities. Consequently, the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE) is launching Project Zero. This initiative aims to eliminate avalanche fatalities among backcountry users by providing a unified avalanche safety narrative.

"Project Zero is an effort to bring all interested stakeholders to the table to craft a consistent public safety message [and ensure] that we are speaking the same language," explains AIARE Executive Director Brian Lazar. According to Lazar the list of these stakeholders—and what they stand to contribute—is substantial. This list includes avalanche forecasting centers and educators, gear manufacturers, industry organizations, ski areas, the media, land managers, retailers, and backcountry users including skiers, snowboarders, and snowmobilers. "We want everyone to feel like they have a place at the table and involve them," Lazar says.

This is especially crucial given the initiative's objectives. "What we're trying to do is not just a PR campaign, but a concerted, collaborative effort to affect people's behavior when they travel into the backcountry," Lazar explains. In addition to crafting a unified message, the organization is working to create the infrastructure necessary for its successful delivery. This includes developing curricula, training stakeholders in how to

best educate backcountry users, and creating web-based resources. In addition, AIARE is working with avalanche forecasting centers to develop consistent language and resources for communicating avalanche forecasts and related information.

Project Zero is continuing to gain momentum following its debut a little over a year ago. Those eager to back it include a range of manufacturers and the Backcountry Task Force of SnowSports Industries America (SIA). "Backcountry is now part of the mainstream, so there are some heavy hitters getting involved," explains Bruce Edgerly, the vice president of sales and marketing for Backcountry Access. "Avalanche safety is a hot topic right now in the wake of the Tunnel Creek and Sheep Creek tragedies. We could have an avalanche fatality epidemic on our hands if avalanche education doesn't keep up with the rapid adoption of backcountry equipment."

Jon Frederick, marketing director of Golden, Colo. retailer Bent Gate, also emphasizes that the growth in backcountry users further justifies the need for Project Zero. "With a high-risk activity like backcountry snowboarding, it is important to be responsible with how we grow the user base," he explains. "A unified avy safety message seems like a perfect foundation for this responsible growth."

According to Christian Mason, the director of sales and marketing for Deuter USA and Ortovox, brands and retailers play an especially crucial role in educating riders who are new to the backcountry. "We don't know if these new users understand that they're putting themselves at risk," he says. Mason explains that, as a result, those who make and sell equipment for the backcountry need to ensure this gear is accompanied by additional support—especially in the form of educational resources. "We don't want people to have to use our equipment," he explains. "We want them to know how to use it, but more importantly, how to avoid getting into a bad situation in the first place."