



Maintaining SOTA's Reputation

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MELBOURNE SOTA CONFERENCE 2014

One of SOTA's Rules is that the concept/activity shall not be brought into disrepute by the activator.

I was motivated to make this presentation because of a number of incidents that have occurred in the last couple of months that could have led to this rule being invoked.

So, how do we activators maintain a good reputation for SOTA? Indeed what applies to any portable operator who wishes to maintain Amateur Radio's reputation. What are the "Do's" and "Don't's" and what behavioural pattern should we adopt in a sticky situation?

Things to avoid (a few mostly obvious examples).

- **Entering private land or closed sites without permission.**

Most landowners will give permission for a hiker if asked. Some have had bad experiences with AR and will say no. Respect their view. Closed sites are closed for a reason. You might be able to sneak in and activate but if later challenged and you can't prove you had a permit your activation will be cancelled by the SOTA Management Team (MT) and you will be in the "sin bin".
- **Camping in areas where this is not permitted.**

It's OK to have a canopy or small tent to shelter from the sun or rain, but if you have sleeping gear and stayed after sunset you probably were camping. If you were still there at sunrise you were camping. The MT will act on such indiscretions.

- **Putting yourself in danger of injury, getting lost or stuck up a cliff.**

Activation should not involve taking obvious risks. Always be over prepared and carry basic navigation tools such as a map and compass. Read the Association Reference Manual (ARM) for more advice. We don't want to see your rescue search on the 6 PM news. Not all publicity is good publicity.
- **Activating in the bush on a total fire ban day.**

Fire can start anywhere anytime in the mountains and bush. Avoidance is the only sensible action. Keep out of the evening news bulletin.
- **Heading into the mountains when there is a storm alert for the area.**

Even in summer substantial snow can fall on the highest peaks in SE Australia. Heavy rain can cause rapid rises in creeks and rivers cutting off access and egress roads for days. Lightening is a hazard of operating on a mountain top when storms are brewing or, worse, in progress.

Things to do.

- **Take a copy of your licence. It is an authority to operate your radio wherever you may drive or hike as part of a normal personal recreational pursuit. It is not a permit to do other things but it helps to be able to show you are a responsible person pursuing a legitimate recreation.**
- **Be polite and greet visitors. Explain what you are doing.
A smile and a keenness to explain go a long way to create a positive impression.**
- **Take a brochure on SOTA to show interested people.
A sample “Visitors Information Card” is available in the VK3 Documents section. It is A5 size but you might like to do your own.**
- **Do not leave anything more than footprints behind – no rubbish.**
- **Take away only photographs and memories. Leave the wildflowers and wildlife alone.**

- **Obey mandatory signs.**
e.g. “No Entry”, “Management Vehicles Only”, “Keep to the Path”, etc.
- **Be properly equipped for your excursion. Ref to the ARM for suggestions.**
Make a check list and double check. You should do that for your technical bits but make sure you have the essentials for navigation and basic first aid and plenty of water. You can survive 3 weeks without food but only 3 days without water.
It’s better to carry an extra kilogram of “just in case” stuff than to find yourself in trouble.

- **Plan carefully and select summits within your ability.**
If inexperienced in bushwalking start out with an experienced buddy and slowly increase the difficulty. Check the blogs of other activators and the maps from Forest Explorer Online etc to find out about access, track conditions and steepness of ascent.
- **Undertake more difficult summits with a partner or two**
It's easier to deal with a sick or injured person if there are three in the party.
- **Tell a reliable person where you are going and when you expect to be back.**
Stuff happens. If you get into trouble the sooner someone comes looking the better. Ring them if you are running late.

Stay out of the late evening news.

Dealing with the Public and Officialdom.

- **Avoid potential problems by keeping a low profile.
Keeping out of trouble is far better than trying to talk your way out of a confrontation. Above all try to create a positive impression.**



The low profile author

Dealing with the Public

- **Set up well away from fire spotting towers and public viewing areas.**

The viewing public may not like intrusion into their photograph or they might suffer from ‘Mast Phobia’. Prevention of these issues avoids having a long and uncomfortable and probably negative chat with the Ranger
- **Wave if they are watching you from a distance.**

You may be away from the main viewing area but if you can see them watching you a wave is reassuring to them. Bad guys don’t wave.

- **Greet them if they approach.**
It's just basic good manners. Create a good impression
- **Briefly explain what you are doing.**
They came over so they are interested. Be brief.
- **Emphasize what a great outdoors recreation it is.**
They are also on the mountain top so you can build on their empathy.
- **Offer them a SOTA brochure for more information.**

Dealing with Officialdom.

- **Set up well away from fire spotting towers and public viewing areas.**

If you set up within a few metres of the fire spotters tower he may feel you are intruding on his personal space and if so will try to get you off the mountain. Most fire spotters are friendly but it only takes one heated exchange to create a big problem for SOTA.
- **If challenged (“What are you doing here?”) be friendly.**

If the challenger is aggressive just explain you are a private recreational hiker who is using his licenced radio to report all is well and to chat to friends while having a rest. You will be hiking out in a short time. Remember a Park Ranger is there to help visitor and to protect the Park and assets and can ask you to leave the Park. A CFA officer has no jurisdiction except in relation to fire or their tower. You can be told to leave if there is fire danger.

- **Listen politely to any CFA officer or Park ranger who asks about what you are doing and remember to smile. Remember they have a job to do and mostly they are very friendly and helpful.**

If the questioner is friendly then you can expand on your SOTA activity. Most will respond positively when they understand your recreation and the transient and low impact nature of your excursion. “In addition to letting people know I’m OK I’m also participating in Summits On The Air”

You are in a public space and have responsibilities as well as rights and privileges. Be responsible, don’t demand your rights.

- **Never lose your temper.**

It can be difficult when faced with an apparently uneducated officious individual with an official shirt who wants to throw you off the mountain because of his personal view of the world or need to demonstrate power.

If you have to negotiate anything, you will fail if you show anger or frustration. Worse it will give SOTA activators a bad reputation.

- **Do not argue with officials, at least not in an obvious way.**
You can say “I don’t want to have an argument with you but would appreciate being able to explain my situation and then you can tell me where I have gone wrong.”
Or “Can you please elaborate on as I don’t think I understand.”
Put them in a position where they are advising you, not instructing or giving orders.

- **“You need a permit.” This is a common response to you the intruder from an official protecting his patch.**

A response that has been used is:

“Well actually I believe I don’t need a permit. I’m a recreational hiker using a licenced low power radio while resting but if I have contravened any signage or public notices please tell me which ones”.

If they insist on you having a permit ask where the permits are issued from and under what regulation number (“just to make sure you get it right for next time”).

Ask if you can contact a couple of friends on air to let them know you are OK before packing up. Agree to enquire about a permit in retard. Don’t push the issue if refused.

- **“Your mast is interfering with vital communications.”**

This is only likely to be said if you are close to the official stations aerials or hut and will likely be used after you have explained what you are doing. It’s likely to be a ploy or misunderstanding as you would not go out with a rig with significant out of band emissions would you?

Ask for a description of the interference as it will help avoiding it. Static and inability to hear distant station clearly is the most probable response you will get. Receiver overload is a remote possibility if you are really close to their aerials – hence the injunction not to set up too close.

The best approach then is to indicate you are confident that the interference is not from you but to put the issue beyond doubt say you will move say 100 m away and do so.

- **“A member of the public has complained about your mast.”**

A possible response is”

“Oh I sorry to hear that. What was the basis of their objection?”

If it is visual “pollution” ask for a suggestion as to where you could relocate to.

If it is the “Radio Masts Cause Cancer” syndrome you can try:

“I don’t want to upset anyone but you should know that this “mast” is a fishing pole and my transmitter is about as powerful as a mobile phone. A mobile phone radiates a person much more than my set up. While the complainer has rights I also have a right to enjoy my recreation. I am required by the ACMA to ensure that Electromagnetic Safety is maintained in all my operations and I have done so here”.

(You had of course hadn’t you? Read the LCD, use VK3UM’s on line calculator if unsure).

Ask if he will reassure the member of the public or suggest an alternative site.

- **In the case of a Park Ranger who may have the authority to ask you to leave, be prepared to abandon the activation and retreat gracefully.**

Do ask about the regulation that applied.

Do apologise for creating a situation where he has to eject you but point out you were not intentionally breaking any rules.

If a report goes in to higher authority your apology will stand us all in good stead.

Do exchange names and mobile phone numbers. Write them down. If the official is particularly difficult state your desire to be helpful and get their supervisors name position and telephone number as you may need to talk to them, if not now, next time.

DON'T GIVE SOTA A BAD REPUTATION BY STANDING UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS IN A FORCEFUL MANNER OR BY GETTING ON THE EVENING NEWS BECAUSE YOU ARE LOST ETC

Being deferential might not allow you to stay on the mountain this time but being aggressive might get us all banned. Better a lost QSO or activation than none ever again.

Avoid issues by taking a low profile and apply some thought to where you set up.

Do spend some time planning carefully be well equipped and don't take risks. Keep you out of the news spotlight.

Keep the public onside.

Enjoy your activations by making them stress free.