

Leave No Trace in the Backcountry

By Brian Mohr

At some point during my early childhood, I started shaking snow-covered tree branches over my yellow marks in the snow. I don't remember where I was or who I was with, but this little discovery had a great influence on my future experiences in the backcountry. Why should anyone have to stumble upon such an obvious sign of my passage?

Then, on a summer hiking trip between my 6th and 7th grades, our leaders challenged us to leave our camps without any sign of our presence. The tidiest tent group, we were told, would get to be first in line at the snack bar later that week. There's nothing like a little sugar and grease for bribing kids into leaving no trace in the backcountry.

After packing up and scouring our site for anything that wasn't there when we arrived, we proceeded to rake our tent area with fallen branches and the ends of our hiking sticks—scatter the twigs we had tossed aside, and shuffle a few rocks and pinecones before calling it good. At first, it all seemed so ludicrous. What difference would a few crumbs and some worn spots in the forest floor make?

Several campsites later, it all started to make sense. We were hiking in the lower elevation forests of central Maine's Kennebec River watershed. It was a privilege, not a right, we learned, to be traveling through such a wilderness. And it was our responsibility, as visitors, to preserve that wilderness so that others in the future could have the same experiences. For a bunch of twelve-year-olds, this was some pretty heavy stuff. Then again, we had greasy fries and ice cream sundaes waiting for us.

In fact, we soon took great pride in leaving camp every morning knowing that we had left it just as we found it. "Take only pictures, leave only footprints," shared one of our leaders, citing one of his heroes, to illustrate his point. And when we arrived at the site of another camp for the night, we did so as if we were guests in someone else's home, careful not to wear out our welcome.

As adventures mounted and I began spending more time in sensitive environments—especially alpine regions frequented by other humans—the challenge of leaving no trace grew. Walking, cooking and sleeping on rocks—instead of the fragile tundra—became the name of the game. I learned to make soup from the water of cooked pasta and any leftover scrapings, and out of principle, I started to pack out every stinking crumb that didn't get eaten. Not a trace, right? Even today, I still motivate myself with the promise of an ice cream sundae after my biggest adventures.

Why? I could easily start citing wildlife studies or well-researched examples of human-induced habitat degradation. But I won't. Instead, we should ask ourselves, "Why not?" Personally, leaving no trace puts me in closer contact with the environment through which I am traveling. It encourages me to pack lighter and move faster. And it reminds me that we are merely visitors to the places we travel.



No too long ago I ran across a smart list of guidelines published by the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, a national non-profit organization (www.lnt.org) dedicated to promoting and inspiring responsible outdoor recreation in all types of environments, from sub-tropical deserts to the Green Mountain divide. By partnering with organizations and businesses, like the Green Mountain Club, Leave No Trace builds awareness, appreciation and respect for our wildlands.

Not only was I excited to see that others cared as much as I did, but I was excited to spread the word. Below you will find Leave No Trace's guidelines for backcountry travel in Vermont...and a few more that I couldn't resist adding to the list.

Fortunately, in Vermont at least, these are merely guidelines for us to follow, not laws to be strictly enforced. The more we can effectively spread the word about Leave No Trace ethics—and practice what we preach—the more successful we will be at minimizing our cumulative impact on the places we love most. It's that easy.

Consider the words of the former Squamish leader, Chief Seattle, who, in 1854 said, "We did not inherit the land from our fathers, we are borrowing it from our children." 7

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LEAVE NO TRACE

(Visit www.lnt.org for the full scoop.)

Plan Ahead and Prepare

Do your best to be prepared for extreme weather, hazards and emergencies.

Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces

When hiking or biking, stick to the trail, even when wet or muddy, to avoid widening the treadway. Walk on rocks whenever possible, especially in fragile areas such as alpine summits and shorelines.

Dispose of Waste Properly

If you pack it in, pack it out. Use privies whenever available, or bury human and pet waste in 6-8 inch deep holes, at least 200 feet from any water source. Learn to use natural alternatives to toilet paper, or

pack out toilet paper and hygiene products. If you must bring a pet, please treat its waste as you would your own.

Leave What You Find

Flowers and naturally occurring objects are best enjoyed in their natural state.

Minimize Campfire Impact

Where permitted, if you choose to build a fire for warmth or cooking, keep fires small, using only down or dead wood, gathering the wood over as large an area as possible.

Respect Wildlife

Feeding animals can damage their health, alter their natural behavior and expose them to predators. Protect wildlife and your food by storing it securely.

Be Considerate of Other Visitors

Respect other trail users and protect the quality of their experience. Let nature's sounds prevail by avoiding loud voices and noises.

Here are a few more, with the Vermont backcountry user in mind:

Shake Snow Over Your Yellow Marks

No one wants to look at your territorial markers, nor those of your pets.

Use Extreme Caution When Skiing At or Above Treeline

Our alpine summits are home to Vermont's most fragile and slow-growing vegetation and tree species. Treat this environment so as not to offend the mountain gods. Do not attempt to ski through tree-line bands of krumholz (stunted fir

trees) unless these trees are buried under a significant snowpack. Breaking through a weak snowpack and snapping and cutting the branches of these fragile trees is not cool, and does great harm to Vermont's alpine ecosystems.

Resources:

Leave No Trace — www.lnt.org

Green Mountain Club — www.greenmountainclub.org

Backwoods Ethics, by Laura and Guy Waterman, Countryman Press, 2003.

Leave No Trace: A Practical Guide to the New Wilderness Etiquette by Annette McGivney, Mountaineers Books, 1998.