



Don Klehr

Leaving 'Leave No Trace' Behind Towards a Holistic Land Use Ethic

by David Moskowitz and Darcy Ottey

IF YOU ASKED AN ECOLOGIST whether it is possible for humans to “leave no trace” on their environment, he or she would probably chuckle. Nothing lives on this planet without affecting its environment. From subsistence hunter-gatherers to modern western scientists, people have always encountered this truth. Yet in recent years, many outdoor educators, land managers, and recreationists have embraced a set of land use principles known as Leave No Trace. These principles emphasize ways for people visiting wilderness areas to minimize their impact on these areas. However, the central message of Leave No Trace — the notion that it is possible to live in the natural world without leaving a trace — is critically flawed.

First, it conflicts with fundamental principles of ecology. Second, it encourages wilderness visitors to view the natural world as an environment in which humans do not belong, disconnecting them from the landscape. Third, the Leave No Trace principles do not address larger environmental issues and day-to-day patterns of behavior. By encouraging people

to examine their actions only while they are in wild areas, the principles fail to help people understand the connection between their actions at home and the preservation of the wild places they seek to visit. These are fundamental shortcomings during a critical time in humanity’s evolving relationship with the natural world.

The attitudes and principles of behavior that students learn during camping and traveling in wild areas should be applicable to their everyday lives as well. They should increase students’ awareness that they are part of the natural world. They should help them to make educated, responsible decisions, and encourage them to take actions that have a positive impact on both wild and developed environments. In the following, we review the origin of the Leave No Trace movement, provide a critique

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of its overarching principles, and propose a new set of land-use guidelines that are based on the concept of “Conscious Impact Living.” These guidelines build on many of the Leave No Trace principles, but go further in helping students to connect with the natural world and to see their actions within a larger ecological context.

History of Leave No Trace

The Leave No Trace movement developed in response to the deterioration of wilderness areas resulting from increasing numbers of visitors during the 1970s and 1980s. As more and more recreationists took to wild spaces, land managers grew concerned about emerging problems such as litter, pollution of water sources, and disturbances of wildlife.

They tried a variety of regulatory approaches to address these problems, eventually coining the phrase “Leave No Trace” to describe the guidelines and regulations they developed for behavior in wild areas. Recognizing that guidelines would be ineffective without public education, the U.S. Forest Service partnered with the National Outdoor Leadership School to develop educational curricula, training courses, and a variety of programs to support the goal of “leaving no trace” in wild areas.

Leave No Trace, at its core, consists of guidelines for traveling through and camping in the backcountry. They are summarized in the following seven 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.

These simple principles are applicable or adaptable to outdoor activities in any landscape, and they have been largely embraced by outdoor education institutions, guide services, land managers, and individual wilderness recreationists.¹ And indeed, the Leave No Trace principles are very helpful in maintaining pristine wilderness environments. As Outward Bound instructors working in fragile alpine areas, we have seen the destructive effects of overuse and poor management of mountain environments and the ability of Leave No Trace principles to mitigate these effects. For example, if most of the thousands of summer visitors to wilderness areas were to leave their garbage behind — as was not uncommon 25 or 30 years ago — these areas would quickly be covered in waste. The “Pack it in, pack it out” guideline helps to ensure waste disposal and to preserve the undisturbed appearance of wild lands.

Limitations of Leave No Trace

The benefits of the Leave No Trace principles are not without cost, however. As educators, we teach as much about the natural world and environmental ethics through what we do *not* say as through what we do say.² Because the Leave No Trace guidelines ignore basic principles of ecology and are limited in scope, they can engender an inaccurate worldview. The

idea that it is possible for us to leave no trace on our environment stems from a worldview in which humans are utterly disconnected from their natural surroundings. It is similar to believing that garbage disappears once the big truck picks it up, that human waste goes away when it is flushed down the toilet, and that milk comes from the dairy section of the supermarket. Rather than perpetuating this myth, we need to teach about land use in a manner that allows students to see wild lands in a holistic context, recognizing that everything within an ecosystem leaves a trace on the larger whole.

On an individual level, the Leave No Trace message can perpetuate students’ sense of being disconnected from the natural world. As environmental educators, we strive to illuminate the complex relationship between people and their environment, and encourage students to develop personal connections with the natural world. Yet one researcher found that the Leave No Trace program taught on Outward Bound courses actually led students to feel disconnected from their environment.³

Educator and Outward Bound instructor Greg Weiss agrees: “The next time you watch someone give a ‘Leave No Trace’ talk, put yourself in a novice’s shoes and see how often it sounds like ‘we humans are bad,

don’t touch that, don’t pick that up, and we need to tip-toe around the woods because we don’t really belong here.’”⁴ Students exposed to Leave No Trace principles often have a sense that everything they do “out there” is destructive and that it might be better never to go into natural environments. It’s as if we ask students who visit the wilderness to live, eat, travel, and play inside a museum, constantly reminding them not to upset the fragile displays.

Finally, Leave No Trace education is silent and blind in regard to systemic environmental issues. It focuses mainly on the visual and immediate impacts on the landscape resulting from certain behaviors. For example, dealing with waste properly involves repackaging food items before we go into the wild and packing out whatever we pack in. By these actions, we avoid creating the visual blight of litter and waste strewn on the landscape. But what happens to the dozens of plastic bags that we bring back with us? Have the producers of our powdered milk, dried meats, and instant rice been respectful of wildlife and “left no trace” on their landscape? On wilderness trips at high altitudes, on rivers, or in winter, proper disposal of human waste may involve packing it out. But it still has to go somewhere. Do our sewage systems leave no trace on our rivers and estuaries? Does a plastic bag filled with feces and gelling chemicals break down in a landfill? Often these questions are avoided by educators, land managers, and recreationists; they are certainly absent in the seven principles of Leave No Trace. Right action by people traveling in wild places will not *in and of itself* preserve these places. Right action by people in their daily lives can, and that means addressing larger environmental issues.



Tim Grant

Toward Conscious Impact Living

We *must* mitigate our impact on wild lands, and Leave No Trace principles help wilderness travelers do this. However, educators seeking to draw connections and foster transferable learning need more effective, comprehensive, and accurate ways to frame our relationship with the natural world. We want to reduce our impact on wilderness areas in direct and immediate ways, but we also want to help our students develop a connection to the land and an understanding of their place in it. We believe that an alternative approach, one based on ecological principles of interconnection and interdependence, could teach to all of these goals: keeping wild lands wild and untrammelled, fostering an understanding of the interdependence between humans and the rest of the natural world, and improving urban and rural environments in which the human hand has already had a significant impact.

Humans always have and always will leave traces on their environment, as all living beings do. We have no choice in this. However, we do have a choice in determining what our impact will be. As educators, we can help students become aware of their impact and give them tools to make choices that mitigate the destruction and support the integrity of landscapes and natural systems. Krocka Expeditions in Vermont uses the phrase “conscious impact living” to describe a broader vision of the ways in which students might learn to interact with the land around them. The notion of Conscious Impact Living allows educators to address the immediate land management goals of the Leave No Trace program and at the same time to place students’ experience within a larger, more holistic context.

Seven principles of Conscious Impact Living

We propose the following principles as an example of a holistic land use ethic that promotes “Conscious Impact Living.” They can be used in teaching people to minimize or optimize their impact, not only on excursions to wild areas but also in their daily lives in developed environments.

Live simply: Consider the difference between wants and needs, and reduce unnecessary uses of resources. Travel in wild places can help clarify what is essential and what is not.



Stewart Wilson

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Think globally and plan ahead: Explore the potential consequences of your choices, both for yourself and for the world around you, and make educated choices that maximize positive consequences and minimize negative ones. For instance, when planning meals for a backcountry trip, consider where and how different foods are produced and strive to purchase whole foods that are local, organic, and have minimal packaging. By also doing such planning in your day-to-day life, you can avoid making unsustainable spontaneous purchases. For example, with a little forward planning you can pack a lunch of local, organic foods, rather than needing to purchase packaging-rich fast food when lunchtime comes. (This principle can include Leave No Trace guidelines for planning ahead and preparing.)

Follow the precautionary principle: The precautionary principle states that if the consequences of an action are unknown, but hold the

potential for grave or irreversible damage, then it is better to act as if the risks will come to pass. Similarly, if an action will likely help but we cannot prove that it will (and the consequences of inaction appear to be dire), it is better to act than to wait for indisputable proof. For example, many disagree about when, or even if, oil production will end. The consequences of being unprepared are likely to be dire, while the consequences of investing in alternative forms of energy could be highly beneficial. The precautionary principle suggests that we should invest in alternative energy sources and reduce oil dependence in order to stave off the potentially grave consequences of running out of oil. Precautionary thinking can help us minimize our impact on the areas we travel through. For example, considering where we place our feet may help to protect fragile plant life with which we’re unfamiliar. In the same vein, if as a society we could avoid embracing the latest technology until we understand its far-reaching and long-term costs, we might avoid problems such as environmental contamination and the exploitation of workers in countries where the products are produced, and at the same time enjoy the benefit of lessening our dependence on technology for comfort and survival.⁵ (This principle can include Leave No Trace guidelines for planning ahead and preparing.)

Reduce, reuse, recycle,

relearn: Minimize waste through reducing what you use, reusing what you can, and recycling what you can no longer use. Relearn traditional methods of conserving, such as mending and repairing items that are broken rather than replacing them. (This principle can include the Leave No Trace guidelines for disposing of waste properly.)

Follow nature's lead and blend into your surroundings:

Seek to make your shelter, travel, and other activities blend into the environment and to work with natural systems rather than fight against them. For example, set up your tent in a place where you will not disturb wildlife or sensitive plant communities, such as on a large flat rock rather than next to water or on vegetation; and use the topography of the landscape to protect yourself from inclement weather. In the same fashion, construct or adapt your house so that it keeps you comfortable by working with the environment, such as by passively capturing solar heat through south-facing windows. While traveling in wilderness areas, use gear and clothing with earth tones that reduce your visual impact on the landscape for other human users while at the same time allowing you to blend in and perhaps enjoy seeing more wildlife. In either the wilderness or the city, choose clothing, building materials, and household and school supplies that are made of sustainably harvested, renewable materials. A grey wool sweater from the thrift shop might meet your needs just as well as a brand new fleece jacket made from petroleum in a factory halfway across the world. (This principle can include the Leave No Trace guidelines for respecting wildlife, being considerate of other visitors, and traveling and camping on durable surfaces.)

Use appropriate technology and use technology appropriately:

Seek to use situation-appropriate fuel sources for cooking, heating, lighting, and transportation. Seek technologies that support rather than destroy the integrity of wild places and natural systems. In some areas, making fires from wood that you find lying about might have little or no impact on the immediate area and, on a global level, prove better than using a stove that runs on petroleum. In other areas, such as at high altitudes, the natural environment may not be able to support the use of fires. At home, consider using a bicycle or public transportation rather than a personal automobile. (This principle can include Leave No Trace guidelines for minimizing the impact of campfires.)

Show respect and compassion for all forms of life:

Approach all living things with respect, compassion, gratitude, and awareness that each plays a part within the whole. By recognizing that humans are only one small part of the world, dependent on the myriad natural systems and



Community Bicycle Network, Toronto

life forms of the planet, we can act in large and small ways with gratitude and concern, remaining humble and aware of our place in the world. (This principle can include Leave No Trace guidelines for leaving what you find, respecting wildlife, and being considerate of other visitors.)

These principles of Conscious Impact Living accurately reflect principles of ecology. They also help to foster a sense of interconnection by encouraging students to explore how they have affected (and

would like to affect) the world around them. This naturally links their behavior in the wilderness to their lives back home. For example, the solution to waste is no longer simply to carry it out of the backcountry; rather, the goal becomes the minimization and proper disposal of waste both in their wilderness travels *and* in their daily lives.

Ultimately we do not want students to seek only to minimize their destruction or strive to have no impact at all on their environment. Instead, we want our students to make *positive* impacts on the world around them, in both wild and developed places. Let us leave "Leave No Trace" to decompose along with many other good ideas that have served their purpose — and explore ways to integrate this ethic into more holistic ways of teaching about our relationship to the natural world. Future generations are depending on it.

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Notes

1. Jeffrey L. Marion, and Scott E. Reid, "Development of the U.S. Leave No Trace Program: An Historical Perspective," 2001, on-line January 6, 2006, <<http://www.lnt.org/about/history.html>>.
2. David W. Orr, *Earth In Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect*, Washington DC: Island Press, 1994.
3. Rebecca L. Lemburg, "The Integration Of Environmental Education And Wilderness-Based Adventure Programs," unpublished masters thesis, Prescott College, 1997.
4. Greg Weiss, "Leave No Trace Versus the Environment," Outward Bound International Newsletter. June 2003, p. 5, on-line January 6, 2006, <<http://www.outward-bound.org/docs/newsletter/2003-06.pdf>>.
5. Thanks to Turner, Pearce, & Bateman, *Environmental Economics*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, and Jerry Mander, *In the Absence of the Sacred*, San Fransisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991, for the ideas in this section.