

## **TSX Challenge – Operating Guidelines**

**Effective Date:** January 2026

**Applies To:** All TSX Challenge guides, assistant guides, staff, contractors, and volunteers leading or supporting TSX trips

### **1. Purpose, Scope, and Use of Judgment**

These Operating Guidelines define the standard practices, expectations, and decision-making framework used to plan and lead TSX Challenge trips across all locations, routes, and operating permits.

They are intended to:

- Establish consistency across guides, trips, regions, and seasons
- Support participant safety, preparedness, and positive group experiences
- Protect natural, cultural, and wilderness resources
- Provide a shared baseline for training, evaluation, accountability, and continuous improvement

These guidelines apply to all TSX trips, regardless of location, duration, participant makeup, or permit type.

### **Relationship to Permits, Policies, and Training**

- These Operating Guidelines supplement, but do not replace, park- or permit-specific operating plans, conditions, or directives.
- These guidelines are separate from the TSX Youth Protection Policy and other standalone policies.
- Where park regulations, permit conditions, or agency directives differ from these guidelines, the more restrictive requirement applies.

### **Professional Judgment**

Backcountry travel involves dynamic and uncertain conditions. Guides are expected to:

- Follow these guidelines as the standard operating baseline
- Apply professional judgment when conditions require adaptation
- Make conservative decisions when uncertainty exists
- Prioritize participant safety, environmental stewardship, and clear communication
- Communicate significant deviations, incidents, or emerging risks to TSX leadership in a timely manner

Nothing in these guidelines removes a guide's responsibility to think critically, modify itineraries, delay objectives, or halt travel when safety, environmental, or group conditions warrant it.

### **2. Guide Role, Authority, and Professional Expectations**

## **Role of the Guide**

TSX guides serve as trip leaders, risk managers, educators, and representatives of TSX Challenge. Guides are responsible for:

- Leading trips safely, professionally, and in accordance with TSX standards
- Managing group dynamics, pacing, morale, and decision-making
- Communicating expectations clearly and consistently to participants
- Modeling preparedness, stewardship, respect, and accountability

## **Authority and Decision-Making**

Guides have authority over on-trail and in-camp decisions related to:

- Safety and risk management
- Route selection, timing, pacing, and turn-around decisions
- Campsite selection and layout
- Response to weather, environmental hazards, and participant condition

Safety-related decisions made by guides in the field are expected to be respected by participants.

## **Leadership Structure**

- Each trip will have a designated Lead Guide
- Support Guides support leadership, safety, instruction, and group management under the Lead Guide's direction
- Guides are expected to communicate openly, share observations, and support unified decision-making

## **Professional Conduct and Boundaries**

Guides are expected to:

- Represent TSX professionally at all times while with participants
- Treat participants, other visitors, land managers, and commercial operators with courtesy and respect
- Maintain appropriate professional boundaries
- Communicate clearly, calmly, and directly, especially in stressful or challenging situations

## **3. Pre-Trip Preparation & Participant Readiness**

### **Participant Screening**

Prior to each trip:

- All participants complete experience and medical questionnaires
- Guides review forms to identify
  - Fitness and experience alignment
  - Medical conditions, allergies, and medications
  - Potential risk factors related to altitude, heat, terrain, or remoteness
  - Follow-up conversations occur when clarification or additional screening is needed

Concerns should be flagged early so adjustments or participation decisions can be made proactively.

### **Participant Preparation**

TSX prepares participants through:

- Pre-trip preparation emails and reminders
- Gear lists, instructional resources, and training materials
- Optional or required educational sessions

Guides should assume a wide range of experience levels and proactively reinforce expectations related to pacing, hydration, nutrition, safety practices, and group conduct.

### **Pack Checks**

A thorough pack check is completed for each participant prior to departure

- Gear is evaluated for:
  - Appropriateness for terrain, season, and conditions
  - Safety, reliability, and functionality
  - Weight, redundancy, and necessity
- Guides require gear changes, substitutions, or removals when needed to ensure safety and group efficiency

### **Group Gear and Logistics**

Before each trip, guides verify that:

- All required group gear is present and functional
- Communication devices are charged and operational
- Permits, emergency contacts, and participant information are carried
- Food, fuel, and water treatment systems are adequate for group size and itinerary

## **4. Environmental Stewardship & Resource Protection**

TSX trips are operated in accordance with Leave No Trace principles and all applicable park, forest, wilderness, and permit requirements. Where standards differ by land manager or permit, the more restrictive requirement applies.

### **Campsite Selection and Use**

- Camps are established on durable surfaces such as rock, gravel, dry grasses, or snow
- Camps are located away from water sources, trails, cultural sites, and other groups where conditions permit
- Previously impacted or designated sites are used in high-use areas
- Camp areas are inspected before departure to ensure no debris or avoidable impact remains

### **Wildlife Interaction**

- Wildlife is observed from a distance
- Feeding, approaching, or intentionally following wildlife is prohibited

- Food, trash, and scented items are stored securely at all times
- Wildlife-related incidents or concerns are reported to TSX leadership

### **Waste Management and Sanitation**

- All trash, leftover food, and refuse are packed out
- Solid human waste is disposed of according to park- or zone-specific requirements
- Used toilet paper and hygiene products are packed out unless explicitly permitted otherwise
- In regulated or high-use zones, solid human waste is packed out using approved systems (e.g., WAG bags)

### **Campfires**

- Trips do not rely on campfires for cooking or light
- Stoves are used for all cooking
- Campfires are permitted only where explicitly allowed by current regulations and permit conditions
- When permitted, fires must be small, attended at all times, and fully extinguished before departure

### **Invasive Species Prevention**

- Guides and participants clean and inspect boots, packs, and equipment prior to trips
- Visible soil, seeds, or plant matter is removed before entering wilderness areas
- Suspected invasive species sightings are reported to appropriate land managers when practical

## **5. On-Trail Leadership & Group Management**

### **Trail Management Standards**

Guides reinforce consistent trail practices, including:

- Hiking within sight or sound of others
- Regrouping at trail junctions and decision points
- Leaving packs on trail when stepping off to relieve oneself
- Crossing streams only with guide supervision and appropriate precautions
- Adjusting pace to group ability, conditions, and environmental factors

### **Group Spacing and Accountability**

- Head counts are conducted regularly
- Guides maintain awareness of the front, middle, and back of the group
- Participants are instructed on what to do if separated or unsure of the route

### **Daily Rhythm and Communication**

- Clear daily briefings outlining mileage, terrain, weather, and expectations
- Regular hydration, nutrition, and rest reminders

- Camps established with sufficient daylight for setup, food preparation, and recovery when reasonable for day's itinerary.

### **Group Dynamics**

- Guides actively monitor morale, energy, and interpersonal dynamics
- Nightly group discussions (e.g., "Thorns and Roses") are used to surface concerns early
- Issues are addressed proactively to prevent escalation or safety impacts

## **6. Food, Water, and Sanitation Standards**

### **Food Planning & Allergies**

- Known food allergies and dietary needs are identified in advance
- Menus are reviewed to ensure adequacy for duration, group size, and conditions

### **Food Safety**

- Guides wash or sanitize hands before food handling
- A designated hand-washing station is established at camp
- Dishes are washed and rinsed daily

### **Food Storage**

- Food and scented items are consolidated and secured
- Bear-resistant containers are used where required
- Food is secured whenever unattended

### **Water Management**

- At least one container is designated for clean water only
- Water is filtered into clean containers to avoid cross-contamination
- Water used for cooking is brought to a full boil

## **7. Risk Management & Continuous Assessment**

Guides are expected to continuously assess risk and adjust plans accordingly.

### **Activity-Based Risks**

Includes gear failure, hydration, nutrition, fatigue, navigation, and terrain-specific challenges.

### **Environmental Risks**

Includes weather changes, heat, cold, snow, water crossings, smoke, fire activity, wildlife, and seasonal hazards.

### **Client-Based Risks**

Includes fitness, acclimatization, medical conditions, injury, illness, and group dynamics.

## **Continuous Assessment**

- Risk assessment occurs before, during, and after each day
- Guides share observations during nightly guide syncs
- Adjustments are made proactively to reduce exposure to risk

## **8. Emergency Response & Communications**

### **Emergency Response Priorities**

In the event of an accident, illness, or other emergency:

1. Ensure scene safety for guides, participants, and bystanders
2. Assess the patient using Wilderness First Responder protocols
3. Stabilize within scope of practice
4. Escalate and communicate as appropriate

### **Communication and Escalation**

- Satellite communication devices are carried on all trips
- Guides check in with TSX support staff regularly
- Life-threatening or time-sensitive emergencies are escalated immediately
- Non-life-threatening situations are communicated to TSX support staff for coordination

### **TSX Support Role**

- TSX maintains off-site support during active trips
- Support staff assist with decision-making, coordination, evacuation logistics, and agency communication
- Guides collaborate with land managers and emergency responders when available and appropriate

## **9. Post-Trip Responsibilities & Feedback Loop**

After each trip:

- Guides debrief with TSX leadership as needed
- Incidents or notable deviations are documented
- Participant feedback is reviewed and incorporated

Continuous improvement is expected and encouraged as part of TSX culture.

## **10. Training, Review, and Acknowledgment**

Guides are required to:

- Maintain required certifications and training
- Participate in annual or seasonal updates
- Review and acknowledge these Operating Guidelines

Acknowledgment confirms that guides understand these guidelines represent TSX operating standards and that professional judgment is required in their application.

**Approved by:**

TSX Challenge LLC

Christopher Casado – Managing Member