

For fragile wilderness

Expert deplores ruinous camping methods

By KEN SANDS
Of the Emerald

The early morning frost lightly glazes the trail, and exhaling produces a cloud of mist. Bitterly cold in the mountain wilderness, but exhilarating nonetheless to the suburbanites, the trek begins.

Heavy boots crunching the frozen leaves underfoot is the only sound. Clearings provide unobstructed views of the Three Sisters, and as the day wears on the hikers approach the timber line.

Near exhaustion as the sun lowers, the hikers find a small meadow, and pitch their small tent. Relieved of heavy packs, and ready to eat, they build a fire ring.

The evening temperature drops rapidly, and the campers quickly gather firewood and start a soothing campfire. The fire heats the food and the feet. A light snow begins to fall. The campers now snuggle into their sleeping bags, and the fire's glowing embers watch guard as they sleep.

A perfect day in the wilderness — harmony between man and creation, right?

Wrong, says Jim Blanchard. Part-time forest ranger, and part-time wilderness skills instructor at the University, Blanchard believes the "Boy Scout" approach to camping and hiking is ruining the wilderness. "The problem is that usage is concentrated in the high alpine areas, the areas that can least sustain the use, and there is 10 times as much use as there was 10 years ago." And those using the wilderness are unaware of their impact.



Emerald photo

High alpine areas such as this one are more fragile than people think, according to ranger-wilderness skills instructor Jim Blanchard. Use of small backpacking stoves instead of campfires and simple knowledge of susceptibilities would help campers reduce their impact, he says.

Blanchard says that four percent of wilderness areas in Oregon receive 80 percent of the use, while other more inaccessible areas are unused. "There are more than 200,000 acres out there where you could travel for weeks and see no one," he says.

But the popular trails attract the weekend vacationers, and the problems they bring. Camping in meadows, and having campfires, the traditional favorites of hikers, are the two biggest problems, says Blanchard. Not realizing the significant long-range effects on the environment, the campers are unknowingly destroying the wil-

derness they love.

Camping in a meadow merely mashes down the grass and flowers in the short-run. But as more people use the same campsite, the ground becomes compacted. "Over time there are significant changes in vegetation, and there is a tremendous loss in the growth of new trees," says Blanchard.

Higher altitude areas are the most sensitive to change. "Those areas may look durable because they can withstand the weather, but in reality the vegetation in areas of that elevation is just hanging in there," he says.

Blanchard says the remedy is to locate campsites under trees, where the ground is likely to be padded with pine needles. In areas of heavy use, he says it may be better to use old campsites rather than create new sites. "The best thing to do is to determine the sensitivity of the land, and do everything possible to minimize the impact on the land," he says.

Upon finding a campsite, the usual camper then builds a fire. "If everyone camped under trees and used portable stoves, there would be a significant improvement," he says, but this isn't the case.

What's wrong with a campfire? "In five or six years we have expended a century's worth of dead wood on the forest floor, and now people are cutting down the gray weathered snags near populated areas," he says. Many times live trees are also cut.

According to Blanchard, people think the wilderness is an infinite resource. "The resource is limited, and the increase in the use of the fixed resource results in a change in the resource itself," he says.

Simply caring will reduce the impact on an area. "The capacity of an area to withstand usage is exceeded in a lot of areas and if people were adequately equipped, it would reduce their impact," he says. "People will take care of themselves first, and if it gets cold and nasty, any scruples they may have go out the window."

In his classes, (Wilderness Skills I and II and Outdoor Leadership) he teaches reasonable ways to have a low impact on the environment. "We discuss possible impacts, and practice those on a trip. We look for the best possible location for a campsite, and we try to reduce pollution of the water supply, stop abrasion and stop compaction of the soil," he says.

One must consider elevation, vegetation, soil type and the direction the land is facing to determine its sensitivity. If the wilderness is to remain a true wilderness, unaffected by man, more careful consideration must be taken by all those who use the resource, says Blanchard. "Something needs to be said about low impact camping techniques, or it's just going to get worse."

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