

Survival expert offers tips

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HANCOCK - Mike Wiitala came to a talk about wilderness survival Tuesday because he thought he might be able to learn something for the times he's outside by himself.

"I do spend a lot of time in the woods," he said.

Wiitala, who is from Toivola, said he does bring some things, such as a flashlight, whistle and compass when he goes out into the woods.

"Usually, I bring these things back unused, which is good," he said.

Wiitala and about 40 other people were at the Finlandia University Chapel of St. Matthew in Hancock to hear the presentation by Hancock Central High School science teacher Brian Rajdl, who has training and experience in survival tactics. His presentation was the first in a series of Finlandia's Campus Read 2012, which focused on a book titled "Into the Wild" by Jon Krakauer about the experiences of Christopher McCandless in the Alaskan wilderness, who eventually dies there.

Rajdl said getting through survival situations has to do as much with understanding what happens in the human brain as with having knowledge of survival skills.

"Into the Wild" is about a young man who wanted to find purpose for his life, so he took off for the Alaskan wilderness with few survival items and little or no survival skills. Eventually, his situation became desperate. He may have been eating poisonous plants, but it's uncertain exactly how he died.

"Sometimes your brain is going to help you, sometimes it's going to go against you," Rajdl said.

Knowing what is happening in the brain in dangerous situations can help a person survive, he said.

For those interested in learning survival techniques, Rajdl said there are many helpful books and survival schools, but finding a "mentor," someone who knows and has used survival tactics, is the best way to learn.

Becoming a naturalist and knowing what is in any particular wild area is important, also, Rajdl said.

Studies of people in survival situations show children 6 years old and younger have a better chance of surviving than older people without survival training, Rajdl said. The theory is because young children haven't developed the cultural models, which can be barriers impeding their ability to do what's needed - If they're cold, they find warmth, if they're thirsty, they find water, if they're tired, they sleep.

"It's hardwired into kids," he said.

Rajdl said it's the small inner part of the brain, or reptile brain, that has the ability to find survival tactics. The larger thinking, or mammalian brain, often conflicts with that.



Some people, such as McCandless, intentionally put themselves in survival situations with little or no training or knowledge, just to see if they could make it, Rajdl said.

"There is this innate drive for people to live in the wild," he said.

Many of those people don't survive those situations, Rajdl said.

More than likely, Rajdl said, survival situations will come about by accident, and he gave as an example two hikers who became lost in Keweenaw County in August. Those two survived unhurt.

"This stuff happens," he said of accidents. "(Thinking) 'It's not going to happen to me,' doesn't work. Accidents are going to happen."

Fear in survival situations can be a serious hindrance, Rajdl said, and it's important to accept the fear and not let it take over the thought process.

"Control your panic," he said.

Rajdl said learning survival skills can be done slowly during camping trips. At first, the usual camping items, such as tents, sleeping bags, stoves and tools should be taken. Gradually, learning how to build a shelter from vegetation, build a fire or making tools from natural items can be practiced on the camping trips.

Rajdl said anybody can carry a basic survival kit, which has a whistle, knife, compass, flashlight and lighter on a lanyard to wear around the neck. A more complete, yet still small kit can be packed into a small stuff sack, with a poncho, large sheet of tough plastic for cover, knit cap, wool socks, twine, first aid kit, flashlight, lighter, matches, candle, metal cup, duct tape, water purification tablets, and something, such as Jell-O mix, which contains sugar for energy.

Rajdl said in order of significance, people in survival situations have to get first aid (need in three minutes), find or make a shelter (need within three hours), find water (need within three days) then find food (need within three weeks).

Human beings have about 30,000 years of survival experience in their memories, and Rajdl said people who plan to spend time in the wilderness should take advantage of that knowledge.

"Don't go it alone," he said.

Wiitala said he was glad he attended Rajdl's talk, and he did learn some things.

"I enjoyed it when he talked about controlling panic," he said.

Now, Wiitala said he will add water purification tablets and twine to his survival kit.

"You just never know when you might be able to make use of something," he said.

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