I am writing this in response to the article on tree rescue by Graeme McMahon, which was published in the February/March issue of Australian Arbor Age. Graeme made several excellent points, and in particular deserves recognition for having the resolution to be forthright about his beliefs, rather than (as is too common in the industry) paying lip-service to the various guidelines whilst in practice doing whatever is easiest.

I also wish to agree with Graeme that many current OH&S systems seem to be increasingly skewed when they are applied to the practice of tree work. The most important factors affecting the safety of a tree work practitioner are his own knowledge, skill and experience, and how he is able to apply them to deal with the tree he is working on. Because these are difficult to document and regulate, however, attention becomes focused on a range of important, but peripheral issues, such as the type of carabiner used, the colour of the climber’s shirt or the paperwork he filled out before starting to climb. Let me be clear, I am not advocating that we throw out all of the guidelines and climb in thongs without helmets – just that it is important to keep perspective on the real issues affecting a climber’s safety whilst in the tree.

This ties in with the first of the two main points Graeme made in his article – that the current outcomes of ‘tree rescue training’ fall short in practice. As Graeme does, I view the current qualifications as being similar to ‘learner’s permits’, unless the holder also has several years of climbing experience. In the event of a tree rescue being necessitated (i.e., the climber is injured and not able to self-rescue), the main factor affecting the ability of the rescuer to bring the climber safely to the ground will be the ability of the rescuer to access and move around the tree. As such, I would consider a qualified but inexperienced climber to be suitable as a rescue climber for most small to medium, stable trees with good anchor points and easy access. If I were working in a large, difficult to access or otherwise challenging tree I would certainly not expect to be quickly and safely rescued by a novice climber, whether they had a tree rescue qualification or not. I do not however agree with Graeme that the difficulty of ensuring that a second competent climber is onsite when doing such work is an argument for not doing so.

Graeme states that the most hazardous part of his work is driving to the jobsite and back. I know that he is an extremely competent climber, but I can only assume that his driving skills are not at the same level, because otherwise statistics do not seem to bear him out! Tree accident statistics are very hard to come by, but an analysis of tree work fatalities in the US found that tree workers were almost 90 times more likely to be killed in a tree-related accident than whilst on the road to work1. This does not address the likelihood of a climber requiring assisted rescue from a tree – in fact the same statistics show that the likelihood is that the climber will either be able to self-rescue, or will be past the need of rescue, or will in any case have fallen to the ground. In the unlikely event of a rescue being required, however, the time-scale may be short. The time required to find another competent climber and get them on-site might well be the difference between life and death.

Graeme states accurately that the requirement to have a second climber onsite, as with many other such OH&S ‘issues’, has the moral high-ground in our modern workplace, and is consequently difficult to discuss openly without prejudice. It is important to regularly reconsider things which we take for granted, and question whether they ought to continue to be the orthodox. In this case, I suggest that the requirement for a second climber of sufficient competence to be onsite when tree work is undertaken is a good and valid requirement, and should continue to be upheld.

In addition to the possibility of this climber being needed to perform an aerial rescue, there are of course many other advantages to having a second climber. Many jobs allow for two climbers to be safely in the tree at once, or for the second climber to be working in another tree. Even if the second climber is on the ground, they will offer a valuable second opinion about the options presented by challenging trees, as well as having a good understanding of what is likely to be needed by the main climber as the job progresses – or taking turns in more time-consuming trees, thereby reducing fatigue.

Graeme proposes ‘a system of learner’s permits and mentoring, under the supervision of competent practitioners to be an acceptable option for acquiring the practical skills required’. Assessing the suitability of such supervisors is a problem which he has already identified – a problem which recurs whenever the question of on-the-job experience is raised in discussion of regulation. Where Graeme and I would agree is that experience in climbing and working in trees is the most important foundation on which to build competency in conducting a tree rescue, particularly where the tree in which a rescue is necessitated is large or challenging to access. Prescriptive regulation struggles with defining many of the particularities of individual tasks and trees, however I would like to conclude by recommending that the relevant text of the Victorian Tree Industry Organisation climbing guidelines be considered in this case:

*A minimum of two persons must be present on every job site. One is the climber, and one is the* ***rescue climber****, who must be a sufficiently* ***competent climber*** *to perform an* ***aerial rescue*** *from the particular trees being worked on.*

Note that both climbers may be climbing at one time, providing there is a third person on the ground – if one has an accident the other can move across or leave the tree he is in to access the casualty. Note also that when working in head-high trees, the competency necessary to conduct an aerial rescue could be no more than the applicable first-aid ticket.

1. Ball, John – Arboricultural Safety and Safe Work Practices <http://www.isaontario.com/pages/Resources/misc/BallLecture.pdf>