

Responsible Wilderness Travel

Why do we choose to endure miles of dusty trails to reach the shores of an alpine lake? Why do we struggle with blisters, force down tasteless bowls of one-pot glop, sleep in claustrophobic mummy bags, and gasp our way up mountain passes? What is it about being surrounded by towering canyon walls, jagged mountains, or silent, dripping trees that makes us put up with oppressive heat, penetrating cold, smelly clothes, grumpy tent mates, and whining mosquitoes? In short, why do millions of us make annual pilgrimages into the Wilderness?

We go to the Wilderness for many reasons. Wilderness travel is about enduring hardship, confronting fears, rising to new challenges, responding to changing circumstances, getting close to nature, sharing good times with friends, and learning about oneself. It's a place where a steaming bowl of macaroni and cheese tastes like manna from heaven after a long day on the trail. It's about holding down your tent in a raging storm waiting anxiously for dawn. It's a place where you thrash your way through impenetrable thickets of alder for hours to be rewarded by the glimpse of an unnamed waterfall tumbling for hundreds of feet above you. It's catching a native cutthroat in a sparkling stream or watching a moose amble placidly through a marsh. For many of us, it is all these things and more that keep bringing us back, year after year, blister after blister.

But the privilege of earning these rewards brings with it responsibility—responsibility to the land, to yourself, and to others. Wilderness travelers must recognize that there are risks inherent to heading into the backcountry. These risks are what make the Wilderness experience raw and exciting. They are what make it wild. They can also be life threatening. Your decision to cross a raging river may only get your boots wet, or it may kill you if you've underestimated the current's power. Placing your campsite on the top of a ridge may give you an incredible view or it may turn the aluminum poles in your tent into lightning rods if an electrical storm moves in. These risks can all be minimized if you know what you are doing before you head out into the Wilderness. Preparation is not

going to make the lightning go away nor the rivers mellow, but it will give you the tools you need to tackle these obstacles responsibly.

Start your preparation by making an honest assessment of your skills. Choose a goal that is appropriate for you and for your group. If you've only hiked in the city park, you probably want to pick a route with well-established trails. If you've never climbed before, choose a peak you can walk up the first time you try to reach an alpine summit. Plan ahead and get the training you need to be safe in the backcountry. The following information will give you a basic introduction to the essential elements of a responsible Wilderness expedition. You will also find links and references to other sources of information, including books and websites. The critical thing is to do your homework *before* you find yourself miles from nowhere lost without a plan.

Expedition planning.

The questions to ask yourself as you sit down to plan your next Wilderness trip are: who, what, when, where, and how. If you explore each of these questions thoroughly, you should be well prepared for your adventure.

- **Who** are you going with? What are their skill levels? What is your skill level? Do you want or need to designate a leader? How do people get along with each other? The longer your expedition, the more critical the make up of your team. There's nothing like a five-day storm with four of you stuck in the three-person tent you brought to save weight, to bring out the worst in your team. Know who you are going with and establish basic ground rules before you leave home.

- **What** do you plan to do? Does everyone agree with this plan? Many trips go awry because Joe wanted to fish every puddle you passed along the trail, while Jane thought you were planning to climb Mt. Everest. Do you have the appropriate training and equipment to tackle the goal you have set? If the river is Class IV, can everyone on the team boat at that level comfortably? Does everyone, or anyone, know basic First Aid? Do you have a contingency plan in case something goes wrong?

- **When** do you plan to make the trip? Have you checked with books, locals, or land managers to confirm that your timing is appropriate for the objective? You don't want to plan a river trip so late in the season you have to drag your boat through the boulders nor do you want to go when the water is at flood stage. Have you allowed yourself enough time to both complete your goal—say a winter traverse of the Presidential Mountains in New Hampshire—and sit out a storm or two? Should you expect snow? Will finding water be an issue? Do you need a four-season tent or will a rain fly suffice?

- **Where** are you going? Do you have the appropriate maps? Do you need a permit? If so, are permits readily available or do you have to plan months ahead? Where is the nearest hospital? If you need help, who do you call—the sheriff's department? The park service? 911? Have you talked to the appropriate land management agency about specific regulations? For example, are open fires allowed? Are there group size limits? Do you have to camp in designated spots?

- **How** are you going to do this trip? What and how much do you want to eat? How much fuel do you need? What equipment is required to accomplish your goal? How much money is the trip going to cost? How do you get to the trailhead? Do you need a shuttle to get back to your car at the end of your trip? Do you have any escape options if your plan is overly ambitious? Are you prepared for all kinds of weather?

By systematically going through these basic questions with your team, you will be much better prepared for your expedition and much less likely to run into trouble once you get out into the Wilderness. As a final step before you leave, write down your itinerary. Include all relevant information including anything that might cause a delay or change of plans. Leave this note with a friend or family member—someone who will notify the appropriate authorities in case you fail to return on time. This information will help immensely as people seek you out.

Links and Resources:

The Backpacker.com provides basic information for planning your backcountry trip. Visit <http://www.thebackpacker.com/> for more information.

REI's website has tons of information for beginning wilderness travelers. You will find gear hints, trip ideas, and a community forum for exchanging information. Visit http://www.rei.com/reihtml/LEARN_SHARE/camp/clbkbegintop.html for more information.

Backpacker magazine's website contains information on the latest equipment, trip planning, and technique tips. It's a bit more hit or miss in terms of subject matter than the REI or Gorp site, but the information that is there tends to be more in-depth. See <http://199.93.170.221/> for more information.

The Great Outdoor Recreation Pages (GORP) has everything you need to get your trip off the ground from recommended destinations to specific how-to's for beginners. See <http://www.gorp.com/default.htm>

Skeeter's camping guide is a personal website that provides an introduction to expedition planning, including lists for first aid kits, equipment needs, etc. Visit <http://www.cis.yale.edu/amstud/stibitch/stibma.html>

Like Skeeter's camping guide, **Hiking with Mike** is a privately maintained website that offers personal hints about planning your backcountry trip. On the positive side, these sites have no commercial agenda, on the negative side, there are personal biases in the recommendations. Both sites do have useful information, you just may not need all the knives Mike recommends. Visit: <http://www.HikingwithMike.com/Survival.htm>

For specific information about Leave No Trace camping, visit LNT, Inc at <http://www.lnt.org/> or check out the National Outdoor Leadership School's site at <http://www.nols.edu> NOLS is responsible for the education component of Leave No Trace, so their website contains additional information about minimum-impact camping.

For general information about Wilderness issues, visit www.wilderness.net

The Wilderness Society maintains an expansive set of links to various environmental groups and wilderness sites. Visit www.wilderness.org to check it out.

Books:

Berger, Karen, *Everyday Wisdom: 1001 Expert Tips for Hikers*, Seattle: The Mountaineers, Date?

Hampton, Bruce and David Cole, *Soft Paths*, 2nd edition, Harrisburg, PA, Stackpole Books, 1995

Harvey, Mark, *The National Outdoor Leadership School's Wilderness Guide*, Fireside Books, New York, 1999

Howe, Steve, Alan Kesselheim, Dennis Coello, and John Harlin. *Backpacker Magazine's Making Camp: The Complete Guide for Hikers, Mountain Bikers, Paddlers and Skiers*, The Mountaineers, Emmaus, PA 1997