

## Some 'Flowers' will never enhance wilderness experience

by Candace Ward and Ed Berg

Have you ever hiked into a remote lake only to find a fire pit full of trash? Or returned to a favorite fishing spot and found human waste? Or lots of toilet paper "flowers" behind a campsite? If you're like us, you were probably just a bit ticked off!

Each year the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge and other land management agencies in Alaska rely on the good graces of the majority of the outdoor users who don't make a mess when camping and hiking. Many folks go an extra mile and pick up stuff that mess-makers have left behind.

The Refuge and other outdoor groups are working to promote the "Leave No Trace" idea. This program provides a basic philosophy of how to protect and enjoy public lands while doing a variety of recreational activities.

"Leave No Trace" has seven basic principles:

**Plan Ahead and Prepare:** Proper trip planning helps day trippers and campers accomplish trips safely and have fun while minimizing damage to natural and cultural resources. By taking the time to plan ahead and prepare, aggravation and disaster can be avoided.

You'll never have to trowel a ditch around your tent in a rainstorm, if you bring the right tarp and choose a sturdy tent. Food can be re-packaged into reusable containers such as ziplock bags and polyethylene jars. Trips can be scheduled for off-peak times to avoid having to open up a new campsite because the best campsites are full.

**Camp and Travel on Durable Surfaces:** It's important to protect natural vegetation to prevent erosion and scarring. In high use areas, campers should try to concentrate their activity. It's best to use trails whenever possible and to select campsites that are already well used.

In fragile areas like alpine tundra, try using a campsite for one night and moving to a new site for the next night. When alpine hiking, spread out and hike on rock and snow fields to avoid creating a trail.

Often there are a lot of gray areas when applying this principle. However, if you get into a mind set of thinking about how to minimize the damage your boots and campsite make, you can really make a difference. Stepping in that mud puddle in the middle of

the trail can save a beautiful rose or buttercup at the trail's edge.

**Dispose of Waste Properly:** Trash, litter, and human waste left in natural areas detract from the beauty of wild places. Simple rules to live by are:

- Pack out what you pack in.

- Prevent contamination of natural water sources. Soapy, gray waste water needs to be dispersed 200 ft. from fresh water sources.

- When disposing of human waste, dig a cathole 6 - 8" deep and 200 ft. from water. Deposit waste and fill hole with soil.

- Pack out your toilet paper in a small ziplock baggie. Toilet paper "flowers" can last for years and are one of the most obnoxious reminders of mindless camping. You can start young children off right by giving them a ziplock baggie and instructions, before handing them toilet paper and sending them into the bushes "to take care of business."

**Leave What You Find:** Allow others a sense of wonder and discovery. Leave rocks, plants, wildlife, and archeological artifacts so others can enjoy them.

**Minimize Campfire Impacts:** Some people can't imagine camping without a campfire. Yet, there are some situations where a campfire is harmful. In the high country it's best to use a lightweight gas or butane stove. Avoid fires that blacken bare rock outcrops. The campfire scars of the Lewis and Clark expedition of the early 1800's are still visible (and have been allowed historians to track the expedition day-by-day through the mountains of the West.)

In areas where it is practical to have a ground fire, think small. Use dead and down wood no bigger around than your wrist and no longer than your forearm. Be sure to build your small fire on mineral soil to prevent creeping ground fires in the forest duff.

**Respect Wildlife:** When encountering wildlife, give them space to retreat and enjoy them from a distance. Avoid traveling in sensitive habitat like wetlands or in areas that may be critical to wildlife such as nesting and breeding areas. Never feed wildlife. Hang your food bag when tall trees are available or use a plastic bear barrel. Never take food into your tent, nor leave food in a pack on the ground.

Be Considerate of Other Visitors: Respect the privacy of others. Let natural sounds prevail. Most people come to visit natural areas to enjoy nature and to socialize with their family and friends. Realize that your entertainment may be someone else's pet peeve. An evening of storytelling may be more fun and respectful to your neighbors than playing loud portable radio music or target practicing with a pistol. After hearing about the Leave No Trace Program, many folks may agree whole heartedly and adopt new ideas for their outdoor adventures. Others may give familiar excuses - we can do what we want, wilderness is limitless, it will heal in time, and it's too much trouble.

Refuge visitors frequently express surprise at how much human impact there is on our Peninsula public lands - trash, giant fire pits, numerous bullet holes in trees and signs, off road vehicle scarring, human waste left on the ground unburied, toilet paper flow-

ers, and beer cans for starters. Putting Leave no Trace into practice can keep human impacts to a minimum, so that the Kenai will retain its beauty and wilderness values.

Fortunately, the Leave No Trace philosophy is alive and well with many local residents and visitors. Scouting organizations and school children at Tustumena, K-Beach, and Mt. View Elementary Schools participate in Leave No Trace Programs. At the Refuge headquarters we talk about Leave No Trace with visiting groups and with people seeking information about where to go in the back country. The idea is catching on, and with luck maybe we won't see so many of those white "flowers" next spring!

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