

River Challenge

Safety Operating Procedure (SOP)



1. Purpose

This SOP outlines the safe planning and delivery of the River Challenge activity to ensure risks are effectively managed and all participants are supported.

2. Scope

Applies to all AOEC staff, instructors, supervising adults, and participants involved in the River Challenge.

3. Description of Activity

The River Challenge is an instructor-led team building activity designed to foster personal growth, confidence, and river safety awareness. Sessions are carefully planned and delivered to provide a positive and engaging learning experience for all participants.

The programme typically runs over a 3½-hour session (including preparation), although timing may be adjusted to suit the needs of the group.

Participants begin with a 25-minute walk to the river, where they receive guidance on safe river practices, including when and how to cross as a group. The activity then involves moving upstream through a section of river, intermittently in and out of the water, while completing a series of supervised challenges.

This activity takes place in a natural river environment and can be physically demanding. It includes bush walking, moving over uneven terrain, and travelling through cold water.

The river-based component covers approximately 200–400 metres. As conditions can vary, all activities are continuously assessed and adapted by instructors based on environmental factors and participant capability.

While risks are inherent in outdoor activities, these are actively managed through experienced staff, appropriate supervision, and ongoing assessment to support a safe and rewarding experience.

4. Roles & Responsibilities

AOEC Instructors - Lead and manage the activity safely - Conduct risk assessments and make go/no-go decisions - Deliver safety briefings and monitor conditions - Coordinate emergency response if required

Supervising Adults (Teachers/Parents) - Retain duty of care for students at all times - Actively supervise assigned students (max 1:4 ratio) - Follow all instructor directions and safety procedures - Assist with risk management and emergency response if required

Participants - Follow all instructions - Wear required clothing and safety equipment - Disclose relevant medical or behavioural conditions

5. Instructor Requirements

- Minimum of 2 trained AOEC instructors per session
 - "New instructors are trained by a senior instructor, with the training duration based on their prior river experience, river knowledge, risk management, and group management skills."
 - Returning & Seasonal Instructors are updated with new safety practices and procedures
 - Risk Management Workshops are held on a regular basis for all instructors.
 - Instructors must be familiar with:
 - The river environment and route
 - Emergency procedures
 - Risk management systems (RAMS)
-

6. Ratios

- Minimum instructor ratio: 2 instructors per group (max 24 participants)
 - Supervising adult ratio: minimum 1 adult per 4 students
 - Ratios may be increased depending on group needs, environment, or risk level
-

7. Pre-Activity Requirements

7.1 Risk Disclosure & Medical Information

- All participants and their caregivers must have completed risk disclosure forms prior to activity, which includes the acceptance of Risks of this activity disclosed by AOEC.
- Medical conditions, injuries, behavioural needs, and water confidence must be identified
- A responsible adult must be assigned for participants requiring medication

7.2 Equipment Checks

Instructors must ensure the group carries: - First aid kit - Communication device (radio and/or phone in waterproof protection) - Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) - Throw rope - warm clothing and emergency food/drink (Hot Raro)

7.3 Clothing Requirements & Checks

Participants must wear: Thermal, polyprop, or merino layers required - No cotton!
Minimum 3 layers (base, mid, outer) - Waterproof jacket - Beanie - Thermal tights under shorts (optional) - Suitable footwear (secure sports shoes recommended) - a pair of big old socks to fit over shoes, to prevent slipping on rocks - Helmets are provided and must be worn at all times. Participants are checked for correct clothing and footwear.

7.4 Other Requirements

- Participants must go to the bathroom before leaving for the river.
 - ENSURE participants bring their personal medication with them, and that there is someone present (adult supervisor) who knows how to administer it
 - Hair should be tied up and out of the face.
-

8. Environmental & Weather Assessment (Go/No-Go Criteria)

The activity must not proceed if:

- River flow is fast, high, or difficult to cross safely
- Water levels exceed safe known markers or visual safety thresholds
- Heavy rainfall has occurred within the previous 24 hours impacting river conditions
- Weather conditions increase risk (e.g. heavy rain, strong winds, cold exposure risk)

Guiding principle: If in doubt, stay out.

Instructors must:

- Assess river conditions on the day
- Continuously monitor weather and river changes throughout the activity
- Modify or cancel activity if conditions deteriorate

9. Safety Briefing (Mandatory for all participants)

Must include:

- Identified hazards (slippery rocks, cold water, river flow)
- Behaviour expectations
- Use of safety equipment
- Communication signals (including hand signals)
- Emergency procedures

Supervising adults must be present and engaged during the briefing.

10. Activity Management

During the activity:

- Instructors lead route selection and hazard avoidance
- Supervising adults actively monitor assigned students
- Helmets must be worn at all times and are colour coded according to water confidence.
- Non-confident swimmers are clearly identified
- Participants are regularly checked for: - Cold stress (hypothermia) - Fatigue - Confidence levels
- Activity must be stopped if safety is compromised.

11. Emergency Response (Summary)

In the event of an incident:

- Instructor takes control of situation
 - First aid is administered by trained person
 - Emergency services contacted via 111 or PLB if required
 - AOEC Management Contacted via Satellite Messaging
 - Group managed and kept safe by supervising adults
 - Designated person meets emergency services at access point
 - All incidents must be reported to AOEC management and recorded.
-

12. Environmental Care (Reinforce this to the students)

- Stay on marked tracks following orange markers
- Avoid damaging vegetation by standing on seedlings and breaking branches
- Leave no Trace. Everything we take to the forest and river must be removed and disposed of properly back at camp, including food/scraps, footwear and clothing.
- Leave the river as you found it. Take down any dams or bridges built.
- Respect nature and its wildlife. No harming any creatures like spiders or eels.



River Challenge – Risk Disclosure

Understanding the Risks

We acknowledge that participating in the River Challenge involves inherent risks, including but not limited to: - Slippery and uneven terrain - Cold water exposure and risk of hypothermia - River hazards including moving water, submerged objects, and changing water levels - Risk of slips, trips, falls, and injury - Potential for serious harm, including drowning or death.

We understand these risks cannot be completely eliminated.

Medical & Fitness Declaration

We confirm that: - we have disclosed all relevant medical conditions, injuries, medications, and behavioural considerations - all participants (students & adults) are physically and mentally able to participate in this activity. We will inform staff of any changes prior to participation.

All participants have consented to receive medical treatment deemed necessary in an emergency.

Participant Responsibilities

We agree to: - Follow all instructions given by AOEC staff - That everyone will wear appropriate clothing and safety equipment at all times - Act responsibly and not endanger themselves or others. We understand that failure to follow instructions may result in removal from the activity.

Acknowledgement of Risk

We confirm that: - We understand the nature of the activity and associated risks - we have had the opportunity to ask questions - We are aware that everyone voluntarily choose to participate.

Liability

We understand that, to the extent permitted by law, AOEC is not liable for injury, loss, or damage resulting from risks inherent to the activity, particularly where instructions and safety requirements are not followed.

Additional Conditions

We agree to care for any equipment provided and accept responsibility for damage caused by misuse

Consent

Name of Participant : _____

Name of parent/caregiver of Participant: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

River Challenge – Risk Disclosure (Schools)

Risk Disclosure Documentation

All adult participants, and the parents/caregivers of participating students, have signed the risk disclosure document, confirmed they have read the activity overview and risk management summary, and have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

In addition, the school is required to complete and return a Risk Disclosure and Emergency Management Summary document. This document includes a full list of all participants (adults and students), relevant medical information, behavioural considerations, and any injuries. It also records confirmation, by way of a checklist against each participant's name, that signed risk disclosures and activity overview documents have been received.

Consent

Name of Teacher in Charge

Signature: _____.

Date: _____

Name of Principal/Member of BOT

Position _____

Signature: _____.

Date: _____

River Challenge – Overview & Risk Management Summary



Activity Description

The River Challenge is an instructor-led team building activity designed to develop confidence, teamwork, and river safety awareness. Participants walk to the river and travel through a short section of water, completing a series of supervised challenges.

Aongatete Outdoor Education Centre is Committed to safe, meaningful outdoor learning experiences.

Nature of the Environment

This activity takes place in a dynamic natural environment and can be physically demanding. While carefully managed, river conditions can vary due to weather and other environmental factors.

Key Risks (Inherent to River Environments)

While risks are actively managed, the following hazards are present:

- Slips, trips, and falls on uneven or wet surfaces
- Loss of footing due to water movement
- Partial or full immersion in water
- Cold exposure
- Anxiety or panic in a water environment
- Changing weather and river conditions

Risk Management Approach

Aongatete Outdoor Education Centre manages these risks through:

- Pre-activity safety briefing (including river awareness and expectations)
- Continuous instructor supervision throughout the activity
- Appropriate instructor-to-student ratios
- Ongoing environmental monitoring (weather and river conditions)
- Dynamic decision-making, including modifying or stopping the activity if required

Participant Safety & Wellbeing

Participant wellbeing is prioritised at all times.

Participants will be removed or supported out of the activity if:

- They show signs of distress, anxiety, or are not responding to instruction
- They are physically unable to continue safely
- An instructor determines continuation increases risk to the individual or group

Instructor Competency

All activities are led by instructors who are:

- Experienced in river environments
- Trained in group management and safety procedures
- Capable of responding to changing conditions and participant needs

Important Note on Risk

Participation in this activity involves inherent risk that cannot be completely eliminated. However, all reasonable steps are taken to identify, minimise, and manage risk to ensure a safe and positive experience.

This activity aligns with the expectations of the Health and Safety at Work (Adventure Activities) Regulations 2016 and is managed in accordance with industry good practice.

River Challenge - Risk Analysis & Management

	Date: 15/04/2026		Next Review Date: 15/12/2026		Reviewed by: Karen Tobich & Emily Underwood Approved by: Board of Trustee - Nisha Duncan	
	Risk Rating System: Likelihood (1–5) x Consequence (1–5): 1–5 Low - 6–10 Moderate - 11–15 High					
	What would cause someone to get hurt?	What could happen?	Risk Rating	Risk Management Control Measures	Risk Rating	
	Hazards/Harm	Risk	Initial	What can be prevented? By Whom?	Post Control	
People	Insufficient Instructor training	• Death • Major Injury • Minor Injury • Physical wellbeing (hypothermia/hyperthermia) • Frustration/poor decision making • Damage to the environment	12	• New instructors are trained by a senior instructor, with the training duration based on their prior river experience, river knowledge, risk management, and group management skills. • Regular Risk Management Training for all instructors	3	
	Poor Briefing/Instruction & Preparation	• Death • Major Injury • Minor Injury • Physical wellbeing (hypothermia/hyperthermia) • Frustration/poor decision making • Damage to the environment	10	Go with group through: • Instructions • Emergency Action Plan • Safety Guidelines, Hazards & Risk Management • Environment care Instructors go through pre-activity safety check list	3	
	Insufficient Supervision: • Not enough adult helpers • Adults not actively engaged	• Death • Major injury • Minor Injury • Physical Well-being (hyperthermia)	10	• Enforce 1:4 adult ratio • Assign named adult to each group of students • Brief adults clearly on expectations and responsibilities • Instructor actively monitors adult	4	
	Participants/Supervisors not confident • around water or swimming • unable or unwilling to continue safely Triggers for Send-Back: • Child showing high anxiety, distress, or non-compliance • Participant physically unable to continue • Adult unable to safely supervise or assist • Early signs of hypothermia or fatigue	• Death • Major Injury • Minor Injury • Frustration/poor decision making	8	• Identify non swimmers/not confident swimmers, with different colour helmets before leaving lodge - Decision made by instructor • Participant escorted back by a responsible adult • Route instructions back to lodge • Sign in when back at lodge (Outdoor Safety Board) • Minimum ratios maintained with remaining group • Clear communication between instructors • Activity adjusted if ratios compromised	4	
	Medical Events/Incapacitation • Asthma, injury, panic, fatigue, incapacitation	• Death • Major injury • Minor Injury	10	• Pre-identify medical conditions (Risk Disclosure & Emergency Management Summary Form) • Assign responsible adult for each case • Carry medication and first aid kit • Ensure trained first aider present • Carry satellite enabled communication device and PLB • Adjust activity as needed	6	
Equipment	Poor Clothing & Footwear & Wet weather gear	• Death • Major injury • Minor Injury • Hypothermia/hyperthermia	9	For everyone in group (students and adults) • Before leaving, enforce correct clothing (no Cotton, minimum 3 layers) • Appropriate foot ware and socks <u>over</u> shoes	4	
	Lack of Safety & Emergency Equipment	• Death • Major injury • Minor Injury • Hypothermia/hyperthermia	12	• Ensure participant are wearing safety helmets • Carry a throw rope • Carry additional warm clothing for emergencies • Carry flask with hot Raro plus additional food • Carry First Aid Kit • Carry PLB & Phones with Satellite Service • Carry Radio with water proof cover	3	
Environment	Weather and River Conditions: High river flow, rising water, cold exposure	• Death • Major injury • Minor Injury • Hypothermia • Physical well-being	15	• Apply strict go/no-go criteria as per Instructor Decision Making checklist & Emergency Action Plan	5	
	Hypothermia/Cold Exposure: Prolonged exposure to cold water and weather	• Death • Major injury • Minor Injury • Hypothermia • Physical well-being	12	• Enforce correct clothing before departure (no cotton, minimum 3 layers) • Carry spare warm clothing and hot drinks. • conduct regular participant checks (cold, shivering, withdrawal) • Remove participant early if symptoms observed	5	

	Slips, Trips, Falls and other hazards • Slippery rocks, Shallow/Deep Water, Uneven Terrain, Foot Entrapment, Hidden Hazards • Tree falls, rock falls or slips on track or river • River Noise	• Death • Major injury • Minor Injury • Physical well-being • Miss alerts/shouts • Miss communication	10	• Socks over shoes for grip • Instructor-led route selection • Helmets worn • Controlled movement through high-risk areas Instructor to check each activity for hazards before participants commence that section under close supervision • Halt group when assessing rock/tree fall or slips and likelihood of entrapment. • Assess High Wind dangers & Cancel activity need be • Discourage hand signals with group	6
	Damage to environment or harm to living creatures	• Damage to environment • Harm to living creatures	4	• Stay on track, follow only orange markers, do not step or pull on plants • Do not harm or touch any living creatures on land or in water	2

Emergency Plan	First Aid	Medical Treatment		Serious Injury
	• Who is the trained and nominated First Aider	• Follow Emergency Action Plan Discussed at Pre Activity Safety Talk and at Safety Stations		• See Emergency Action Plan discussed at Safety Talks and at Safety Stations
	• First Aid Kit - Instructors have this	• Katikati Medical Centre 07 549 0411 4 Clive Road, Katikati		• Call 111 or activate PLB
	• Know medical conditions/behaviour issues of students & adults and knowledgeable person to deal with it (Risk Disclosure & Emergency Management Summary)	• Tauranga Hospital, Cameron Road, Tauranga 07 579 8000		• Nominate someone to meet Emergency Services at Gate
		• Report to AOEC Management at earliest convenience		• Report to AOEC Management at earliest convenience
	• Incident & Accident Reporting on Safety Log at Kitchen Safety Station	• Incident & Accident Reporting on Safety Log at Kitchen Safety Station		• Incident & Accident Reporting on Safety Log at Kitchen Safety Station