

# The Principles of Leave No Trace



The principles of Leave No Trace might seem unimportant until you consider the combined effects of millions of outdoor visitors. One poorly located campsite or campfire may have little significance, but thousands of such instances seriously degrade the outdoor experience for all. Leaving no trace is everyone's responsibility.

Today, use of designated wilderness areas has increased from 4 million people in 1964, to 7 million people in 1974, to 15 million in 1984, 21 million in 1994, and nearly 30 million expected users in 2000. That's a 750 percent increase in 30 years! As cities grow and populations encroach upon wildlands and recreation areas, we must do more than just pick up the litter and extinguish campfires. We must learn how to maintain the integrity and character of the outdoors for all living things. Leave No Trace is not simply a program for visiting the backcountry, it is an attitude and a way of life. Learning about Leave No Trace begins with your unit.

**Leave No Trace means traveling and camping with care, deliberately planning, and guiding one's actions so as not to harm the environment or disturb others.**

## The Seven Leave No Trace Principles

1. **Plan Ahead and Prepare**
2. **Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces**
3. **Dispose of Waste Properly (Pack It In, Pack It Out)**
4. **Leave What You Find**
5. **Minimize Campfire Impacts**
6. **Respect Wildlife**
7. **Be Considerate of Other Visitors**

**1. Plan Ahead and Prepare:** Proper trip planning and preparation helps hikers and campers accomplish trip goals safely and enjoyably while minimizing damage to natural and cultural resources. Campers who plan ahead can avoid unexpected situations, and minimize their impact by complying with area regulations such as observing limitations on group size. Schedule your trek to avoid times of high use. Obtain permits or permission to use the area for your trek.

### **Proper planning ensures:**

- Low-risk adventures because campers obtained information concerning geography and weather and prepared accordingly
- Properly located campsites because campers allotted enough time to reach their destination
- Appropriate campfires and minimal trash because of careful meal planning and food repackaging and proper equipment
- Comfortable and fun camping and hiking experiences because the outing matches the skill level of the participants

**2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces:** Damage to land occurs when visitors trample vegetation or communities of organisms beyond recovery. The resulting barren areas develop into undesirable trails, campsites, and soil erosion.

**Concentrate Activity, or Spread Out?**

- In high-use areas, campers should concentrate their activities where vegetation is already absent. Minimize resource damage by using existing trails and selecting designated or existing campsites. Keep campsites small by arranging tents in close proximity.
- In more remote, less-traveled areas, campers should generally spread out. When hiking, take different paths to avoid creating new trails that cause erosion. When camping, disperse tents and cooking activities—and move camp daily to avoid creating permanent-looking campsites. Avoid places where impacts are just beginning to show. Always choose the most durable surfaces available: rock, gravel, sand, compacted soil, dry grasses, or snow.

These guidelines apply to most alpine settings and may be different for other areas, such as deserts. Learn the Leave No Trace techniques for your group's specific activity or destination. Check with land managers to be sure of the proper technique.

**3. Dispose of Waste Properly (Pack It In, Pack It Out):** This simple yet effective saying motivates backcountry visitors to take their trash home with them. It makes sense to carry out of the backcountry the extra materials taken there by your group or others. Inspect your campsite for trash or spilled foods. Accept the challenge of packing out all trash, leftover food, and litter.

**Sanitation:** Backcountry users create body waste and wastewater that require proper disposal.

**Wastewater:** Help prevent contamination of natural water sources: After straining food particles, properly dispose of dishwater by dispersing at least 200 feet (about 80 to 100 strides for a youth) from springs, streams, and lakes. Use biodegradable soap 200 feet or more from any water source.

**Human Waste:** Proper human waste disposal helps prevent the spread of disease and exposure to others. Catholes 6 to 8 inches deep in humus and 200 feet from water, trails, and campsites are often the easiest and most practical way to dispose of feces.

**4. Leave What You Find:** Allow others a sense of discovery, and preserve the past. Leave rocks, plants, animals, archaeological artifacts, and other objects as you find them. Examine but do not touch cultural or historical structures and artifacts. It may be illegal to remove artifacts.

**Minimize Site Alterations**

- Do not dig tent trenches or build lean-tos, tables, or chairs. Never hammer nails into trees, hack at trees with hatchets or saws, or damage bark and roots by tying horses to trees for extended periods. Replace surface rocks or twigs that you cleared from the campsite. On high-impact sites, clean the area and dismantle inappropriate user-built facilities such as multiple fire rings and log seats or tables.
- Good campsites are found, not made. Avoid altering a site, digging trenches, or building structures.

**5. Minimize Campfire Impacts:** Some people would not think of camping without a campfire. Yet the naturalness of many areas has been degraded by overuse of fires and increasing demand for firewood.

- Lightweight camp stoves make low-impact camping possible by encouraging a shift away from fires. Stoves are fast, eliminate the need for firewood, and make cleanup after meals easier. After dinner, enjoy a candle lantern instead of a fire.
- If you build a fire, the most important consideration is the potential for resource damage. Whenever possible, use an existing campfire ring in a well-placed campsite. Choose not to have a fire in areas where wood is scarce—at higher elevations, in heavily used areas with a limited wood supply, or in desert settings.
- True Leave No Trace fires are small. Use dead and downed wood that can be broken easily by hand. When possible, burn all wood to ash and remove all unburned trash and food from the fire ring. If a site has two or more fire rings, you may dismantle all but one and scatter the materials in the surrounding area. Be certain all wood and campfire debris is cold out.

**6. Respect Wildlife:** Quick movements and loud noises are stressful to animals. Considerate campers practice these safety methods:

- Observe wildlife from afar to avoid disturbing them.
- Give animals a wide berth, especially during breeding, nesting, and birthing seasons.
- Store food securely and keep garbage and food scraps away from animals so they will not acquire bad habits. Never feed wildlife. Help keep wildlife wild.
- You are too close if an animal alters its normal activities.

**7. Be Considerate of Other Visitors:** Thoughtful campers respect other visitors and protect the quality of their experience.

- Travel and camp in small groups (no more than the group size prescribed by land managers).
- Let nature's sounds prevail. Keep the noise down and leave radios, tape players, and pets at home.
- Select campsites away from other groups to help preserve their solitude.
- Always travel and camp quietly to avoid disturbing other visitors.
- Make sure the colors of clothing and gear blend with the environment.
- Respect private property and leave gates (open or closed) as found.

**Be considerate of other campers and respect their privacy.**

## **OUTDOOR CODE**

**As an American, I will do my best to  
Be clean in my outdoor manners,  
Be careful with fire,  
Be considerate in the outdoors,  
and be conservation-minded.**