

A Backpacking Ethic

The tremendous rewards of backpacking are drawing more and more people to the trails. At the same time, the vast territory suitable for treks is shrinking in size. More people and less land means hikers must be careful not to endanger the very wilderness they have come to enjoy.

A good way to protect the backcountry is to remember that while you are there, you are a visitor. When you visit a friend, you are always careful to leave his home just as you found it. You would never think of dropping litter on the carpet, chopping down trees in the yard, putting soap in the drinking water, or marking your name on the living room wall. When you visit the wilderness, let the same courtesies apply. Leave the backcountry just as you found it.

A few hundred years ago, when unspoiled country was everywhere, frontiersmen could slip through the forest without a trace. Sometimes their survival depended on it.

Today, the survival of the wilderness itself depends in part on the willingness of backpackers like you to be good visitors. Hiking and camping without a trace is the sign of an expert woodsman, and of a Scout who cares for the environment. Perfect the skills of the frontiersmen. Travel lightly on the land.

Trail Procedures

Hiking with a pack is much different from walking without one. A pack on your shoulders alters your sense of balance. Its weight puts extra strain on your feet, ankles, and knees, especially when you're pounding downhill. Take it easy at first until you become accustomed to the sensation of carrying a pack, and rest whenever you begin to tire.

Setting a good pace will enable everyone in your group to enjoy a trek. Help ensure the comfort of the slowest members by positioning them near the front of the group where they can more easily maintain a steady stride. Backpacking is a group activity, and everyone must pitch in to do whatever is necessary for the good of all.

Begin each day's walk slowly, allowing plenty of time for your muscles to warm up and your packs to settle into place. Take brief rest breaks to refresh yourselves and adjust your clothing to meet changing weather conditions. Never hike to the point of exhaustion; you may need those reserves of energy to meet unexpected situations.

On a trek it is crucial to everyone's well-being to adopt and put into practice proper trail procedures. Every member of the group should be aware of these procedures before you depart for a trek:

- Always keep together.
- Use the buddy system.
- Anyone may call a halt.

Keeping the group together is essential in preventing anyone from becoming lost, but it is frequently neglected unless the leader insists on it and each member is committed to doing his or her part to ensure success. **Every trek should be a team effort.** Stronger backpackers should be expected to help those who are less able. Faster hikers should walk near the end of the line of hikers and give positive encouragement to the slower ones in front. The entire group should hike within hearing of one another.

The buddy system works well in any outdoor situation, not just aquatics. Before the trek, make sure everyone has at least one buddy; buddies can also tent together.

When hiking or backpacking on the trail, every member has a right and even a duty to call a halt to the entire group when necessary. Every member should be encouraged to call a stop to check a hot spot, adjust a pack, adjust layers of clothing, eat a snack for energy, drink some water, or any other reason. When necessary, leader should redistribute equipment and food to lighten the load of someone who is having a problem.

Assign Duties

An effective way to travel quickly and safely on a backpacking trek is to divide responsibilities among the group. There are four basic duties: those of scout, the smoother-upper, the leader, and the sweep.

Scout

With map and compass in hand, the scout strikes out a little ahead of the rest of the group in search of a route everyone can follow. Careful to maintain a course that leads toward the destination, the scout stays within earshot of the group.

Smoother-Upper

The smoother-upper takes a position in front of the group and “smooths up” the route established by the scout to ensure the other hikers the easiest walking possible. For instance, the scout might climb up and over a steep knob or plunge through a dense thicket. The smoother-upper may decide to lead the group around the obstacle and rejoin the scout on the other side. The smoother-upper also sets the pace.

Leader

The leader comes along midway in line in order to monitor the progress of all the hikers. Leaving the determination of route and pace up to the scout and smoother-upper, the leader decides when to take a rest stop, where to eat lunch, when to seek shelter from inclement weather, and whether to stop or turn back. When a decision is made, a message is passed up the line to the smoother-upper and the scout.

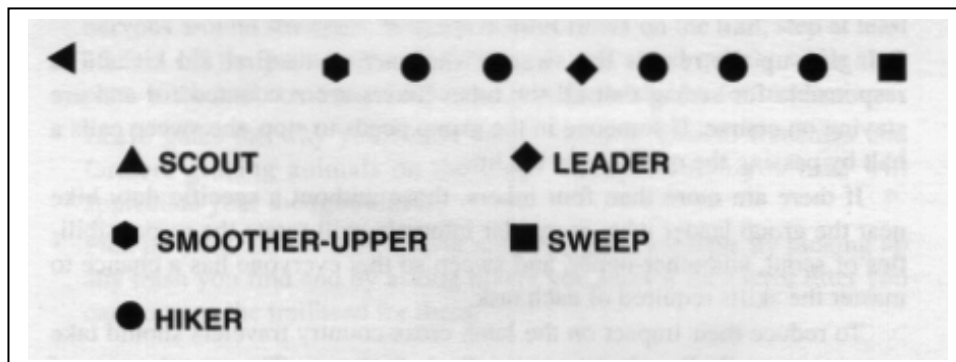
Sweep

Bringing up the rear is the sweep, who carries the first aid kit and is responsible for seeing that all the other hikers are accounted for and are staying on course. If someone in the group needs to stop, the sweep calls a halt by passing the message up the line.

If there are more than four hikers, those without a specific duty hike near the group leader who, at regular intervals, will rotate the responsibilities of scout, smoother-upper, and sweep so that everyone has a chance to master the skills required of each task.

To reduce their impact on the land, cross-country travelers should take care not to walk directly in one another’s footsteps. Those at the rear of the group should seek alternate routes through fallen timber and rocks to avoid beating a path.

This system works especially well to keep everyone together when hiking cross-country, but it is also helpful when hiking on a trail.



Rules of the Trail

As with any public thoroughfare, a trail has certain rules its users must obey. There aren't many of them, but they are important matters of common sense.

- If there is a registration box at the trailhead, sign in. Officials of the agency in charge of the area will know where you've gone, and they can use your registration information to better determine the needs of future hikers.
- Use switchbacks properly. Switchbacks zigzagging a trail up a mountainside help prevent erosion by easing the steepness of the grade. When hikers cut across switchbacks rather than staying on the pathway, their boots can loosen the earth, disturb vegetation, and make it easier for rain and melting snow to wash away the soil.
- Be kind to the countryside. Meadows and alpine tundra are fragile. Protect them by staying in the center of main trails, and by taking rest breaks and camping in the trees rather than on the clearings themselves.
- Treat other hikers courteously. Many people enjoy hiking, and in your travels, you will meet some of them. Be polite. Step aside to let them pass. Respect their privacy and, if you camp, find a site hidden away from other tents.
- Give livestock the right-of-way. Horses and pack animals are sometimes nervous around strangers. When you meet riders on the trail, step at least 10 feet off the path on the downhill side and stand quietly while they pass. If the trail is too narrow for that, ask the lead rider for instructions.
- Leave gates the way you found them—open or closed. Ranchers and farmers grazing animals on the lands through which you hike will appreciate your thoughtfulness.
- Pick up litter. Do the land a favor and set a good example by picking up any trash you find and by asking hikers you meet if they have litter you can carry to the trailhead for them.

Hiking Tips

1. How fast should the hike be paced? Not faster than the slowest member.
2. Keep some space between hikers: 6 to 10 feet is about right. Space will allow safety (no stepping on heels or catching flying limbs in the eye); it also allows for sudden stops and a good view of the surrounding environment.
3. A steady, even pace results in fewer rest stops, and less chance that members will overheat.
4. Foot problems? Speak up! Foot care is essential. Hot spots, blisters, foreign objects in the boot—all can cause misery for everybody if not taken care of early.
5. Rest stops? They're good if someone has a problem or if the scenery warrants a special gaze. Too-frequent rest stops signal a too-rapid speed of hiking.