

LEAVE NO TRACE FOR ALL

Backcountry hikers and backpackers have embraced this national ethics and education program. Will other outdoor recreationists follow suit?

■ BY BILL SCHNEIDER

I've been hiking for a long time, going back to the mid-1960s, covering thousands of miles of trails in national parks and wilderness areas. While logging those miles and writing 11 hiking guidebooks along the way, I saw something wonderful happen.

In the old days, I stayed in even better shape on hikes by carrying out backpacks full of trash. I don't mean a candy wrapper here or a discarded tissue there, but a mountain of aluminum foil, cast-off horseshoes, rusted cans, rope, spent cartridges, wire, and what seemed like a million cigarette butts. I also hauled old hiking boots, discarded tents, and cast-iron frying pans out of the backcountry. And I may have destroyed more fire rings than any person on earth.

Not these days. I now have to go to the gym for extra exercise. When I hike in the backcountry I can't even find a piece of dental floss or a shred of scorched foil in a fire ring—if I can even find a fire ring.

What happened? More than anything else, it has been the widespread acceptance of Leave No Trace (LNT), a program promoted by land and outdoor recreation management agencies in cooperation with the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics. The no-trace ethic challenges all outdoors users, not only hikers, to leave as light a footprint as possible. >>

ON THE RIGHT TRACK Backcountry hikers and backpackers quickly saw the value of the Leave No Trace program, which began in the 1960s in response to growing public use of national forests and wilderness areas.

That means simple things like staying on trails if possible, properly disposing of waste, and not disturbing wildlife or conflicting with others also enjoying the outdoors.

Each individual user might have a tiny effect, but cumulative use, year after year and decade after decade, can add up to major damage. Impromptu trails around official routes erode into ugly scars, campsites start to resemble miniature garbage dumps, and campers hoping for peace and quiet can't find it.

LNT encourages everyone to reduce disturbances to the land and to others sharing the outdoors, today and for years to come. It's working, but not everyone who spends time outdoors has embraced the ethic—yet.

TOO MUCH TRACE

The idea for promoting no-trace hiking and camping came from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) in the 1960s in response to increasing public use of trails and campsites in national forests and wilderness areas. By the mid-1980s, the agency had adopted a formal program emphasizing wilderness ethics such as keeping noise at low levels and practicing no-trace backcountry travel and camping. Since then, hikers and campers have embraced the ethic, largely thanks to widespread and relentless promotion by the Colorado-based Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics.

The center's four teams of educators crisscross the country to train outdoors program organizers, scout leaders, land managers, and others in no-trace backcountry travel strategies. Many of the center's programs target kids. The Bigfoot Challenge, for example, encourages participants to emulate the mythical northland creature, which, the center's website notes, "leaves no trace of his passing through the wild." The Bigfoot program challenges youngsters to "Get Muddy! Commit to walking through the mud in the middle of the trail or stay on deep snow to avoid widening trails which are vulnerable in wet conditions."

Since the nonprofit was formed in 1993,

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TOO MUCH TRACE It was once common for hikers and backpackers to widen trails, carve trees, and leave campfires filled with cans and other trash. Today such visual scars are largely absent from backcountry areas. Now Leave No Trace advocates are working with "frontcountry" campers, anglers, hunters, and other recreationists to similarly reduce signs of human presence by picking up fishing line, using fire pans, and packing out human waste from river campsites.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LEAVE NO TRACE CENTER FOR OUTDOOR ETHICS; ALLI BOZEMAN; BEN LAMMON

more than 5,000 people have taken the five-day master educator course, 12,000 have gone through the two-day trainer course, and hundreds of thousands have participated in one-day or half-day sessions.

The instruction is paying off. "About 85 percent of the people who've had any exposure to Leave No Trace—from just seeing a slide show to taking the master educator course—say their behavior in the outdoors has changed," says Dana Watts, the center's executive director.

Though a resounding success, LNT could have failed. From its inception, the program was designed as a massive partnership among federal and state land and recreation management agencies, along with cooperating nonprofits and private companies. Partners include the USFS, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and National Association of Parks Directors. That's a lot of bureaucracy to overcome. According to Roger Semler, assistant administrator for Montana State Parks, it works because every partner buys into the same principles instead of competing with each other. "I think the unified effort among public agencies makes a huge difference," says

Semler, previously national LNT coordinator for the National Park Service. "That's so much more effective than having each agency doing its own different program."

Watts says another reason for the success of LNT has been commitment from federal officials in Washington, D.C., all the way down to members of local hiking clubs. She notes that the center now has more than 300 partners—including public agencies, private nonprofits, and corporations such as REI and Subaru.

Both Semler and Watts see the LNT program's reasonable, nonbinding approach as a primary source of its success. LNT is neither regulatory nor absolute. It offers suggestions and principles, not rules or laws. The intent is to lessen the effects of outdoors use, but only voluntarily. "If we were too adamant about every little thing at the expense of common sense, people just wouldn't embrace it like they have," Semler says.

Despite the program's successes, Semler and Watts believe LNT has the potential to reach many more recreationists. "The origin of the program was to take care of the wilderness," Semler says. Now that most backcountry hikers and backpackers have

adopted the no-trace ethic, he thinks it's time to introduce the benefits of LNT to "frontcountry" campers, anglers, hunters, water recreationists, horsemen, and ATV users. "People in the frontcountry like to see the places where they camp, hunt, and fish remain clean and unspoiled the same as anyone else," Semler says.

Though Semler and Watts acknowledge that many frontcountry recreationists already leave no trace, they believe many opportunities exist to expand the ethic into all aspects of outdoors recreation. "We're making some gains with frontcountry users," says Watts. "But we still have a lot of work to convince the majority to embrace the ethic." She says her organization has produced informational LNT material tailored to hunters and anglers with recommendations such as picking up Styrofoam bait containers, monofilament line, spent shotgun shells, and other litter; keeping ATVs on designated trails and roads; and setting up no-trace campsites.

For cooking, Watts recommends using a backpacking stove, building a minimal-impact fire with no fire ring, or at least using an existing fire ring rather than building a new one. "We're not saying don't have a fire," she says. "But consider having fewer fires or building ones that leave less of a trace." After repeated use, the fire and carbon in a fire ring sterilize the soil, Watts explains. Also, the rings often fill with foil, cigarette butts, melted plastic, and other garbage. "They're eyesores to many people," she says.

A DELICATE SUBJECT

Human waste is another big concern, especially near water. Recently FWP considered requiring river recreationists on the popular Smith River to pack out their human waste, as required on many major multiday-float rivers across the West. Pit toilets currently provided on the Smith often fill rapidly. That requires digging new holes, which damages soil and vegetation. The toilets also have the potential to leak into groundwater and contaminate the renowned fishing and floating river. FWP eventually decided to make the action voluntary and, for now, pit toilets remain at the campsites.

The Seven Principles of Leave No Trace

1. Plan ahead and prepare
2. Travel and camp on durable surfaces
3. Dispose of waste properly
4. Leave what you find
5. Minimize campfire impacts
6. Respect wildlife
7. Be considerate of other visitors



Learn more at lnt.org

But pit toilets are not the long-term solution—on the Smith or on other rivers. Semler says river users need to think of other, more environmentally friendly options. One is to use a cathole—a small hole you dig with a hand trowel and cover up afterward. No-trace principles recommend that a cathole be at least 200 feet from the water. In Montana, that could conflict with the state's stream access law. The law allows public access on rivers only up to the ordinary high-water mark, which is often less than 200 feet from the stream. That's another reason Semler recommends river users consider packing *everything* out. Though that takes extra planning and a change in habits, Semler says "there are several excellent systems and products now available for packing waste out of rivers."

Watts hopes guides and outfitters will emerge as leaders in selling the idea of proper waste disposal and other no-trace ethics to their clients. I can see it working. Every fishing guide I've used has a set of "boat rules," such as safety tips and strict canons on carefully releasing fish. A few no-trace suggestions like taking along a trowel or a pack-out system and asking clients to use it for nature calls would certainly fit.

People can learn to change even long-held

habits. Many backcountry horsemen, for instance, are now embracing LNT. Horses can trample lakeshores, litter campsites with horse "apples," and gouge out unofficial trails in alpine areas. But in recent years, pack and saddle stock users have begun adopting no-trace principles. Bob Hoverson, lead trainer at the Lolo National Forest's Ninemile Wildlands Training Center, has spent most of the past 20 years teaching LNT courses to agency personnel, outfitters, and individual stock users. "The program has been tremendously successful," he says. "In the old days, an outfitter might take 50 clients and 150 stock animals out on a single trip. There's not a campsite I know of that can handle that kind of impact. Over the years the number of people and number of stock animals has been reduced, so the impact is automatically less."

Hoverson teaches users to reduce their hoof print in the backcountry by not tying horses to trees, staying on established trails, and removing droppings from trailheads and campsites. "We still have some problems," he says, "but we recognize that we can do things correctly and minimize the impact. It's just as easy to do it right as it is to do it wrong."

Watts believes that kind of common-sense thinking will continue to resonate with other people in the outdoors. Whether you are a wilderness camper in the Bob Marshall Wilderness or a walleye angler on Fort Peck Lake, it only makes sense, she notes, to not make scenic areas ugly for others. And almost everyone appreciates walking along trash-free, uneroded trails and arriving at a campsite free of toilet paper and garbage. Believing in these universal values gives Watts, who has spent the last 15 years leading LNT, hope she can reach even more people: "One reason I'm still around is that we still have a lot of folks out there to convince." 🐾



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