

Being Gentle On The Land On Elk Hunting Pack Trips

A year ago I asked for ideas on how to Leave No Trace when fall elk hunting. I received a lot of responses and tried to pull those ideas together here. Thanks go to all of you who took the time to respond. This is a controversial topic that we, as an organization, need to look at internally. It would have been better if I had finished this article before everyone went hunting again, but my season doesn't slow down enough until after hunting season to be able to put the thought needed into writing this follow up article.

I posed a lot of questions in the last article. The scenario was a hunting camp packed into the high country in late October where the weather became harsh. Camp was set up during good weather and then it rained, blew and snowed about two feet. There were several people in the party and 8 – 10 head of stock. The camp was there for a week and a half. The questions related to wood gathering, stoves and campfires, tents, trails, animal confinement and feed, and rehabilitating the site when done.

There was a lot of experience speaking in many of the responses, and some responses came from people who had never even packed or hunted. Some answered the specific questions, which I was looking for, and others just shared how they camped when hunting. Responses were related to the individuals experience level, ethic level and specific conditions based on geographic location. I have compiled this information, hopefully offering some ideas that can be used by others. These responses do not represent a position of the Back Country Horsemen of America organization, just individual opinions. In some cases, commonly used practices are not the best LNT alternative, and may even be contrary to Federal regulation. I mention when these conflicts occur and offer suggestions to eliminate or mitigate the impacts of such practices.

A combination of old style common sense and stock handling skills, blended with new knowledge about the ecosystem and technological improvements in gear, now allow us to at least approach, even if we can never quite reach, absolute Leave No Trace backcountry use. We should keep in mind that "LNT" represents a way of thinking about our relationship to the land, our Land Ethic and not get discouraged with the absoluteness of the terminology.

Attitude is everything. We need to realize that it's impossible to go into the backcountry without causing an impact, so we need to do our best to minimize, mitigate those impacts, and restore those we cannot eliminate. Leave no lasting impacts. We need to understand that we are sharing in the use of lands that also provide recreational opportunities for many other people during the entire year. We hold these lands in trust for generations of Americans as yet unborn.

Here are some Leave No Trace suggestions or opportunities for voluntary changes in your behavior:

"Plan Ahead and Prepare" is key to success.

Sometimes survival becomes the immediate goal, with no energy available to think about and practice LNT. Many impact issues can be eliminated, or at least reduced, before we ever reach the trailhead if we properly plan and prepare for the trip. Not

being prepared really means you did not plan adequately for situations that experience should have prepared you for. Contact the managing agency or landowner to learn what you can about seasonal conditions, precautions and regulations that are in effect. Visit sport shows and check out displays of new gear. There is a lot of new improved equipment, some you may not be aware of. Review the newly revised Stock Use Skills and Ethics booklet from Leave No Trace and the Back Country Horsemen Guidebook which contain good information.

Review your equipment list carefully, substitute lightweight gear when possible.

For many hunters, the rustic look of a traditional camp and the sound of a crackling fire in the stove are essential elements of the backcountry experience. A hunter shared his story: " I used a canvas wall tent and wood stove as standard operating equipment. The unit weighed about 70 pounds – dry. Lord knows how much after a week of wet weather. Cots weighed 10 pounds each, lanterns, and stove all added up. I vowed I would never give up this stuff and no one could make me. The comfort was good but the outfit was heavy. After some serious reconsideration, I am trying out a lightweight tipi and wood stove (22 pounds), a 48-pound reduction in tent gear. No cots but instead air mattresses (6-pound reduction each) backpack stove and lightweight lantern, etc. The goal is to reduce the outfit's weight by 50% without appreciably sacrificing comfort and safety. I will still be able to enjoy the sound and warmth of a crackling fire, and all the comforts of a snug and secure camp, but with much less weight. Time will tell how this works out. The transition will not be easy or cheap. Hopefully the outcome will be the need for less stock and/or the ability to carry more pelletized feed to reduce the need for grazing, or the ability to camp in areas with less feed available. As I get older and the mountains grow higher each year, the thought of handling 50% fewer pounds of gear becomes more appealing. I probably won't hear any objections from the horses either."

Evaluate your equipment and see if there are some things you can change. When it comes to cooking there are lightweight options for cooking utensils. Camp Chef sells an aluminum propane cook stove with high BTU's that weighs 11 pounds. Dutch ovens and frying pans come in lighter anodized aluminum, rather than cast iron. Packing in charcoal briquettes is an excellent alternative to a wood coal fire. Luxury Edition Thermarest pads are less bulky and much more efficient than foam pads, especially if used on top of stock pack pads. Small lightweight cots are available that weigh much less than the standard cots. Lightweight folding tables and chairs make camp life comfortable, can be packed easily and are better than cutting and building them on site.

Other ideas passed on included using white gas lanterns and stoves exclusively feeling the BTU's are better than propane and there are no bottles to pack out. Three gallon buckets can be packed with gear, which then become camp chairs, water carriers or feed bags. A lash cinch can be used as a highline, but don't break it. Plywood sheets packed in kitchen boxes can later be folded across them for a table.

Choosing your campsite is a critical decision.

Make a pre-season scouting trip if at all possible, when you are going into an unfamiliar area. This will provide the opportunity to get a feel for the lay of the land, which benefits hunting opportunities and allows you to spend some time looking for a

campsite that will be suitable for hunting season. Trying to find a campsite in unfamiliar country the day before season opens usually results in the selection of a site that is lacking in some important factors. Often the best sites are already occupied. The result is unnecessary impacts to less-than-suitable-sites.

Select a site that will suit your needs. Your needs will be different if you plan to hunt early in a bow hunt or early rifle season, than it would be if you hunt later when snow and more severe weather will be likely. During early season game is generally higher and camping in more exposed sites at higher elevation may be possible. A lower, more sheltered site without needing to cross major passes might be a consideration for a late season hunt. The site needs to have enough forage to take care of the stock without completely grazing off the meadows.

Select a site with suitable soils. If hunting in rainy or snowy weather, try to select a site that is well drained and has a base of gravelly or rocky soils. Nothing is worse than ending up in a site that turns into a virtual bog hole after a week of rain or wet snow. Look at the soils carefully. Sites that have boggy soils usually turn into bottomless pits of mud and mire when they get wet.

Select a site that can tolerate the anticipated use considering the number of stock days and people. Trying to crowd large numbers of stock on small meadow areas for extended periods usually results in hungry animals and churned-up meadows. Select sites that have enough feed for anticipated needs without impacting meadow areas. Another option is to pack in pelletized feed or weed-seed free hay to reduce the need for grazing.

Many people try to camp near water areas for convenience sake. There are great camping areas with lots of forage that may not be convenient to water. Some folks have camped successfully in areas up to a half-mile from water by using plastic panniers to carry water. More time and effort is required to water stock at camps away from narrow creek bottoms or sensitive lakeshores but impacts can be greatly reduced in some cases.

Now to get to the Back Country Horsemen responses to the questions posed in the last article:

Camping

How do you pitch your tent if there aren't any existing tent poles? Do you pack in a frame, and take an extra animal to do it? Many people cut poles for wall tents or use existing ones. Dead Lodgepole pine was the suggested choice. Other options that reduce or eliminate the need for cutting tent poles include using a rope between two trees for the ridgeline, or packing in a lightweight aluminum tent frame. There are other tent options that have a center pole or can be tied by the peak to a tree branch such as a tipi tent.

Do you buy a new and different style tent with fewer poles and a floor? There are some new lightweight fabrics that tents are being made out of that weigh less than 36 pounds with poles. Beckel Canvas Products (800-237-3362), Wyoming Outdoor Industries (800-725-6853) and Salem Tent and Awning (503-363-4788) are three suppliers mentioned who market these tents. Fabric that doesn't breathe can have a condensation problem, so ask about that. Another option is a tent with a canvas top,

which breathes and synthetic walls for less weight. Tents come in different styles besides the traditional wall tent. Check them out. Some have floors and some don't. Tarps can be used for a floor or scrim, which is a durable woven flooring material that let's the ground breathe but protects any vegetation.

Where do you pitch your tent if it doesn't have a floor and you are not supposed to ditch the tent site? (This question was in relation to the situation when the ground was not frozen when setting up camp and then breaking camp in a foot or so of snow.) First, try to locate the tent site on high, dry ground. A tent fly that extends two feet or further past the edge of the tent, helps deflect water run-off. A tarp on the floor helps keep it dry though scrim might be better for the soil. If ditching is felt to be necessary, cut the sod on one side and roll it back so it can be replaced. That is a lot of work in the snow!

Do you leave your tent poles and firewood because you'll be back next year? Poles are usually leaned up in a tree to prevent rot and away from camp, so they are not readily visible. Re-using the poles is preferred to cutting new ones. Firewood is left stacked out of the campsite under a tree for protection and out of sight to the casual visitor.

How do you dry out raincoats, wet clothes or horse blankets? Is the traditional shepherd wood stove still the best answer? Wood heat is still the popular choice although some new propane stoves were mentioned that put out good BTU's and are safe in tents. Several lightweight, collapsible shepherd stoves are now available. The Simms stove that folds flat and is easy to pack was mentioned, as was a Riley stove. Some use homemade barrel stoves although that would be more bulky.

What do you use for efficient wood to heat the tents if the dead and down wood is wet? This question got a lot of responses. It's a good idea to pack in some kind of fire starter such as briquette lighter, pitch wood or some other commercial starter. They start a fire faster and help if the wood is moist. Dry needles, twigs and branches can be found under trees if it isn't too wet. Some break off "squaw wood" or lower dead branches found on live trees. This works but is not a good Leave No Trace practice. Fallen snags that are up off the ground can be dry and sound if not down too long. If down wood is depleted in the area, such as might be found in a campsite near a main trail; an option is to go away from camp to cut it and pack it back, or pack some in from the trailhead. Many people cut and stacked wood prior to the season when it was still dry. Cutting snags down is a last choice. A wildlife biologist shared "that generally speaking the larger the snag the more beneficial it is to the most species. For backcountry high elevation firewood gathering, trees less than 10" at diameter breast height with no critter activity would be preferred and avoid taking trees in riparian areas." If you cut a snag, take it off at the ground so the stump is not so noticeable. Once firewood is cut it can be stacked in the tent around the stove to dry. Be aware that there is a Federal regulation that prohibits cutting standing trees, dead or alive, without special authorization.

Do you need a campfire if you have a wood stove burning in the tent? Boy, campfires are a controversial one! For some a campfire is a central part of the experience, a place to relax and philosophize at the end of the day. Sitting around a campfire probably depends on how good the weather is too. Others felt it was too much work to cut wood with a crosscut saw to feed both a stove and a campfire. Cooking is more easily done and is quicker on a propane stove. Campfires do leave impacts. If

you camp in a site without a fire ring, try to keep your fire small and get rid of it when you leave. If there is a fire ring at the site, use that and try to keep it clean. This is especially important in bear country. Remove any left over firewood, scattering it or hiding it out of sight when leaving. Leaving a log with the end burned is not a good practice.

Stock confinement and feed

Do you put your stock on a highline, tie to trees or use an electric fence? There were lots of different ways people handled their stock. Stock handling can make or break your LNT efforts, especially as the weather turns sour. Plan to minimize the number of head going in to camp or perhaps trail some out if that is possible. This reduces the amount of impact from each of the animals and the amount of feed that needs to be packed. That reduces camp work caring for them and allows more time to concentrate on the hunt. Condition your stock ahead of time so they are hardened for work and can tolerate changes in the weather.

If you highline, pick a site with a hardened area suitable for some extended highline situations, well off the trail. The best site for the animals would be one sheltered by trees or topography from the worst of the wind and storms. It might take several shorter highlines to be able to get horses under shelter. A long highline with all stock on it may leave some without shelter between trees. Many hunters graze their stock mid day if they can and tie up at night. Those that paw are hobbled. Stock should be trained to stand tied for long periods before going on a hunting trip. This cuts down on the restlessness. In the situation like an outfitter might have, where stock are used hard, come in late all sweaty and where the weather is cold and snowing, some chose to loosen cinches and leave saddles on for warmth while tied up for the night. Packing in horse blankets or using manti covers with grommets for horse blankets keeps an animal warmer and may offset some of the weight in feed that has to be packed in.

Electric fencing is a good option provided the stock is conditioned to it, the area fenced off is large enough to discourage escape attempts or conflicts (1500 feet of wire), and the fence design (multiple strands) and placement (avoid crossing game trails with fence line) discourages unwanted encounters with large wildlife species. White fence wire has been found to be best as animals are color-blind but can see white. Some hobble the leaders in the fenced area. Some include the highline area within the fenced area and tie the leaders up at night, leaving the rest loose. Stock is happiest if they can be loose and it spreads their impact.

Others loose graze their stock in shifts or picket the leaders or wrangle horses. Some don't dare leave their stock picketed at night for fear they could get tangled up. Not many say they tie to trees, but those who did and return to the same camp year after year did not see much effect. It is possible for long-term damage to occur from chewing trees, and from pawed holes if they are deep or the tree is young. I think a lot of the "doughnut" issue has to do with aesthetics, which affects our image as horsemen. This we do need to be concerned about, as you well know.

Most late season camps do not have adequate forage locally so supplemental feed is needed. You have to take care of your animals or they won't be able to help you in a tough situation. Weed seed free feed is recommended and required in places. It takes 4-5 days for digestive systems to adapt ahead of time and to clear weed seeds

from their manure. Know your animals feed needs for work, rest and to stay warm in inclement weather. Most people add sweet feed or grain to pellets (which are weed free) but pack certified hay, if on lengthy trips without grazing available. Why weed seed free? Seed not native to the area can sometimes really spread in a new environment out competing the natives. This can be detrimental especially if they are noxious weeds. A straight diet of pellets is not usually satisfying for stock. You feed about half the weight of pellets that are required in hay. Some fed 8 pounds a day of pellets and had some grazing. Stock not working that is eating hot feed can get excitable but there are companies producing grass pellets now, instead of alfalfa. Some take grain just as a treat for morning and night after grazing so the stock knows where home is. Lightweight mesh nosebags work well. If you get the cavalry style rather than bucket style they don't have to reach the ground to empty the bag while tied up, and they hold more feed. If in bear country, grain must be made unavailable. Chipmunks soon find a feed sack hanging and can eat a hole in it. Bear proof panniers sound like the easiest method or hanging feed in plastic buckets.

How do you rehabilitate the stockholding area if the ground is frozen? (This question had to do with a highline erected during good weather, then the weather turned bad.) Consensus here is to keep the highline cleaned up everyday. Kick the piles around while they are soft and take care of any pawing situation when it occurs. Then when it freezes there aren't any holes to deal with. Kicking piles apart in a meadow is good too.

Rehabilitating the whole campsite when leaving is important. Clean the place up and make it look natural. If you have to leave in an emergency situation, do the best you can first and then go back in the spring or summer and do it right. Better late than never. We've seen sacks of garbage left behind and animals tear into those making a real mess. That really gives hunters a bad name.

Trails

Do you buck out the trail into camp or blaze the way in? Do you use flagging on trails or into an elk kill? Everyone that answered this either knew the country well enough to not flag or removed any flags they put up. They don't flag if they are in open areas where blow down is not a problem; they can get around it, are camped right on the main trail or don't want anyone to know where they are. Flag if you must but remove them when you come out. Blazes are permanent scars and not a good LNT practice as well as against Federal regulation. It is recommended that you only cut out the blowdown on non-system trails to the extent necessary to get through. On main trails out of camp, some folks lightly pruned branches that would hit you in the face when riding in the dark. This is a safety factor if you can't ride around them, but is not a good LNT practice. Another important point about cross-country trails into camps is to use a good location that won't create erosion. Don't go straight down a hill for example where the water will follow your tracks and erode. If you use an existing non-system trail that goes through a bad spot, see if there is another better way around it.

What is your Ethic? Do you believe in leaving a place in a better condition than you found it?

Back Country Horsemen love the land and feel some ownership in it. Many folks return to the same camp spots year after year and say they are in better shape now

than they were when they first started using them. Some decided that as they got older it was much easier to hunt from the trailhead and not worry so much about doing all the work it takes to do a good job in a remote camp location. Being gentle on the land comes not only from common sense but also from an awareness that is learned. As our society changes and values change, so does our technology and the size of our population. We enjoy our conveniences and standard of living, but are still drawn to the simple existence we find in the backcountry. Being conscious of our actions, and recognizing what they cause or create, requires a lot of thought. Caring about how we treat the backcountry is what awareness is all about. Just thinking about it is the first step. Making one positive step in improving what you do is a real beginning. Attitude is critical. Sometimes it is through experience, or sometimes it is education, that helps you re-evaluate your practices. Look at what you take with you, what you do, how you do it. Could you do better? The real test is how does it look when you leave? Are you proud of the job you did? It takes extra effort and knowledge to do a good job when the conditions are adverse. Yes, nature heals itself pretty well with time, but recognize how much better it is when we help her along.

So create a list and make sure you have everything planned and packed. This is not only a safety issue when packing into a remote area, it also helps to eliminate making spontaneous decisions which may have a negative affect on your surroundings. Take care in choosing your campsite, deal with the confinement issue by carefully choosing the highline or grazing site, and don't be afraid to turn your stock loose. Keep your campsite clean on a daily basis and pickup after yourself when you leave. Go back early in the summer season if you need to do more. If we do these things, most if not all of the major hunting with stock issues will disappear.

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