

Leave No Trace 2006 By Ben Gadd

First given for a launch of “Leave No Trace in Canada,” Calgary, 25 March, 2006. The media was there, plus some politicians.
My las update to this talk was 9 January, 2024.

When I was young, back in the 1950s, if you wanted to go adventuring in the Canadian Rockies you looked something like this.

That's Don Beers in Banff National Park in 1958, with Castle Mountain in the background. You may have heard of Don. He went on to become the author of several excellent hiking guidebooks to the national parks of the Rockies. He told me that the pack in this photo was made from scratch by his dad, using the design of the "Trapper Nelson," which was the standard of its time. The canvas was courtesy of the *Calgary Herald*. It came from Don's newspaper-delivery bags. Don would pack up for the back country by placing everything he was planning to carry onto a tarp. Then he would roll up the tarp and lash it to the pack frame. The tarp was all he had for shelter.

And it was heavy stuff he carried. Hardly anything was made of light metal or plastic in those days, and there was no freeze-dried food. Don would carry all that, no padding on those shoulder straps and no hip belt, for a good many miles. Well, this has all changed.



That great big pack on this guy's back probably weighs a good bit less than Don's did. And I doubt that there is a single item made of wood, or even a scrap of natural textile, anywhere on that person.





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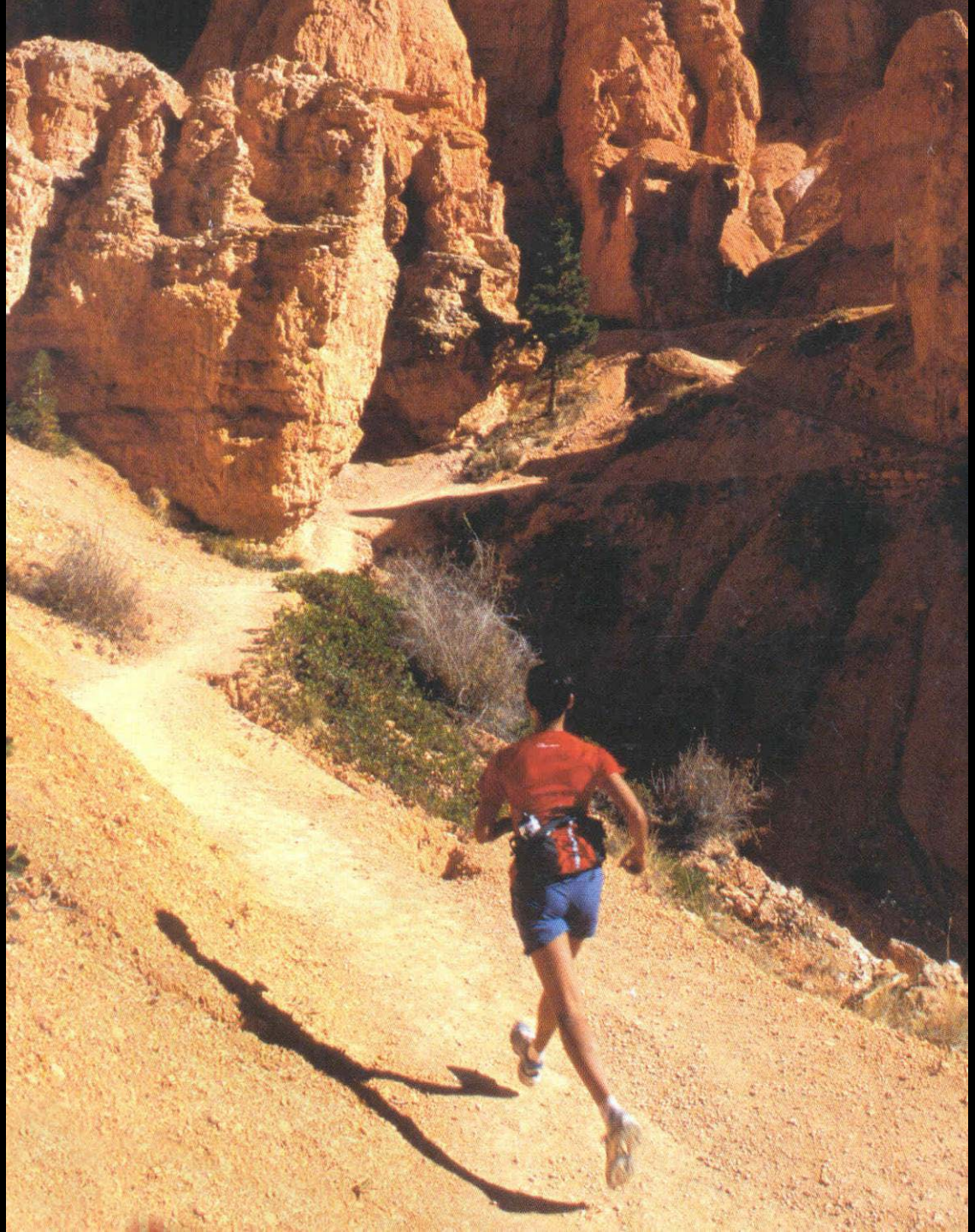
Adjustable U-Bar™


Fit-Lock™ Harness

Pivoting Waist Belt

But nostalgia aside, the packs we use these days are great. They have padded straps, a hip-belt, a chest strap, zippers, buckles, bells and whistles galore. If you look closely at the pack in this picture, on the left shoulder strap, up near the top, you will see something that looks for all the world like a rip-cord! Not only has the gear changed enormously in the past 50 years, the things we do in the mountains have changed, too.

This is the cover picture from the 2005 MEC summer catalogue. In the 1950s you would never see people running around in the wilderness, literally *running*, in shorts and a teeshirt, doing twenty kilometres in a morning. In the wilderness you went plodding along in boots, carrying a pack, taking all day to do that same twenty clicks. And who among us would have expected to see *this*?





Terry
MEC member since 1982

First bike:
a CCM two-wheeler

Favourite trail:
Pink Starfish

we've been
THERE.

Or this...



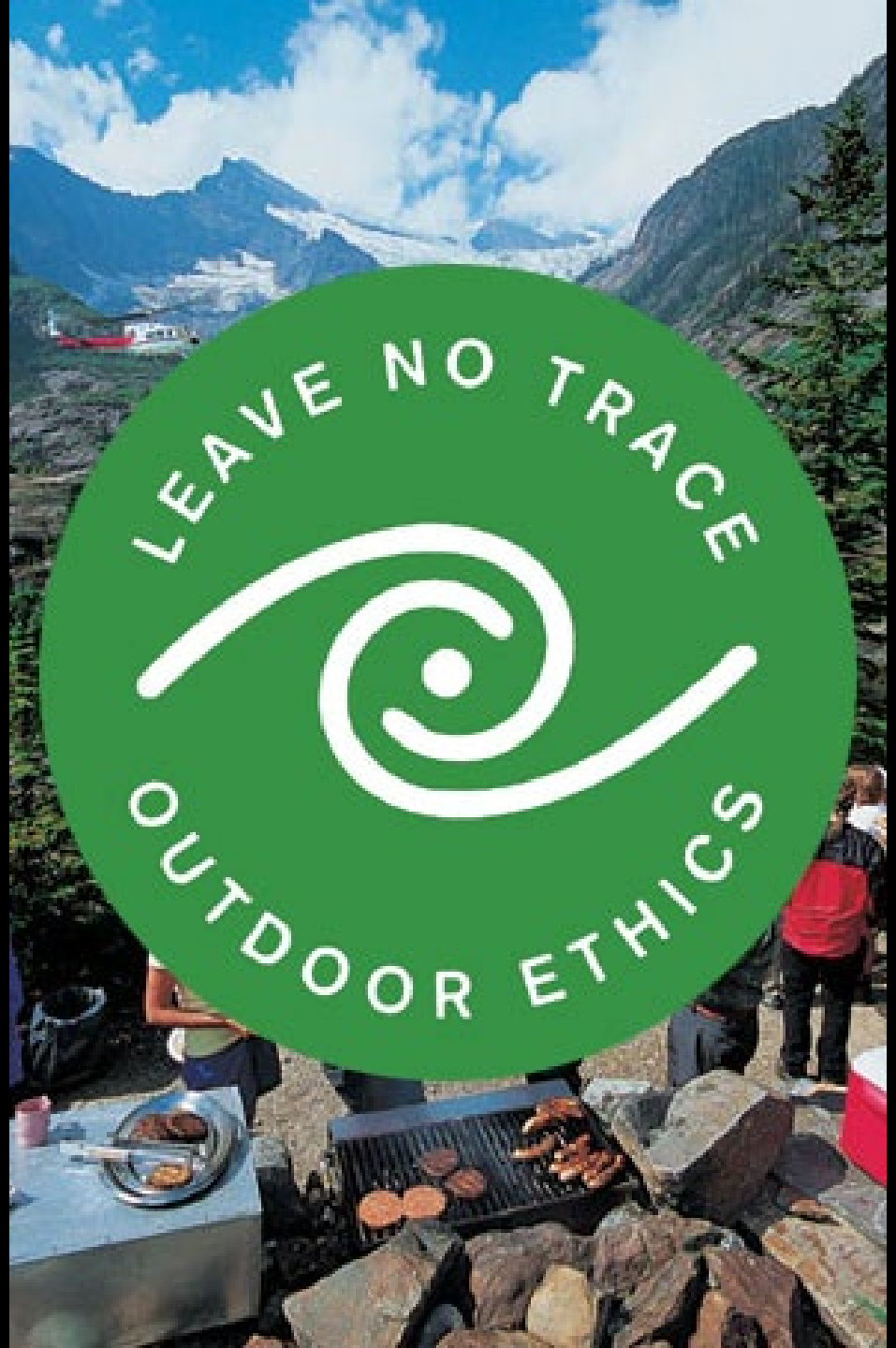
Hmmmm...

HMMMMM...!

Can't say I approve of what's
going on in this picture.
Well, along with heli-hiking
and mountain-biking and
paragliding and whatever
comes next to invade the
wilderness, thank heavens
we also have...



Leave No Trace.
The logo says it all: *outdoor ethics!*
Let's review the seven principles
of Leave No Trace.



PLAN AHEAD and Prepare

Oh, first a word about the seven principles.

They're great. I love them. But Leave No Trace has to do something about how these seven principles are presented in Canada.

This is the way you will see principle number one in many Leave No Trace documents. Now, we Canadians are a gentle, impressionable lot. We see something in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS and it rather shouts at us, you know?

The first time I saw this rendering of "PLAN AHEAD and Pprepare," in my mind it morphed into this...

**THOU SHALT
PLAN AHEAD
AND
PREPARE
TO MEET . . .**

No, no. Your average Canadian might have chosen...

(Please, please,
plan ahead and prepare, okay?)

This way to present principle number one.
But this is where we could use a little American typographic muscle. So, in
classic Canadian fashion, allow me to propose a compromise.

Plan ahead and prepare

Here we have the best of both worlds. And it's in my favorite typeface, Century Schoolbook.

Plus the overcapitalization has been fixed.

I hereby offer this combination to Leave No Trace Canada for use in all their publications.

No charge for the editorial consulting.



So, back to planning and preparing. The photo illustrates how you should plan a backpacking trip. Get everyone together and do some groupthink. However, I have to admit that my trip planning usually looks more like this...



Sooner or later I'm going to get this right. In the meantime, I find that a larger closet helps.

Travel and camp on durable surfaces

Principle number two. Travel and camp on durable surfaces.

For example, take this spot in the California desert. It's called a "playa." Anybody recognize that term? It means a dry lake bed.

Hard to get more a more durable-looking surface than this. Except for a Walmart parking lot, which is the urban campground of choice in North America.

Looking at this site again, I wouldn't take it. If a thunderstorm comes up, the lake will quickly return. You think this can't happen in the Canadian Rockies?





Think again.

This tent was pitched next to a small lake in an alpine meadow. Nice spot, but it rained while the people who pitched it were out hiking.

This is the usual sort of campsite you stay in while you're backpacking in the mountain national parks. The tent pads are prepared by Parks Canada, and they're typically excellent. Nice and flat, with no rocks sticking up, and the soil has been sifted to give it the right consistency for inserting tent pegs easily.

There's a trench around the outside to channel water away.

Tent pads such as this can be used night after night throughout the summer without creating any more damage to the area.

And that's all well and good. But some damage had to be done to create the whole campground, no?



Leave No Trace is intended especially for wilderness that has not been damaged in the first place. This is one such location, at the treeline in the north end of the Rockies, which is a huge wilderness.

From the picture, you might think that my tent was the first one ever pitched here. But actually, this spot is used for a night or two every summer by guided groups. And it's a very sensitive place. Those are delicate lichens the tent is pitched on.

However, it's the most durable surface available. Normally I would have pitched my tent in a clearing in that patch of forest off to the left. But it's kruppelholz, meaning treeline forest, very dense, and there's no space for a tent in there.

Here's something I know about lichens that is the key thing here. The lichens under the tent reproduce in part by breaking up under the hoofs of caribou and getting carried around to new locations, where they grow.

My boots do essentially the same thing to lichens as caribou hoofs do, and so does the floor of my tent, although less so because I have a soft pad under my sleeping bag. So in a way I'm mimicking the caribou.

But here's another thing. This only works as long as I'm not walking over the same ground every time, or camping in the same spot over and over. When you walk over the same ground repeatedly you create a trail. When you camp in the same spot you create a patch of bare ground.

So I'm going to offer you a Leave-No-Trace-type principle that doesn't make the main list of seven they want you to remember. This one really ought to be added.



**If you find a trail
or an established campsite,
use it.**

**If there's no trail
or established campsite,
don't make one.**

This is especially true about trails. If you get ten people walking in a line, the vegetation gets trampled so badly that you can produce a path then and there. So spread out. Leave some space on either side of you. These hikers are doing it right. There's no trail here, and they are walking side-by-side, not in line. And they are giving each other more space than they would on a sidewalk. Sometimes the topography will force you into a line, but usually you can do this.



Dispose of waste properly

Principle number three. Dispose of waste properly.

We all know that we are supposed to pack up our trash. We have all heard the rule, “If you can pack it in, you can pack it out.” It’s a no-brainer. Do it.

And speaking of waste, it doesn’t take long to get educated about how and where to poop in the woods.

You can buy a whole book on this topic. It is instantly identifiable by its title.

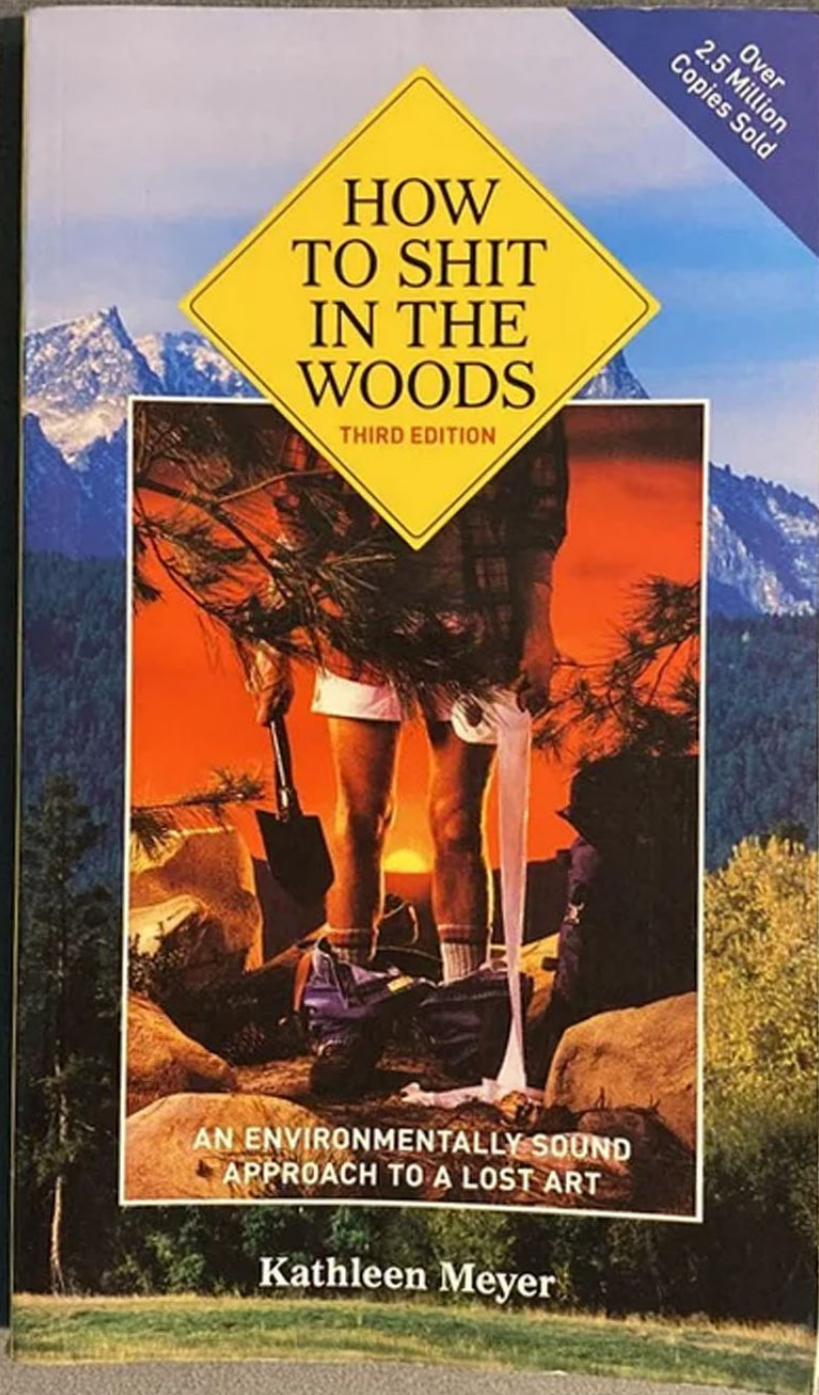
How to Shit in the Woods, by Kathleen Meyer. It's a best-seller.

The main points are these. Use public toilets when you can, and when there's no toilet available, find a place with soft ground at least sixty metres away from the nearest water. Make a small hole and poop in that. Cover it up. Put your used toilet paper in a plastic bag and pack that out along with any other trash you generate. This is good advice for Kathleen and her friends in the lower forty-eight, and it mostly works here, too. But in the Canadian Rockies the operative word is ROCK, meaning very thin soil over bedrock just beneath. And that soil is cold, so decomposition is likewise slow.

Up high in the Rockies the soil is permafrost, frozen year-round. You can't easily dig a hole in permafrost. But usually you can get your plastic trowel—gotta carry a trowel—the requisite twenty centimetres into the thawed surface. At all elevations the summer season is short, further limiting the breakdown of poop underground.

The bottom line, so to speak, is that in our area poop breaks down faster on the surface. Plus animals like to eat it, so why not make it easy for them to find by not burying it? All good points, but leaving poop on the surface allows it to wash quickly into streams. Also, someone might come along and step in it. So on balance, in the Canadian Rockies it's better to bury your poop.

And consider this. As a hiking guide for the past thirty years, I can tell you that the biggest disposal problem in the back-country is not getting rid of poop anyway. It's getting rid of *food waste*.





Freeze-dried backpacking food doesn't weigh much in your pack. It gets heavy when you add the water.



And that's where the problem arises. The stuff bloats up, such that you may find you have far more to eat than you thought you did. Sometimes you just can't finish it. And it's now way heavy. And messy.



Not only that, to a bear it's poison. As the park wardens say, "A fed bear is a dead bear."
Here's why. If you fling uneaten food into the woods anywhere in the Canadian Rockies, a bear may find it.
Bears *love* human food. Any bear that gets a sample of it will be back for more.

And that's a bad situation, both for us and for the bear. In the end, that bear is likely to be killed.

Hanging around a back-country campground, it presents a danger. The wardens used to tranquilize habituated bears and helicopter them into some valley where humans hardly ever go, but we have learned that such bears nearly always return. Plus the places nobody went to are now places somebody goes to. So these days, "habituated" bears are shot.

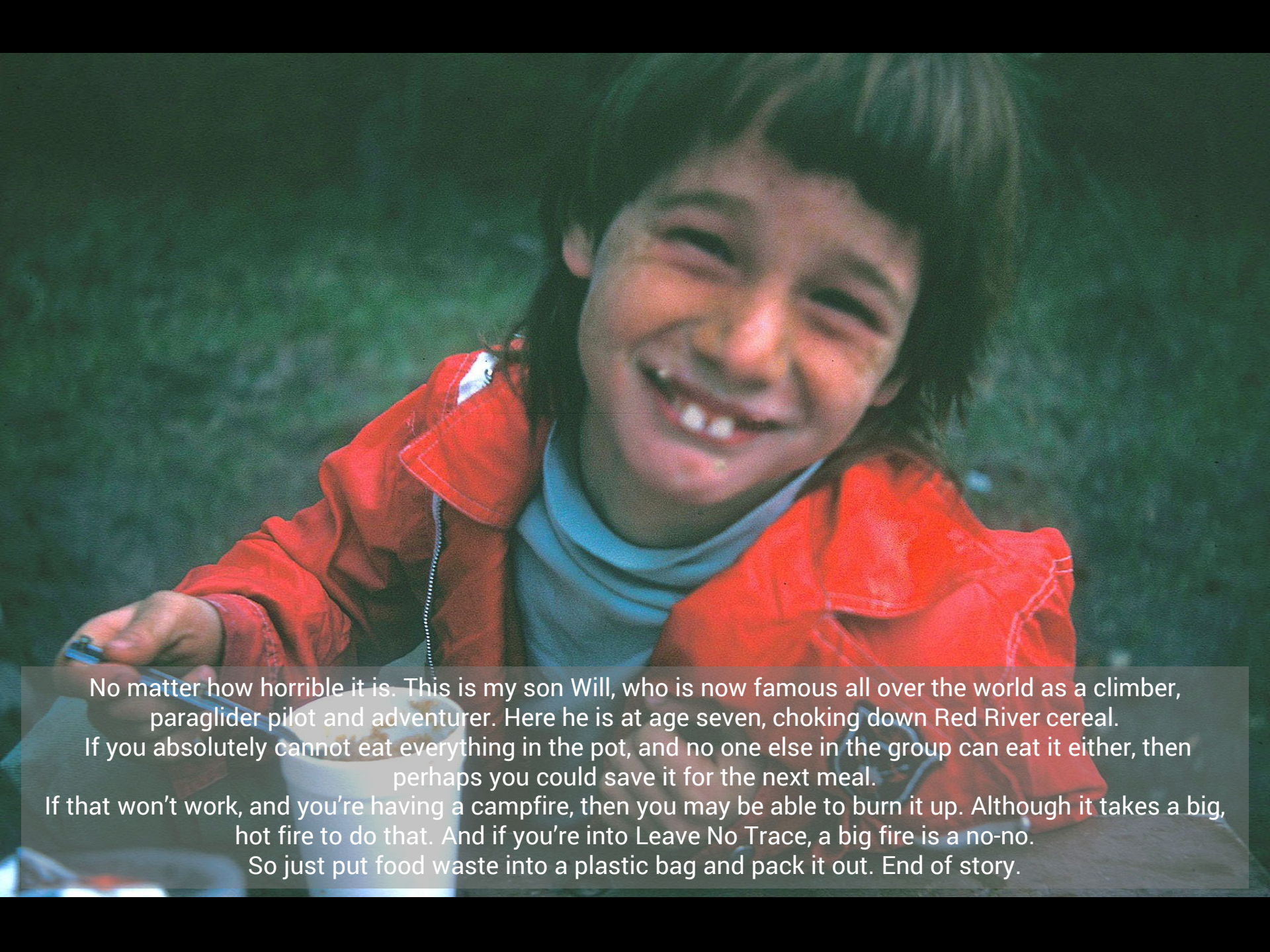
You could bury your wasted food or put it down the campground's pit toilet, but animals will find it anyway. And even small animals are endangered by eating human food. It's not their normal food, not good for them.

Further, they can wind up snared in traps we don't intentionally set, such as a bean can with the lid still attached or a plastic beer-can ring. Even a half-full bucket of water is a deadly trap for little rodents. They fall in and drown.

So don't leave such traps around your campsite, okay?

Back to food disposal. The best solution is not to have to dispose of it at all. Learn to cook only as much as you need, and to eat everything you cook...





No matter how horrible it is. This is my son Will, who is now famous all over the world as a climber, paraglider pilot and adventurer. Here he is at age seven, choking down Red River cereal. If you absolutely cannot eat everything in the pot, and no one else in the group can eat it either, then perhaps you could save it for the next meal.

If that won't work, and you're having a campfire, then you may be able to burn it up. Although it takes a big, hot fire to do that. And if you're into Leave No Trace, a big fire is a no-no. So just put food waste into a plastic bag and pack it out. End of story.

Leave what you find

Principle number four. Leave what you find. Don't pick the wildflowers. Don't collect rocks. As they say in Newfoundland, "Leave 'er lay where Jesus flang 'er."

Back in 1970, when I began to work in the mountain national parks, I learned that messing stuff up in a park was known as "perturbation." That's what it was called in the regulations. Perturbation. Be careful how you say that. Someone caught picking flowers or stealing fossils would thus be officially classified in those days as a "perturbater."

For example, here are some perturbaters.

This is a group of geologists. They are perturbing by collecting rock specimens. Note that one of the perturbaters is wearing a helmet during perturbation. For the entire summer of 1970 I was a professional perturbater. I was working as a field assistant to a geologist studying certain rock layers in the Rockies. Before we were allowed to collect rock specimens in Banff National Park, we had to receive a permit from the park authorities. On that permit, I saw the following words, neatly typed out: "permission to perturbate." I'm not making this up.





Another consideration in a lot of protected areas is the “fifty-years” rule. If something you find is older than fifty years, you have to leave it alone. Even if it’s basically junk or trash.

This is now working in my favor. I’m sixty-eight.

By law, this abandoned mine must be left alone, either until avalanches have spread the mess all the way down the mountain, or until whatever is left gets hauled off to a museum. Which is probably where I belong.

Minimize campfire impacts

Principle number five. Minimize campfire impacts.

Remember this guy? Smokey the Bear, who actually existed, minus the anthropomorphism, was rescued from what one might call an episode of *maximum* campfire impact.

These days a poster like this one seems to be a bit over the edge. But my generation was brought up to *fear* Smokey the Bear. When I was seven years old, I believed that if I started a forest fire, Smokey might show up, shovel in hand, looking for the kid who did it.

Little did we know that Smokey was actually working for the logging companies. As it turned out, the forests were being saved from fire in order to be cut down and turned into lumber. This is still true, but in the national parks, at least, the park wardens get to *light* fires. They call them "prescribed burns."

They use to call them "*controlled* burns." But not any longer. Too many of them became *uncontrolled* burns. So these days the term is "prescribed burns." Just what the doctor ordered.

And truly, for a lodgepole-pine forest that is way overdue for an ecosystem-renewing fire, that is exactly what it needs.



Remember—Only you can
PREVENT THE MADNESS!



However, let the experts do the job. Not your campfire that got out of hand. Or was left unattended.

On a much smaller scale, there is the problem of blackened fire rings in back-country campgrounds. The answer has been to provide these metal things.

No doubt they go by some government-speak name such as “campfire-impact-minimization units.” But they are very good.

Wherever campfires are permitted in the parks, there you *should* find some sort of fire container.

However, when you’re camping where there is no container, and no one has built a fire-ring out of rocks, what do you do? You could carefully remove the vegetation from the ground and store it a safe distance away, find your own rocks, build your own fire ring and enjoy your campfire that evening. Before you leave the next morning, you can put the rocks back where you found them, spread the ashes and charcoal around, and...

Nobody does this. Instead, they walk away, thereby establishing the human presence in that spot for many, many years to come.

No, here is the true alternative. Just don’t build a fire at all. That’s what I do in wild places. I keep ‘em wild. No fires. And that’s the law in Jasper National Park. Unless you’re in an official back-country campground, fires are simply not allowed. Good.



Respect wildlife

Principle number six. Respect wildlife. The corollary to this is, "Keep your distance."

This is good example of a *bad* idea.
I mean, what was that guy *thinking*?



Remember, if it has antlers or long claws or large fangs, it could kill you. But more likely, we will kill it. Whatever hangs around humans usually winds up dead. Our pets can handle us. Wildlife cannot.

So how close to wildlife is too close? Here's how to tell. If whatever you are watching moves away, which it will usually do rather than chasing you, then you are too close. Back off.

In the national parks it's actually unlawful to approach wildlife. The wardens don't particularly mind if you walk toward a herd of bighorn sheep along the highway. The sheep are used to that. In fact, so many people feed them, which is *completely* against the law, that the sheep are quite likely to approach *you*.

But if you follow a bear into the woods, hoping to get a better photo, you may get a ticket instead. Or the scare of your life. Don't do it.





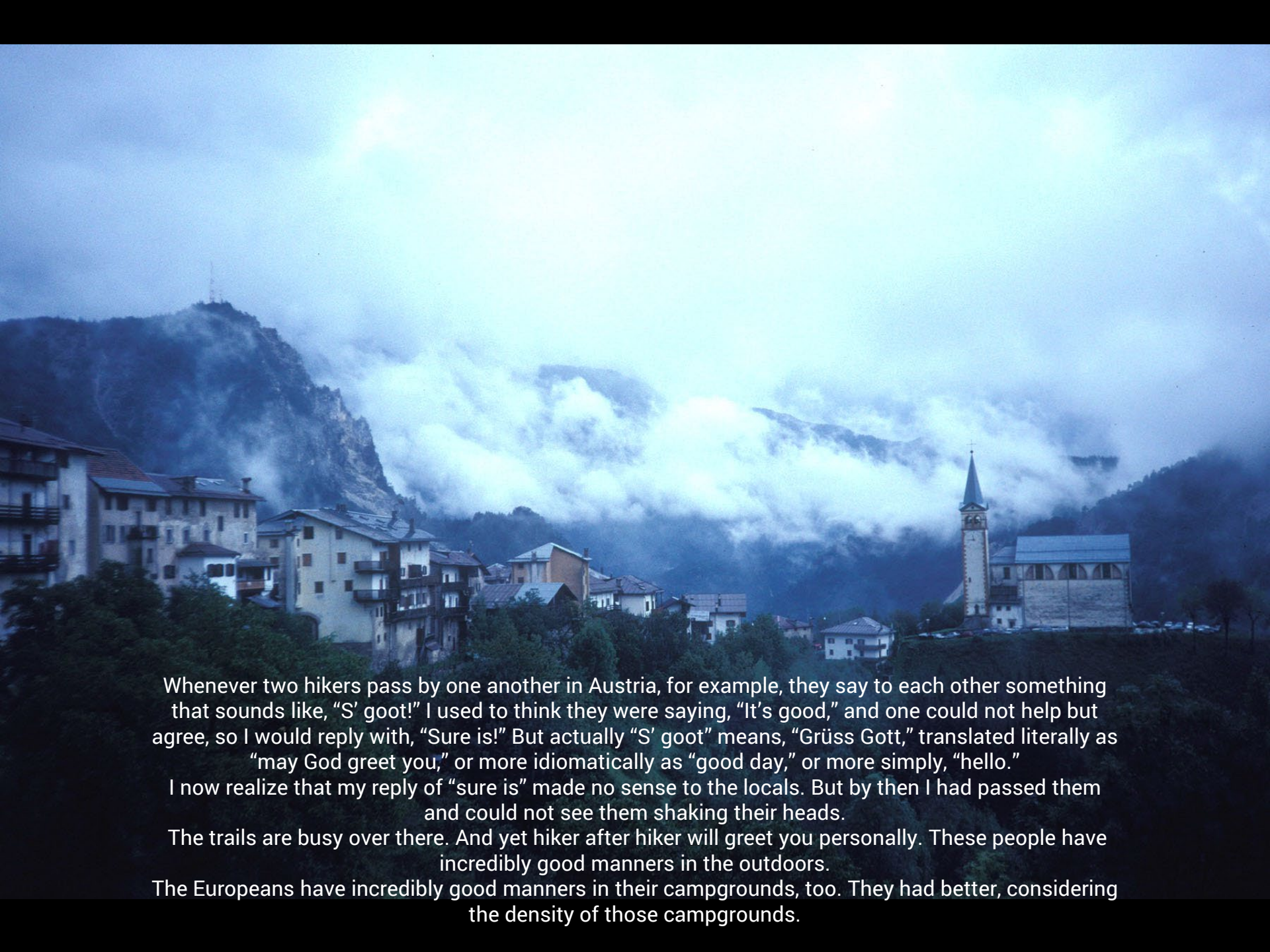
These guys are hardly scary at all. In fact, they can be very friendly. They may even climb right into your lap to share those potato chips you are eating.

However, just remember this. These are ground squirrels, and ground squirrels have fleas. And the fleas can carry bubonic plague. BUBONIC PLAGUE?!!!

Yes. There have been *deaths* in the Rockies from cuddling up to ground squirrels. And here's something else to consider. Rabies. 'Nuff said?

Be considerate of other visitors

And finally, here is principle number seven. Be considerate of other visitors.
The Europeans have this worked out.



Whenever two hikers pass by one another in Austria, for example, they say to each other something that sounds like, "S' goot!" I used to think they were saying, "It's good," and one could not help but agree, so I would reply with, "Sure is!" But actually "S' goot" means, "Grüss Gott," translated literally as "may God greet you," or more idiomatically as "good day," or more simply, "hello."

I now realize that my reply of "sure is" made no sense to the locals. But by then I had passed them and could not see them shaking their heads.

The trails are busy over there. And yet hiker after hiker will greet you personally. These people have incredibly good manners in the outdoors.

The Europeans have incredibly good manners in their campgrounds, too. They had better, considering the density of those campgrounds.



This campground is near Arco, Italy. It covers about one city block, and every night it must hold a thousand campers.

My son Will and I stayed there some years ago. This photo was taken during the day, when the place was mostly empty and I could back off far enough from our tent to get it all in the picture. At night, the spot where I was standing was always occupied by another tent. Or two. Or three.

One night a couple of young Germans set up camp near us. They got out their guitars and their wine, and they began to make music. Well, they thought of it as music. It was awful. Will and I immediately dubbed them the "We Can Sing and Play Anything American Badly Band." They would go from "Blue Suede Shoes" to "Blowin' in the Wind" to "Big John" without ever changing chords. At ten o'clock everyone in the campground was supposed to be quiet. This was a rule. No noise after ten. And up to now we found that it had been universally obeyed.

But that night the We Can Sing and Play Anything American Badly Band kept at it past ten. Theirs was the only noisy party in the campground, and I'm sure they could be heard throughout much of it. Yet no one interfered. Will explained that Europeans were much too polite to ask the lads to stop. Besides, they might be members of the Bader-Meinhof gang and respond with gunfire.

By midnight I couldn't stand it any more. I walked over to them. A few steps was all it took. They looked up and said, "Hello! Would you like some wine?"

I said, "No, thank you. But I *would* like you to stop singing and playing."

"You don't like it?" one of them replied, looking hurt.

"No," I said. "I don't like it."

"Oh," came the response. "We are so sorry. We thought everyone liked it. We are going to bed now."

By the time I was back in my sleeping bag they were in theirs.

If only the average Alberta campground yahoo had this kind of ethic. This kind of *Leave No Trace* ethic, eh?



Well, we may not always understand the people we meet in campgrounds and on the trail. But we should try. And before we rush to judgement, we should always keep in mind what we looked like when we were new to the wilderness. This is what Leave No Trace is for. To teach us. To teach everyone. To get the good word out.





So here are the seven principles again. Plus that extra one I have added.

A group of hikers with large backpacks are walking through a lush green valley. In the background, there are majestic mountains with patches of snow under a sky filled with white clouds. The hikers are seen from behind, moving away from the viewer towards the mountains.

Plan ahead and prepare

You know one thing that will help a lot with this? Make general-purpose lists of the things you usually bring and the food you like to eat. That's what I do.

A scenic landscape photograph of the Canadian Rockies. In the foreground, three hikers with large backpacks are walking away from the camera across a lush green meadow. The middle ground is filled with dense evergreen forests. In the background, majestic snow-capped mountain peaks rise against a sky filled with large, white, fluffy clouds. The overall scene conveys a sense of adventure and outdoor recreation in a natural setting.

Travel and camp on durable surfaces

Travel and camp on durable surfaces. The Canadian Rockies are not the Nevada desert.

A group of hikers with large backpacks are walking through a lush green mountain meadow. In the background, there are majestic, rugged mountains with patches of snow under a sky filled with large, white clouds. The hikers are seen from behind, moving away from the viewer towards the mountains.

Dispose of waste properly

Dispose of waste properly. Cook only as much as you need, and eat everything you cook.



Leave what you find

Leave what you find. Otherwise you are perturbing.

A group of hikers with large backpacks are walking through a lush green alpine meadow. In the background, there are majestic mountains with patches of snow under a sky filled with white clouds. The hikers are seen from behind, moving away from the viewer towards the mountains.

Minimize campfire impacts

Minimize campfire impacts. The best way is simply not to make a fire at all.

A group of hikers with large backpacks are walking through a lush green mountain meadow. In the background, there are majestic, rugged mountains with patches of snow under a sky filled with large, white clouds. The hikers are seen from behind, moving away from the viewer into the distance.

Respect wildlife

Respect wildlife. If whatever you are watching moves away, then you are too close.

A scenic mountain landscape with hikers. In the foreground, several hikers with large backpacks are walking through a lush green meadow. In the background, there are majestic, snow-capped mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The scene is peaceful and natural.

Be considerate of other visitors

So here are the seven principles again. Plus that extra one I have added.

A scenic mountain landscape with hikers in the foreground. The background features rugged, snow-capped mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The middle ground is a lush green valley with dense evergreen forests. In the foreground, several hikers with large backpacks are walking away from the viewer across a grassy field. The text is overlaid in a large, white, serif font.

If you find a trail or campsite,
use it.
If there is no trail or campsite,
don't make one.

And here's the principle I have added. If you find a trail or campsite, use it. If there is no trail or campsite, don't make one.



Thank you very much.

END