

Sign Cutting

Sign cutting has already been defined as the act of looking for sign in order to determine a starting point from which to begin tracking. Now, more of the details of sign cutting will be addressed by answering three questions about it: **When** (when is sign cutting performed) **How** (how is it done) and **Where** (where is it done)?

When? - The best time of the day to seek track and sign is when the sun is low in the sky, usually in the morning and late afternoon. Ideally, sign cutting should be started in the morning, suspended during midday, and then resumed late in the afternoon until sunset. This is not to say that tracking is impossible during midday or at night, but simply stating that mornings and afternoons are the best times for using the sun to your advantage. Tracking at night is quite possible, and even easy, because the light source is totally controlled by the Tracker. Tracking at midday, on the other hand, can be so difficult that it is worth spending the time doing something else. Unfortunately, in SAR, we do not always have a choice.

Sign cutting is not just performed at the onset of a search. It should be employed any time that a single piece of evidence (sign, track, clothing, discarded material, etc.) is found during a search. Since it is probable that the subject was near the evidence found (if the evidence is found to be relevant), sign can be cut around it to determine direction of travel.

How? - Sign cutting is performed while traveling perpendicularly to the direction of travel of the subject. This is an attempt to intersect the path of the subject when you are cutting sign, to avoid confusing the trail you are tracking with that of your own. Search for sign by using available light. Look in the direction of the light source for best results, regardless of what orientation of the light is to your body. Make the light work for you and not against you.

The application of some simple rules can make sign cutting easier and more effective.

- If possible, the most experienced trackers should cut sign then continue on Step by Step.
- Use available light to your greatest advantage. Face the sun, when possible, and cut at a ninety degree angle to the direction of travel.

- Team members should space themselves several yards apart, but should stay in visual and vocal contact. A team of three trackers works best, One as Point and Two Flankers.
- Look behind you at frequent intervals, especially if the light is not optimum.
- You may only get one chance to see a print or sign when cutting sign. Take your time and don't miss anything. You may not get another try.
- Do not allow unnecessary personnel in the area where sign is to be cut. Minimize the possibility of the production of confusing sign.

Sign cutting is performed quite differently than Step by Step tracking. Where Step-by-Step requires examination of a small area within one stride of the last track, sign cutting requires slow, careful visual sweep within a 2 or 3 stride area. Be careful, though, and let your eyes set the pace and not your adrenaline-charged feet!

Where? - The first place to start looking for sign would be where it is most likely to be found. That is, look where the person being sought spent enough time to leave good evidence. Also look where the person was most likely to have walked, and where track would be very easy to see.

Sign is most easily seen where the environment enhances what we seek. You may have noticed that tracks are easier to discover and identify when they are set in moist sand or firm, moist mud. If we identify areas such as these that allow easy sign cutting, we can use them to our benefit. These, and similar areas, are termed natural or man-made "Track Traps". Some examples of natural track traps are muddy areas, (especially firm mud), salt flats, fields of high grass, river or creek banks, steep embankments, and dusty roads. The following types of terrain are also considered natural track traps, but they each have their own special considerations:

Roads - Dusty roads can be excellent track traps, although vehicle traffic can destroy many tracks and much evidence in only a fraction of the time it took to leave them. Try to find out how much traffic has traveled the road in question since your subject passed by. Do not overlook the side-paved roads. Traffic on paved roads tend to leave light dust that easily shows sign.

Sand - Trackers commonly make two errors when dealing with tracks in sand. Both can be prevented by understanding that sand tends to make fresh tracks seem old. Gravity makes soft sand smooth over sharp edges, causing fresh track to look old. The nature of soft sand also tends to make prints made from high traction footwear appear older than prints made with smooth sole shoes. This is because the effects of wind and weather will age "Lumpy" tracks more quickly than smooth tracks. Also keep in mind that, in deep sand, track measurements can be as much as one-half inch shorter than the shoes that

made them.

Game Trails - People tend to follow obvious game trails in the outdoors because they are easy to follow, generally clear of obstacles, and almost always lead to water. Pretty much the same reason animals use them. These trails are great to cut sign on because if a person traveled through the area, you can bet they used the trail. Also, the trails are covered with animal droppings, which can be used as a portable track trap. The feces can show sign that the surrounding terrain can't.

Man Made - Some examples of man made track traps include plowed fields, dirt roads, firebreaks, construction sites, fences, or even a small area that was cleared purposely to catch a good print of anyone passing (track trap). Fence may not necessarily produce terrain that is good for detecting sign, but if the fence had to be climbed over, under, or through, then plenty of sign would most certainly be produced on even the most difficult ground surfaces. If the fence is rusty, a scuffmark may be visible, and don't forget to look for cloth or human hair on a barbed-wire fence. Fences also tend to direct travel of individuals, particularly lost ones. A lost person may welcome finding anything straight to follow, and so follow a fence line for some time.

Other - There are other features that might also affect a person's choice of route. For instance a person may follow a pipeline or utility line in order to reach civilization. Items such as towers, lights, and beacons can attract a lost person and they're for effect their direction of travel. Mountain peaks or terrain features that are visible from far away might cause a person to follow a certain path. Any one of these "Route Modifiers" could be used very effectively to determine a direction of travel. When a direction of travel was assured, sign could be cut ahead, and sometimes far ahead, to expedite the tracking process.

There will be times when terrain and other features do not limit travel so very much, and you are attempting to track a marathon hiker. These are the times when Step-by-Step approach combined with sign cutting becomes the most important. Use the terrain and track traps to assist in finding sign, and always depend on the Step-by-Step method one track is started. The Step-by-Step trackers will serve as a compass, constantly indicating direction of travel, and, therefore indicating where sign should be cut.

The most important principle of sign cutting is to do it where sign is easy to see. To assure this, periodically and carefully test the route you are following by determining if you can see your own prints. If you can't, pick another area for cutting sign.