

DO WE NEED A COMMON CAMPING ETHIC?

This timely article was prepared expressly for GUIDELINE by J. V. K. Wagar, Head, Department of Forest Recreation and Wildlife Conservation, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, through the arrangements of Supervisory Park Ranger Foster R. Freeman, Rocky Mountain National Park.

Have we overlooked some important, evasive ingredient of outdoor living and adventure in our management of wildland recreation areas? We have honestly tried not to. For decades we have faithfully stressed need for things such as public education, proper supervision, reasonable fines and penalties, properly designed and constructed facilities, permits and certificates, and zoning. We need not bewail our accomplishments. But the worn and impoverished condition of many state and Federal forests and parks indicates that ignorance, carelessness, vandalism, and sheer cussedness are so prevalent among our users that we apparently have overlooked some important, motivating ingredient of wildland living.

To simplify our analysis, let's choose camping as an important, representative activity of wild country recreation. To sharpen perception, let's compare it with the card game called "bridge."

Many of us expect never to be much more than duffers when playing bridge. Of course, we won't admit inability. (We jovially insist we have an unbeatable system; that we are invincible if we hold good cards and have partners who can play them.) We merely are more interested in other ways to spend our times and interests, though when we play bridge we contest vigorously. Our hoped-for ability is to play well enough that we don't disgust our partners or incur their wrath. But, though we never expect to become truly expert, we recognize that expertness exists, that experts like Charles Goren shape our playing, and that when we play, we conform to a common concept of expertness and admit that much exists beyond our own venturing into this game.

Few similar, fine distinctions govern common concepts of camping. Privilege is superficially accepted for prowess as we are impressed by the names of places those we envy can list as having visited, though their understanding of such places and their unaided skill in adjusting to the exigencies of time and place are negligible.

We may question that a great percentage of those who today boast of camping truly do so. Great beasts which once dominated areas these campers frequent are exterminated or fenced. Indians are upon reservations or become citizens. Those we dub campers need not question the purity of waters we pipe conveniently near them. A sense of conditioned modesty impels them to use conveniences we devise to prevent their polluting adjacent streams and lakes. Portable refrigerators assure safe, palatable foods without great care for its selection and keeping qualities. Arts of laying, kindling, and fueling campfires are made unnecessary by compact gas or gasoline stoves. Loneliness rarely will assail them amid modern campgrounds into which we herd them.

Without supporting statistics, we suggest that most modern campers are merely travelers working in part for their board and room as they migrate from attraction to attraction they'll list or picture to us upon return. As one example, examine the Ford Motor Company's Station Wagon Living booklets for accent upon travel, comfort, and economy, but with precious few words urging understanding remnants of natural wonders seen or how to use them without diminishing their charm.

Then there are trailers, which the elder Leopold called the cap on "the pyramid of banalities." Many owners tell us they have graduated from tents to trailers. Pride of ownership in anything as obvious and impressive as a trailer erases awareness of the concept that camping truly is the maximum tolerable contact with an adjustment to nature. Trailer caravans give herd assurance that owners can invade even foreign countries with feelings of safety and status. Naturally trailers are extolled by those who write annual articles for outdoor magazines which profit from trailer advertisements. But in trailers no porcupine ever will walk across one in a sleeping bag at midnight. One does not sense the country soil, or rock, when driving tent stakes, and rarely compares the burning qualities and fragrances of native woods. What repute would Marco Polo have earned had he outlived Methuselah and had awaited trailers before beginning his journeys?

Camping is less of an ethic than a statistic to those whose chief outdoor interest is in tourist numbers and dollars, or in visitor records to support requests for larger budgets and staffs. (I can't forget the sly grin of a cowboy who last summer told us, upon a wilderness jaunt, "Keep Wyoming green. Spend money!") Other defenders of low-level camping are humanists so delighted with myriads of people having fun that possibilities for unusual experiences never are contemplated. Many recommend getting people into beautiful outdoor settings, just as some urge people to attend church, in hopes they'll "see the light."

Our niche in history probably explains our undue acceptance of comfort as life's primary desideratum—as well as that of camping. Probably no other powerful nation was swept as swiftly from pioneer hardships to modern comforts, before it could realize that hardships had waned, for no other nation's history coincided so precisely with the free expansion of industrialization. But it is high time to reappraise our goals and to substitute intelligence for comforts we have overemphasized—comforts which pass for and are advertised as good living or better living—and which in the eyes of the world perhaps actually make a soft nation of us.

About this time in our analysis, blood pressures rise as we are savagely asked if we aim to give the country back to the Indians or live like Daniel Boone. This is understandable. Primitive living is an ancestral heritage so universal that few will admit being less able campers than others—than anyone. But if, as in that bridge game, we can meet or read of expertness which can readily identify 95 percent of the animals, plants, birds, rocks, tracks, signs, and sounds we encounter even in the wilderness, we are ready to accept an ethic in which camping can consist of knowledge, attitudes, and skillful procedures as well as good equipment.

Probably no one more ably stated the camping ethic than Stewart Edward White in The Forest: "To go light is to play the game fairly. The man in the woods matches himself against the forces of nature... with his naked soul, he fronts the wilderness... as he substitutes the ready-made of civilization for the wit-made of the forest... is he

relying on other men and other men's labor to take care of him. To exactly that extent is the test invalidated. He has not proved a courteous antagonist, for he has not stripped to the contest." This ethic echoes in White's The Cabin and The Mountain, in Rowland's Cache Lake Country, in Leopold's Sand County Almanac and Round River, in Olson's Singing Wilderness and Listening Point, and in similar books. Wilderness trips make room in the mind for an ethic. They and wildernesses are worth their cost for perception they teach, including the fresh, uncluttered appearance of good camps.

Always, we admit, as with bridge, that circumstances or desires commonly circumscribe our ventures. We spoke meanly of trailers, yet who has not used one cannot speak truthfully concerning them. Any camping is better than none, but no camping is intelligently experienced without awareness and knowledge of experts and expertness. And as for "seeing the light," we should remember that churches and wildness not only have the value of settings. There also can be sermons.

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