

Leave No Trace

ECO-FRIENDLY BACKPACKING
By Kevin Jackson

Anyone who has ever spent time in the backcountry can tell you about that one memorable spot they discovered while on their trip. They can describe it to you as though you were there, remembering every detail. There is something about that “spot” and its detachment from the real world that makes us feel as though we were the first ones to visit it.

That feeling is completely gone, however, when we see litter, destroyed landscape and even gear that has been left behind by others. Because adventure travel has become the fastest growing tourism sector, with more than 8 million Americans participating annually, it is our responsibility to leave “our spot” for someone else to find. Although backpacking can be one of the most eco-friendly vacations, it is still important to reduce the impact on the areas we explore. It is our responsibility to ‘Take only photos, leave only foot prints.’ This eco-friendly mindset is the focal point behind the Leave No Trace practices for sustainable outdoor adventure.

What is leave no trace? It is a set of guiding principles for participation in outdoor recreation that seeks to minimize the impact on the environment. Proponents of Leave No Trace believe that individual impacts caused by recreation can accumulate to degrade the land. Therefore, Leave No Trace encourages people who spend time in the backcountry to behave in such a way that they can minimize the unavoidable and prevent the avoidable impact of participating in outdoor adventure.



Photos courtesy of TST Adventures.

7 Guiding Principles of Leave No Trace

1. Plan Ahead & Prepare. When presented with a difficult situation, unprepared adventure seekers often resort to high-impact solutions that degrade the outdoors or put themselves at risk. To avoid this:

- Know the regulations and special concerns for the areas you visit.
- Prepare for extreme weather, hazards and emergencies.
- Know emergency phone numbers. Tell someone where you are going and when you will return.
- Schedule your trip to avoid times of high use or choose a less popular area.
- Visit in small groups. Split larger parties into groups of 4-6.

2. Travel & Camp on Durable Surfaces. Damage to land occurs when vegetation is trampled beyond repair. For areas of high use, it is important to concentrate activity to reduce further harm. For areas of low use, it is recommended that people spread out and take different trails with a dispersed camp site.

3. Dispose of waste properly. If you pack it in, pack it out! As for water waste, avoid the use of soap, and try to disperse dishwater as far from natural water sources as possible to reduce contamination. For body waste, you must dig a cathole with a trowel 6-8 inches deep and 200 feet away from running water.

4. Leave what you find. This is the number one way to allow others to enjoy the sense of discovery. Avoid site alterations such as digging tent trenches, hammering nails into trees and clearing wide areas for campsites.

5. Minimize impact and use of fires. Use a lightweight camp stove instead of building a fire. This is primarily due to the overuse of fires in the backcountry and the increase in demand for firewood in highly trafficked areas. Use existing fire rings, fire pans or mound fires whenever possible, and remember to cover and scatter your ashes to prevent any fires.

6. Respect the wildlife. Here are a few techniques for reducing the impact on the natural habitats we are exploring:

- Observe wildlife from a distance. Do not follow or approach them.
- Never feed animals. Feeding wildlife damages

their health, alters natural behaviors and exposes them to predators and other dangers.


- Protect wildlife and your food by storing rations and trash securely.
- Control pets at all times, or leave them at home.

• Avoid wildlife during sensitive times, such as mating, nesting, raising young or during winter.

7. Be considerate of other visitors. Adhering to backpacking etiquette and trying to reduce noise will reduce the impact on others enjoying the area. Also:

- Respect other visitors and protect the quality of their experience.
- Be courteous. Yield to others on the trail.
- Let nature’s sounds prevail. Avoid loud voices and noises.
- If you smoke, don’t smoke in close proximity to others and always carry out your cigarette butts. Better yet, to avoid the further risk of preventable forest fires, don’t smoke while in the wilderness.
- Be aware that radios, tape players and cellular phones ruin the wilderness experience for many people.

Finally, look for greener options when buying gear. Outdoor magazines, such as *Outside*, have devoted entire sections to eco-friendly outdoor gear and *Backpacker Magazine* considers green gear in their reviews and annually produces the “Green Awards” for sustainable gear. Several outdoor apparel manufacturers, such as Patagonia and REI, have established environmentally friendly business practices where the majority of their products are made from recycled materials with limited environmental impact.

As growing numbers of people seek out the beauty and exhilaration of outdoor recreation, our collective impact on the environment and natural ecosystems becomes more obvious and more detrimental. Water pollution, litter and disturbance to vegetation, wildlife and other visitors are indicators of the need to develop a national code of ethics that protects wild and scenic areas. 

For more information on Leave No Trace programs, visit www.lnt.org.