

Vetting Non-Hikers

The Challenge

Rarely, a non-hiker will call to sign-up for a CVHC hike. The website is welcoming but is clearly targeted to *hikers*. And surely, most non-hikers take one look at it and decide that the club hikes are beyond their ability, but some press-on. The response “I can do it” to vetting questions isn’t always true (at any level) and can lead to a catastrophic failure, especially with a non-hiker on a group hike.

The challenge with non-hikers, or perhaps out-of-town guests visiting a Club member, is the lack of context. One highly experienced club leader commented that some people believe walking along El Paseo to be the equivalent level of effort of a hike. At a higher fitness level, another leader encountered a walker who was training to hike to the top of the Tram by golfing.

Almost all hikers develop a sense of distance and difficulty early in their pursuits on the trails, but individuals with little or no fitness experience with walking, running, or cycling often don’t know, but may not know that they don’t know. They may courageously sign-up, hoping it will work out or that somehow others will be able to make-up for their shortcomings. Minimizing the number of people who slip through the vetting process is so important to the success of Club hikes that it is worth having a back-up strategy for vetting novices.

Creating Context

There is no common context from which to vet most non-hikers and some guests—the leader’s questions about which trails they have done and with which leaders are futile. With experienced hikers new to the area, the vetting leader can branch into other hiking situations; with the non-hiker, consider having the candidate visualize *any* continuous walking situation they have recently done.

..Have you ever/frequently done 1/2/3 hour walks without needing to rest often or for a long time? (They probably have a better sense of time than distance).

..When walking, do you usually stroll or walk at a brisk pace or something in between?

..When taking long walks, are they usually indoors or on a beach or a nature trail or a track?

..How do you manage when your outdoor walks are in the heat?

Self-Vetting Using Impressions

Another strategy for vetting the non-hiker is to encourage them to go walking locally to give you current information about their capability in the desert conditions. You could suggest:

..Palm Desert Civic Center Park, Palm Desert

..Sunnylands Center & Gardens, Rancho Mirage

..Santa Rosa & San Jacinto National Monument Visitors Center, Palm Desert

These locations offer walking paths, sometimes shaded, in safe areas that are up to a mile long. Encourage them to take a number of laps at a brisk pace and to report back to you as to how they felt.

Self-Vetting Using Numbers

A more sophisticated self-vetting approach is to have the candidate hiker monitor both their distance and speed. Since the non-hiker likely won't have a sports watch with activity apps, consider suggesting that they buy a pedometer to count steps. Pedometers can be purchased for as little as \$10.

With a way to measure steps, propose that they walk the equivalent distance of the hike they'd like to do in one of the above-mentioned parks. In round numbers, there are about 2,000 steps to the mile. If your hike is 5 miles, they need to be able to walk 10,000 steps with minimal rest time.

Encourage them to walk those 10,000 steps in 2.5 hours, which would be a 2-mph pace. Of course, adjust the numbers so the mileage is similar to your hike and the time makes sense with your pace. They may not have an opportunity to make this self-assessment before your hike, but it's best that they postpone hiking with the Club until you both have a sense of their capacity.

Once they complete their "pedometer in the park" challenge, have them contact you. With their time and distance walked, together you can decide if they will likely succeed on your hike or not.

If they can't imagine walking continuously on flat, level, paved, sidewalks for that amount of time, they clearly aren't ready for the mileage on rough trail surfaces with gain. At that point, you should be able to politely and comfortably decline them for your hike. If they are determined to become a hiker, encourage them to increase their endurance on the predictable and safe park paths before taking to the trails with a group.

Factoring-In Elevation Gain

It is a short list of hikes that can be done in the Coachella Valley with little elevation gain and the hiker often confronts significant trail steepness immediately. You can use a formula from a Canadian hiking club to estimate the increase in difficulty of a given hike that is due to the elevation gain compared with a relatively flat hike of the same distance. The formula uses the concept of "computed miles," which are miles computed from the gain that are added to the actual mileage.

For example, the Art Smith to First Oasis hike is 5 miles, round trip, and has 1800' of gain. Using the formula in which 300' of gain is roughly equivalent to adding 0.6 miles in distance, that 1800' elevation is converted into 'calculated miles'. Those calculated miles add an additional 3.6 miles. The 5-mile hike becomes a "calculated mileage" of 8.6 miles, which triggers a significantly different sense of the hike's difficulty in most people.

Persistence

One of the joys of being a hike leader is helping others develop their expertise and fitness. Those leaders sponsoring relatively easier hikes may also have the unique opportunity to help a non-hiker transition into becoming a hiker. Consider using the above vetting strategies to cultivate an eager new hiker without them embarrassing themselves or encumbering your group hike.