

## Sanitation in the Backcountry

**Dishes** -- Scrape off food scraps and seal them in an airtight plastic bag ("yummy bag"), store it with other food, and pack it out. Under no circumstances should food scraps be buried! Discarded or buried food scraps attract animal life. It is common to see chipmunks, ground squirrels, and various species of birds gathering around camp kitchens. These "camp robbers" have become attracted to campers as a food source. Human food is not natural to wild animals, and their natural feeding cycles and habits become disrupted when they are fed by humans. A conscientious no-trace camper always keeps and leaves a clean camp. Use a scrub pad to remove tough "cooked-on" parts. Once all visible food is removed, wash dishes at least 200 feet from water sources. If soap must be used, use biodegradable soap. Leave No Trace principles discourage campers from using any soap, if possible, because even biodegradable soap will contaminate fresh water if precautions aren't taken. Rinse dishes, pots and utensils in boiled or filtered water. Everything should be left to air-dry (even if "towel-dried" first) in the sump or dining area. These procedures guard against inadvertently contaminating your pack or its contents. Proper washing and rinsing will prevent diarrhea, dysentery and other ailments. Anyone who has suffered from these on a backpacking trip takes cooking cleanup vveerrrry seriously! Strain dishwater through a small strainer or bandana. Put the food particles in a sealable plastic bag and pack them out. Broadcast the strained dishwater over a wide area at least 200 feet from the nearest water source, campsite, or trail. Scattering dishwater in a sunny area will cause the water to evaporate quickly, causing minimal impact. You should not wash dishes near a water spigot because of possible contamination of ground water. Don't throw food, scraps or garbage/trash into "pit" toilets [ones which just use a hole in the ground], nor bury it, because bears and rodents will easily retrieve it. Do not burn trash, scraps, or garbage, pack it out. Any food falling into the fire must burn to ash or be removed and packed out. A bear drawn to a camp by the smell of buried food scraps or garbage in the fire pit may begin to associate food with people, a lesson it will remember all its life. Then they have to be killed. As they drill into scouts at Philmont: *"Feed a bear - Kill a bear"*.

### Bathing and Laundry

Do not bathe or do laundry in or near a stream. Instead, use biodegradable soap and a shower or wash bag at least 200 feet from the nearest water source, campsite, or trail.

### Human Waste

Proper disposal of human waste is important to avoid pollution of water sources, avoid the negative implications of someone else finding it, minimize the possibility of spreading disease, and maximize the rate of decomposition.

If an outhouse or bathroom is available, use it. In most backcountry locations, burying human feces in the correct manner is the most effective method to meet these criteria. Solid human waste must be packed out from some places, such as narrow river canyons. Land management agencies can advise you of specific rules for the area you plan to visit.

Contrary to popular opinion, research indicates that burial of feces in soil actually slows decomposition. Pathogens have been discovered to survive for a year or more when buried. However, in light of the other problems associated with feces, it is still generally best to bury it in humus (decomposing plant or animal matter that forms organic soil). The slow decomposition rate emphasizes the need to choose the correct location, far from water, campsites, and other frequently used places.

Catholes are the most widely accepted method of waste disposal. Locate catholes at least 200 feet (about 80 adult steps) from water, trails, and camp. Select an inconspicuous site where other people will be unlikely to walk or camp. With a small garden trowel, dig a hole in humus that is 6 to 8 inches deep and 4 to 6 inches in diameter. Cover and disguise the cathole with natural materials when finished. If camping in the area for more than one night, or if camping with a large group, widely disperse cathole sites.

Use toilet paper sparingly and use only plain, white, nonperfumed brands. Toilet paper must be disposed of properly! It is now a requirement in many wilderness areas to place used toilet paper in plastic bags and pack it out, which is the best way to practice Leave No Trace. Never burn used toilet paper. Used toilet paper does not burn well (I wonder why?) and you increase the danger of starting a wildfire.

The best toilet paper for backpacking may actually be paper towels. Regular toilet paper just doesn't stand up to the humidity and shreds too easily leaving Klingons (not the Star Trek variety). Brawny paper towels are great to use because they're scored down the middle of each sheet to make it easy to tear off a half sheet. In packing toiletries for a trip, tear off five half sheets for each day. Cut each half sheet in half again, producing ten quarter sheets for each day.

Pack ten quarter sheets in a quart Ziploc bag along with a wag bag (the bags people use to put pet feces in) and one individually wrapped antibacterial moist wipe such as “Wet Ones”. Make sure to get the unscented moist wipes to avoid attracting bears. Prepare a quart bag for each day to be spent in the backcountry along with one extra. Place these prepared quart bags along with a gallon Ziploc bag inside of a second gallon Ziploc bag. Don’t forget to include a small bottle of hand sanitizer.

The moist wipes serve two functions. They contain aloe which can be soothing when necessary and they can help ensure that your butt crack is clean. Monkey butt (diaper rash) can become very painful if you are hiking long distances over multiple days. The best cure is prevention. If that fails, break out the medicated Gold Bond and use liberally (if you are tough enough).

When nature calls in the backcountry, dig a cathole in an appropriate site and make your fecal deposit in the hole. Clean yourself with the contents of one of the quart Ziploc bags. Paper towels are biodegradable, but don’t bury them in a cat hole or drop them in a composting privy. Pack out the used towels and Wet Ones in a wag bag sealed inside of the quart Ziploc bag. Place the quart bag in the separate gallon Ziploc bag (you should only need one for a seven day trip). Finally, cover and disguise the contents of the cathole and use the hand sanitizer to thoroughly clean your hands. The most common cause of diarrhea in the backcountry is poor hand sanitation, not what was ate.

Urine has little direct effect on vegetation or soil. In some instances urine may draw wildlife that is attracted to the salts. As a result, wildlife may defoliate plants and dig up soil. Because urine has an objectionable odor, be sure to urinate at least 200 feet from water, campsites, or trails. Urinating on rocks, pine needles, and gravel is less likely to attract wildlife.

### Waste Disposal

Dispose of waste properly. Pack out what you pack in. This common saying is a simple yet effective way to get backcountry visitors to take their trash home with them. There is no reason why people cannot carry out of the backcountry the extra food and packaging materials that they carried in with them in the first place. Trash and litter in the backcountry ranks high as a problem in the minds of many backcountry visitors. Trash and litter are human impacts that can greatly detract from the naturalness of an area.

Reduce litter at the source. Much backcountry trash and litter originates from food items. Perhaps the easiest way to practice the principle of – *pack it in, pack it out* – is to follow the principle of *planning ahead and prepare*. It is possible to leave most potential trash at home if you take the time to properly repackage food supplies. Reduce the volume of trash you have to pack out. Save weight by repackaging solid foods into plastic bags and liquids into reusable containers.

Your first preference for dealing with trash should be to pack it out. Most trash will not be entirely consumed by fire and conditions frequently make fires unacceptable. Areas are often closed to fires because of high fire hazards or excessive campsite damage. Some areas, such as desert settings, are impractical for fires because of the scarcity of firewood.

### How Long Does It Last?

Packing out trash is increasingly important as greater numbers of people visit the backcountry. Here are some estimated life expectancies for different kinds of litter:

- Paper: two to four weeks
- Rubber boot sole: 50 to 80 years
- Banana peel: three to five weeks
- Tin can: 80 to 100 years
- Wool cap: one year
- Aluminum can: 200 to 400 years
- Cigarette butt: two to five years
- Plastic six-pack holder: 450 years
- Disposable diaper: 10 to 20 years
- Glass bottles: Thousands or millions of years
- Hard plastic container: 20 to 30 years

