

# Wilderness Ethics—Taking the Moral High Trail

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The key to behaving well in the wilderness is to behave in the same way that you would wish those that came before you had behaved. If you have ever hiked into a beautiful area only to find that some thoughtless soul left all his trash behind, you know what a blight that can be on your own experience. Or if you have ever drank [*sic*] from contaminated water and gotten sick, you know how miserable that can make you feel. The basic rule is if you don't want someone to do it to you, don't do it yourself.

—“Hiking Ethics,” *Hikingwebsite.com*

## **Central Questions Addressed in This Article**

What commonly recommended trail and camp etiquettes should I go out of my way to follow? What other behaviors are required for the highest level of ethical behavior in the wilderness? What ethical issues directly related to hiking and backpacking are important and what is my stance on these issues? What ethical principles are important and how might they relate to my hiking activities? How important is it to take the “moral high trail” in dealing with the ethics of wilderness travel?

## **Introduction**

One of the core topics of philosophy and philosophical inquiry is that of ethics and morality. Therefore, it is more than appropriate for a website having a philosophical emphasis to explore this subject in some depth. [Note: Even though it is sometimes useful to make a distinction, in this article “ethics” and “morality” will be used as synonymous terms.]

I begin this article with some definitions and clarifications to narrow the subject matter. I then review what I see as the BASICS of wilderness ethics. This BASICS section will offer samples of recommended ethical behaviors plus some ethical principles for consideration. The basic wisdom presented in this section is

commonly accepted by most hikers and backpackers and will be relatively non-controversial. I then use this BASIC ethical wisdom as a springboard for discussion of more ADVANCED ethical issues and more demanding ethical principles. The ADVANCED wilderness ethics section will be much more controversial.

Even though this article asks the reader to reflect on the highest levels of wilderness ethics (“The Moral High Trail”), don’t be put off by the title. You will find it quite practical and thought-provoking getting into the body of the article.

### **Narrowing the Subject Matter of Ethics**

Before getting into the heart of it, let’s narrow the subject by clarifying the meaning of “ethics.” On the most fundamental level, ethical concerns differ from other kinds of concerns by making explicit *conflicts of values or conflicts of interests*. An unknown author expresses this point as follows: “Moral issues involve some degree of conflict between an individual and others—a conflict of needs, convictions, principles and values.” A graphic example of one such conflict involves personal hygiene in the wilderness: to bury or pack out used toilet paper? It is much easier to simply bury it, but many say this practice often results in toilet paper being dug up and strewn about by animals, leaving an unsightly mess for future hikers. A common resolution to this particular conflict is to carry used toilet paper in double plastic bags until one has the opportunity to dispose of it properly. Another, much less common resolution, is to not use toilet paper. Whatever the best solution, TP is a serious *ethical* issue.

Another necessary narrowing when exploring “wilderness” ethics in this article is to limit our focus to relationships with one’s fellow human beings (i.e., conflicts of values and behaviors with fellow hikers) rather than conflicts between humans and the non-human natural world. In this article, I explicitly exclude ethical concerns and conflicts involving the wilderness and the ecosystem in general and the specific flora and fauna (e.g., trees and forests, Grizzly bears and wolves) found in the wilderness. These excluded topics are referred to under a number of different labels: “[Environmental Ethics](#),” “Land Ethics,” “Ecological Ethics,” “Animal Rights,” to name a few. Here are three examples of the types of ethical issues I am *excluding* from this current article:

- (1) Is it okay to cut living trees to build a wilderness shelter or cabin while at the same time espousing wilderness preservation?

- (2) Is it consistent to advocate building or maintaining trails in wilderness areas?
- (3) What is meant by the concept of “wilderness preservation and conservation?”

### **On the BASICS of Ethical Behavior in the Wilderness**

Now that I have narrowed the subject matter a bit, here is an overview of the BASICS on this subject. As defined above, ethical concerns involve some sort of *conflict of values or interests*. Because of specific conflicts of values and interests in the wilderness, experienced hikers and managers of wilderness areas have evolved, over a period of time, a variety of Do’s and Don’ts. For example:

- Stay on established trails; do not take short cuts or cut through switchbacks.
- Don’t litter; if you carry it in, carry it out.
- Practice minimum impact camping—camp in well used and established sites.
- Do not contaminate water sources; no camping within 200 yards of lakes and streams.
- Make sure all campfires are cold before leaving.

The above five behaviors provide only a small sample. See document [“The Do’s and Don’ts of Proper Wilderness Behavior”](#) for a comprehensive list of nearly 50 recommended behaviors/etiquettes/rules. This document is divided into five categories: *Proper Behavior (General)*, *Etiquette on the Trail*, *Camping Etiquette*, *Campfires* and *Dog Etiquette*.

When dealing with ethics, many refer to generalized principles such as “Love thy neighbor . . .” or the Golden Rule (“Do unto others . . .”). When thinking about ethical behaviors on this more generalized level, consider adopting a *Reverse Golden Rule*: “Do unto others as they would have done unto them.” (This formulation is sometimes referred to as the *Platinum Rule*.) This modification moves the focus from you onto the other person. It emphasizes the genuine respect and concern for others that is fundamental to most systems of ethical behavior. It also emphasizes the diversity of cultures that exists in the world.

There are many people in different cultures and sub-cultures who don't want to be treated as we ourselves would want to be treated.

A somewhat different "Golden Rule of Trail Etiquette" has been proposed by Dan Nelson, former executive editor of *Signpost* magazine (August, 2000): "Common sense and courtesy are the order of the day." (*Signpost* is now [Washington Trails Association](#).)

A third basic ethical principle for your consideration, proposed by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, has a lot of power to shape ethical behavior: "treat all persons as ends in themselves and not merely as a means to an end." This quoted principle is one of three "categorical imperatives" Kant regarded as universal for all ethical behavior.

### **More ADVANCED Wilderness Ethics: Higher-Level Principles**

If one is truly interested in going beyond BASIC wilderness ethics and morality, consider the following general ethical principle: Not only develop a genuine concern for and sensitivity to the *rights* of other beings, but go out of your way to enhance their *happiness and well-being*. Going out of one's way to enhance the happiness of others is a much stronger ethical position than merely respecting their rights and not doing things to cause their unhappiness. Martha Nussbaum, American philosopher and ethicist, states this principle in terms of *genuine caring*:

My general ethical understanding of what it would mean to be liberated is to not be dominated by one's own tendencies toward narcissism so that we are free to care, to recognize the equality of others, and to care about them as equals.

A second higher-level operating principle for your consideration counsels us to move away from ethical rules (i.e., do's and don'ts) and instead focus on core ethical values like love and compassion, intelligence and sensitivity. Joshua Halberstam, professor of philosophy at New York University, puts it this way:

"The key to your everyday ethics . . . is your moral character. Morality is not primarily about duties, about following rules that say, Do this, Don't do that. It is primarily about moral sensitivity. The pivotal moral imperative is not do the right thing, but be the right person. If you have a decent character, if you

care about intelligence, honesty, and compassion, you'll do the right thing as a matter of course.”

A further perspective on the development of moral character comes from Aristotle 2500 years ago. He maintained that moral character comes primarily from habitually performing right actions. This leads to the third higher-level ethical principle for your consideration: *do the right thing for the right reason*. This third principle essentially restates the second one in different terms.

### **More ADVANCED Wilderness Ethics: Controversial Issues and Situations**

In the next few pages, I deal head-on with many specific areas of *conflict* relating to wilderness and wilderness travel. (Remember that earlier I defined ethical issues as those dealing with *conflicts of values and interests*). One qualification before getting into specifics: I discuss these areas of conflict and offer some solutions, not to get your agreement, but to increase levels of awareness and sensitivity to the ethical issues raised and to encourage readers to come up with their own solutions.

#### Educating Others in the Field on Proper Wilderness Etiquette

For the relatively non-controversial and commonly accepted camping and trail etiquettes (e.g., do not camp within 200 yards of water sources), it is praiseworthy to attempt to educate the inexperienced. More often than not, if you bring up the problem in a friendly, non-accusatory manner, the transgressor will usually reconsider his or her actions. Sometimes use of humor will be effective. If possible, first approach the leaders or behaving members of the party one-on-one. I grant that this is a tricky business, even for the professionals (e.g., wilderness rangers). It will usually take some practice. Quickly back off if the situation becomes confrontational. An additional step that can be quite effective is to hand out [Leave No Trace](#) brochures. Successful ethical education of this sort will often have long-reaching, positive consequences. One further qualification: generally do not attempt this more direct educational approach for the controversial and sometimes complex advanced ethical issues discussed in this section of the article.

#### Detailed Trip Information For Loved Ones and Search and Rescue Agencies

Besides an itinerary, give friends and loved ones a specific time to call authorities

if you don't return as planned. This can usually be sometime the next day. In addition, consider giving them the name of the agency that has jurisdiction (often the county sheriff). Also consider giving them the names and numbers of experienced hikers who know both your skill level and the specific area of your trip. This is highly situational depending upon how responsibly loved ones deal with this information. The ethical element here is the conflict between your freedom of movement (e.g., changing plans when out in the field; being overdue) and your compassion for loved ones. The overriding concern should usually be for loved ones. There is also an ethical responsibility to provide search and rescue agencies with the specific data they need to follow up on emergency calls. See the linked document titled, "[Hiking Trip Detail for Emergencies](#)," for a sample data form I use for trips that are more extensive. I simply add specific trip data to the basic personal information that doesn't change and then print off a few copies for friends and loved ones.

#### Leaving Home For Extended Period

Another ethical issue dealing with loved ones involves getting most of your gear ready several days in advance so that you can spend quality time with loved ones before leaving for an extended period. This is especially important for those who are quite anxious about your leaving.

#### Power of Positive Thinking and Commitment

Our thoughts have tremendous power over our behaviors. In this light, remember to make an explicit, verbal promise and commitment to your loved ones (and to yourself) each time you leave that you *will come back alive and in one piece*. Since so much of what happens in our lives (i.e., reality) is tied to our habits of thought, this extra psychological insurance just might influence reality in difficult situations. More importantly, your loved ones will usually be comforted to hear you thinking on this level and thinking of them in this way. Providing comfort to loved ones is the ethically right thing to do (assuming you are truly committed to your own health and well-being).

#### Time and Money For Trail Maintenance

Be willing to give back to fellow hikers, especially by giving money and volunteer time and energy to trail associations. Trail associations often fulfill several

functions: education, coordination of volunteers, and lobbying government entities on behalf of hikers.

### Trail Passes and Registers

Don't hesitate to pay for trail passes, even though the chance of getting fined for not having one is often low. Given the reduced budgets of federal agencies responsible for our trails, this kind of giving has unfortunately become a necessity. Sign in at trailhead registers for the same reason.

Trail Maintenance: Go out of your way to pick up litter, remove downed limbs, move rocks off the trail, divert water when necessary, etc. If there is room in your pack, bring a small bow saw or clippers to cut through branches overhanging trails that don't get regular maintenance. If each of us gets into the habit of doing a little bit, the overall result will be significant improvement for those that come after us.

### Reimbursement to Drivers

Have a clear, prearranged agreement about reimbursement. Four common arrangements:

- (1) Start with full tank with the passengers paying for gas, including a fill up on returning home.
- (2) Agree on a fixed fee that depends upon the number of passengers and the length of the trip.
- (3) Agree on a specified number of cents per mile per rider (i.e., Seattle Mountaineers policy).
- (4) If the group has the same people most of the time, simply trade off driving. Because of possible legal implications involving prepayment, it is best to settle up at the end of the trip. Be considerate by carrying a few small bills so that no one has to try to make change. Do not pay by check or IOU. Go out of your way to make your payment public so that peer pressure will encourage others to remember to pay in a timely manner.

### Quiet and Solitude

In addition to not hollering and avoiding loud talking, do not talk incessantly either on the trail or in camp. Encourage periods when everyone spreads out on the trail and no one talks much. When you stop for a break, move well off the trail (moving out of sight is even better). Most wilderness travelers go there for at least some quiet and solitude. Please respect this. Wait until camp is established to get into extended conversations. Yes, those who desire solitude can drop back while hiking or they can take their own solo hike, but this is contrary to a basic principle of safety: keeping the group together.

### Keep Your Distance

It is only polite to not hike on the heels of the person in front of you; keep some distance (15 feet or more) so they do not feel you are pushing them. This means that you will not be able to carry on a conversation with the people around you, which is generally a good thing. Wait until breaks for extended conversation.

### Use of Toilet Paper

Some wilderness education groups (e.g., Outward Bound) espouse going without the “luxury” of toilet paper. Why is this? Paper that is buried doesn’t degrade very fast in many environments and is often dug up by animals. In my analysis, this is a good example of [situational ethics](#). Seriously consider foregoing use of TP if alternative methods of cleaning the privates are readily available (e.g., snow, water, leaves, moss, fir cones), if outhouse facilities are unavailable or if traveling in areas of heavy use. If one decides to use TP, then greatly reduce the quantity used by using alternative methods first and finishing up with the TP (e.g., 4-5 squares total per session or one square of heavy-duty paper shop towel). Carry out the soiled TP for later disposal or burn it on trips of longer duration. If carrying out your TP (or your stools), use the “mitten method” as suggested by the Leave No Trace (LNT) group: invert a plastic bag over your hand, pick up the soiled TP, pull the bag right side out over the tissue, close the top, and store in a second sealed plastic bag. A final courtesy is to mark your cat hole with crossed upright sticks so the next person doesn’t attempt to dig in the same place.

### Personal Hygiene

Whether you use toilet paper or not, be diligent about using soap and water, sanitizer or chemical wipes (or some combination) on your hands after pooping.



A little soap and a few wipes weigh next to nothing. Use hand wipes or sanitizer when water is scarce. Chemical wipes degrade more slowly so be sure to carry them out. Dedicate a bandana or small absorbent towel to the vigorous drying of hands (drying and wiping is an important step in the cleansing process). Because personal hygiene is so problematic in the wilderness (the largest single cause of back country illness according to the experts), do not share your snack foods with others. Avoid indulging in handouts. If you do indulge, pour the snack into the other person's hands rather than dip in bare handed. Such diligence will go a long way in keeping the group healthy. Doing your part to keep the group healthy is the ethically right thing to do.

### Improving Established Camp Sites

In spite of the [Leave No Trace](#) philosophy of not altering a well-used campsite ("Good campsites are found, not made; altering a site is not necessary."), I see no serious conflict with improving a *well-used* site. Clearing rocks and debris from a tent site, moving logs to sit on and ditching around the edge of the tent or tarp are three examples. More controversial is the practice of digging hip holes (an improvement that has become a higher priority the older I get). Altering an already used site is also okay if a group site is desired and you are there for more than one night. Ideally, look for *pristine, unused and unimproved* sites that are soft underneath with good drainage (i.e., site needs no improvement). In many parts of the country, however, such sites are difficult to find, especially if looking for a group site. If campsite alterations are philosophically out of the question, each person should sleep in a small shelter in their own comfortable niche in the woods. Using a hammock is also a good alternative in many parts of the country.

### Taking Pictures in Group Settings

With digital still and video cameras becoming lighter and more compact, picture taking when with groups can easily become an ethical issue (*a conflict of interests*). In general terms, make picture taking as unobtrusive as possible. Seldom ask others to pose. Keep up with the group so that you do not become separated. Don't expect others to comment if doing audio recordings. If one or two party members are assigned to document the trip with pictures, don't hesitate to recommend photo opportunities. Those taking pictures should consider sharing their work with others when the trip is over. Posting

information about a completed trip on the Internet is becoming more common and makes the information more accessible.

### Responsibilities to Party Members

The old adage “a chain is only as strong as its weakest link” is important when applied to party members. We need to look out for the weaker or less experienced members and not attempt things we know or suspect are beyond their comfort range. On a circumambulation of Mt. Adams in Washington State, I unnecessarily led our group across a steep snow slope without a good runout. If someone slipped, they could have gone into the rocks below. Having had a lot of experience on steep snow and ice, I was comfortable with the situation, but others in the group were not. Two of the party did slip. One was able to control his slide with his ice axe, but the other was not (mainly because of a heavy pack and a too short ice axe). As it turned out, no one was seriously injured (beyond damaged pride), but the potential for injury was great. An after-the-fact analysis suggested that a longer route would have been much safer. Most importantly, this episode provided an opportunity to think about my responsibilities to other members of the party, especially when there is no clearly established leader making these decisions. On the other side of this coin, those with less experience have an obligation (moral?) to let others know when they are not comfortable with the situation.

### Medical Obligations

In the spirit of wilderness ethics, there are several obligations that need to be fulfilled in the medical realm. Because medical problems take on a much higher profile in the wilderness, it is incumbent upon all hikers to get a regular physical examination and to let their primary care doctor know the level of activities they will be involved in. It is important for hikers to share with their partners any medical conditions that might become an issue in the wilderness. In addition, a brief description of these conditions plus emergency contact information should be included either on one's person or with personal papers carried in a pack pocket. [Note: I now carry a card in my pack that indicates the following: (1) subject to allergic reaction to multiple bee stings for which I carry an Epi-Pen injector in my first aid kit; (2) heart arrhythmia condition for which I take two heart rhythm pills (300 mg total) every eight hours.]

It is obligatory for each hiker to have their own first aid kit and know how to use the items contained in it. All medications (especially prescription drugs) in the kit should have clear directions for use and warnings about undesired side effects. It is more important for each hiker to have a good understanding of how to treat the medical conditions that are most common in the wilderness. More specifically, each hiker should understand the information provided in the Emergencies section of my website dealing with [Wilderness First Aid](#) and [Wilderness Medicine](#). It is important to enroll in a CPR and a First Aid class to learn or renew your skills. Even better, enroll in a wilderness First Aid course.

These medical obligations take on even more importance if one is in a leadership position in the wilderness. Leaders should not only follow through with these recommendations for themselves, but also make sure their group follows through.

#### Off-Trail Routes

When off-trail, generally do not take a route different from the person leading at the time; this can be easily interpreted as an unnecessary, non-verbal criticism. Some exceptions: where the leader suggests a different route, when the terrain clearly suggests an alternative route would be better and when the group decides to practice [Leave No Trace](#) principles by encouraging everyone to take a different route in order not to develop a permanent way trail.

#### Service to the Backpacking Community

One highly praiseworthy activity is to write trip reports and post them for others to read. This activity is especially helpful if you have experienced unusual conditions or have attempted new or alternative routes. Another service activity is to test and write review of equipment for others to read. Many web sites accept such reviews. One of the most active is [BackpackGearTest.org](#). The best thing about this site is that you often get to keep the gear tested.

#### Assisting Beginners and the Less Experienced

Another way to be of service to others is to agree to lead or assist groups of beginning and less experienced hikers such as: Boy and Girl Scouts, college outdoor classes, hiking clubs, family and friends. When out in the wilderness, it is usually appropriate and tactful to first ask the person if they would like some

feedback or assistance. Giving advice without some sort of permission is usually unethical. An exception to this position is warning others about dangerous, self-destructive behaviors. One example would be counseling hikers or climbers about to attempt a steep snow slope without an ice axe or crampons. Another example would be a reminder of the need for headlamps/flashlights because it will be dark on the return if the party continues on to their probable destination before turning around. Giving advice without permission is okay if you are clear about your level of experience and their lack of it.

### Service to Fellow Travelers

I was fortunate to learn my outdoor skills from a small, close knit climbing group (the Sherpas) that hiked and climbed primarily in the Pacific Northwest. An overriding mindset of this group (as I remember it many years later) was service to each other. Part of this ritual was to mimic the stereotypical behavior of the climbing Sherpas of Nepal by regularly using the term “sahib” to both emphasize subservience and respect. Two examples, “May I make you some hot tea, sahib?” “May I carry the tent, sahib?” Even though there were obvious inequalities in the level of experience and strength in our group, we were encouraged to treat each person in our group with equal respect while at the same time being of service to them. The most obvious arena of service is taking on camp tending chores without being asked (e.g., starting the stove in the morning, jumping in to wash dishes, striking the tent). Another common example of a “service” task is taking the initiative to break trail when in deep snow.

### Masochists and Minimalists

This conflict of interest involves those who negatively impact the group because they are either carrying too much personal gear (masochists?) or the opposite problem of those who do not carry enough gear (minimalists?) for safe mountain travel. The latter often mooch off other, better-equipped hikers. These situations should be dealt with one way or another, with peer pressure often being the best way to handle them. In the worst cases, group leaders should correct the situation before hitting the trail. Better yet, if you suspect there might be a problem of this nature, suggest a day or weekend hike for evaluation and teaching purposes before attempting a longer group hike.

### Sustainability Principles Applied Both To Travel and Trekking

Take responsibility for the environmental and cultural costs and impacts of traveling to far off places. Generally limit your hiking to local destinations and use the most efficient modes of transport to get there. Do not impact other cultures adversely. Taking this issue seriously results in a full range of responses. Following the “Basic Ethics” principles spelled out in the first part of this article, my recommended position is to at least “do no harm” to the environment and the local culture around your destination. The best way to accomplish this is to get permission from local authorities and to choose destinations where local authorities are sensitive to the damage tourists might do.

Following the “Advanced Ethical Principles” spelled out earlier means not only to avoid doing harm, but to go out of your way to sustain and enhance the environment and the local culture. One example of this would be to contribute money to the local schools. Another is to work politically to stop deforestation at your proposed destination. Another example would be to collect and dispose of garbage and to repair the damage from past trekking expeditions. The most extreme position on this issue would be to only hike and backpack locally without adversely impacting the environment (i.e., following LNT principles). In this extreme view, one would ideally hike or bike or hitchhike to the trailhead so there is little or no impact on the environment.

Whatever position you take in this matter, realize that trekking to far off places is not a right but a privilege, a privilege to be exercised with care. For a more detailed perspective on this philosophy of sustainability (including information on travel agencies and travel guides emphasizing it), check out National Geographic Society’s Center For Sustainable Destinations. Their website is [nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable](http://nationalgeographic.com/travel/sustainable). At this website, the following definition is given for a central concept: “Geotourism” is “*tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well being of its residents.*” Geotourism builds on the geographical character or “sense of place” to create a type of tourism that emphasizes the distinctiveness of its locale, and that benefits visitor and resident alike.



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### Going Solo

A difficult and controversial ethical issue is that of going into the wilderness by oneself. I will not go into the *conflicts of values and interests* in this context; there are many, especially if leaving loved ones at home. However, I have dealt with this subject in depth (including the social and ethical ramifications) in two articles in the Solo Hiking section of my website: [“Solo Hiking and the Search for Solitude”](#) and [“How dangerous is solo hiking, really?”](#)

Three Final Ethical Issues: Click on the following links for a more detailed analysis on the following controversial ethical issues:

[Resolving Situations of Unequal Pack Weights](#)

[Dogs on the Trails](#)

[On the Morality of Gear Addiction](#)

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I have now explored over two-dozen controversial ethical issues relevant to backpacking and hiking. These are the issues I am most interested in at the present time. Readers will, I am sure, think of others that could and should be included.

### **Reader Participation: Prioritizing “Advanced” Ethical Issues**

*First*, consider listing additional controversial issues I have missed. *Second*, circle two or three ethical issues or topics presented in this ADVANCED Ethics section that are of most interest and for which you would like to give more thought and analysis.

### **Final Thoughts on Wilderness Ethics**

My own wilderness ethics makes a place for the BASICS (i.e., rules of behavior and ethical principles) such as those offered early in this article. However, they are only a starting point and are quite limited in helping us deal with the more controversial and complex issues encountered in the last half of this article.

A perspective I believe should temper all of the above is best summarized in the following quote:

He who defines his conduct by ethics imprisons his songbird in a cage. He who wears his morality as his best garment were better naked.

—Kahlil Gibran, Near Eastern philosopher/poet

Even though this quote states the point in the extreme, the basic message (as I interpret Gibran) is still sound: Take the moral high trail; be ethically aware and assertive but do so with discretion, tact and respect. Where possible, do so quietly, behind the scenes, without fanfare. Especially do so without concern about the superiority and inferiority of the individuals involved.

One final thought: If you have read this far, I assume you are genuinely interested in going beyond the basics, in taking your wilderness ethics to a higher, more advanced level (i.e., “taking the moral high trail”). Underlying this assumption is my belief that all of us, no matter how ethically evolved, can always learn and do more. In the spirit of this assumption, did your “wilderness ethics” change and evolve just by reading this article?

### **Additional *Practical* Issues for Reflection**

1. Marking Of Way Trails : What is a defensible position regarding the marking of cross-country routes or way trails using cairns, plastic tape or other types of flagging?
2. Muddy Trails: Should I follow the *Leave No Trace* recommendation of walking through the middle of muddy sections rather than walking around them? Should I avoid trails that I know will be muddy? Should muddy trails be closed during the wetter times of year?
3. Pack Animals: Should wilderness travelers who use pack animals of various kinds (llamas, mules, horses) be encouraged or discouraged? Should those who use pack animals in wilderness areas be regulated?
4. Grazing of Livestock: Should grazing of livestock (e.g., sheep, cattle, buffalo) be allowed on publicly owned and managed wilderness lands? In wilderness areas?
5. Guide Services: Should wilderness travelers desiring to use guide services be encouraged or discouraged? Should guide services traveling in wilderness areas be regulated? Should guide books be encouraged or discouraged?
6. Mechanical Modes of Travel: Should all, some or no mechanical modes of travel in the wilderness (e.g., helicopters, ATVs, snowmobiles, off-road bikes, mountain bikes) be severely curtailed or banned outright? Should designated wilderness areas and National Parks and Recreation Areas be treated differently from other wilderness areas? Should all mechanical modes of travel be treated the same or are there substantial differences between them? What percentage of funding should these mechanical modes of travel receive from management agencies when compared to various kinds of foot travel?
7. Ecologically Friendly Outdoor Gear and Apparel: Should I attempt to buy “organic” products when possible (e.g., clothing made from organic wool, cotton, bamboo)? What about those who use recycled materials? Those manufacturers who are seriously attempting to reduce their carbon footprint?



Should I attempt to buy products from retailers who contribute some of their profits to environmental causes?

8. Wilderness Suicide: Is wilderness suicide always morally wrong? If I know or suspect that a wilderness suicide is being planned or contemplated, what are my responsibilities to the various parties affected? Should suicides resulting from severe mental and emotional problems be treated differently from those resulting from severe physical problems (e.g., cancer, old age, arthritis)?

### **Some Theoretical Issues For Consideration**

Most of this article has dealt with *practical* ethical concerns (“Applied Ethics”). These last two sections move to a more abstract and philosophical level (“Theoretical or [Meta-ethics](#)”). Do any of the following issues jump out at you?

#### BASIC Theoretical Ethical Issues

1. Explicit Wilderness Ethics: How important is it to make all this explicit, to have a carefully thought out wilderness ethic? Should all backpackers be encouraged to do this? How well has this article assisted you in this effort? What more would you like to do to make your wilderness ethics even more explicit and take them to an even higher level?
2. Obedience to Authority: Should I obey all signs, authorities and restrictions in the wilderness, even when I think they are ridiculous? Even if there is no way I will be punished for breaking them? If not, when should I obey them and when should they be ignored?
3. Moral Principles: When do moral and ethical principles like those presented early in this article come into play when thinking about moral behavior? Should they play a central role, stay in the background or be totally ignored? Should they be strongly emphasized in the developmental years (by parents, teachers, etc.) and then remain in the background as an adult?
4. Education and Enforcement: How effective are the attempts of the various agencies to educate and enforce the basic rules of wilderness travel and camping? If posting rules is not very effective, what might be more effective?

Would an increased presence of wilderness rangers make a real difference?  
 What about more free classes in backpacking and camping?

5. Emphasis On Rules or Principles?: Should lists of rules (e.g., trail and camping etiquette and rules) be publicized and emphasized when possible? Or is it better to emphasize general principles (e.g., respect the rights of others)? Is it better to emphasize the positives (“dos”) or the negatives (“don’ts”)?

### Some ADVANCED Theoretical Ethical Issues

1. Distinction Between Basic and Advanced Ethics: Is it defensible to sharply distinguish between basic and advanced ethics, between higher and lower levels of morality as I have done in this article? Is this a useful distinction for those interested in pushing their backpacking skills and understandings to higher levels? Is this distinction more defensible if there is no attempt at competition or no interest in comparing the behavior of different individuals?
2. Motivations For Taking It To The Next Level: If you have read this far, I assume you have at least some interest in developing your wilderness ethics to a higher level. What are your motivations for this? Assuming it is not enough just to do the right thing, but to do it for the right reasons, what are some ethical and praiseworthy reasons for taking your ethics to a higher level? Assuming that the motivations of looking good and feeling good are not sufficient, what are sufficient motivations, motivations that will stand on their own merit?
3. The Need For Certainty: Most of us have (or had at one time) a strong need for certainty in our lives — a strong need for clear rights and wrongs, clear black and white answers to life’s most important questions. We are often quite uncomfortable with shades of gray and with someone who says there are either many acceptable answers or even no real answers. Some “cognitive” psychologists suggest that the need for certainty is a natural part of human intellectual development, but one that we will outgrow as we develop and mature. Some philosophers believe that true philosophy begins only when we begin to seriously doubt our most cherished and certain beliefs. In the extreme, some thinkers (e.g., the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates) believed

that the only thing of importance we can be certain about is our own ignorance. What is your position regarding the need for certainty? What are your needs in this area, especially as they relate to wilderness ethics?

4. Case For Subjectivity, Individuality and Partiality: A majority of moral philosophers see the ideals of objectivity, impartiality, universality, rationality, etc. as central to a sound system of ethics, even if they are often elusive in real life. Do you agree? How strong is the case for subjectivity, individuality and partiality for you in your daily life?
5. Bias Towards Humans vs. Animals: Do humans have a higher moral standing than animals? Should they? Why? Is there an objective basis for doing this or is it just a natural “human” bias? What about plants in this regard? [Note: Even though this issue is essentially a topic for *Wilderness and Ecological Ethics* (i.e., outside the scope of this article), I include it here to broaden this “wilderness ethic” focus and to remind the reader of a whole other set of ethical issues.]
6. Essence of Morality and Ethics: Is there an essence (i.e., necessary and sufficient characteristics) of ethics and morality, as you understand these terms? What makes something a moral or ethical issue (as opposed to, say, a scientific or religious or a social issue)? Are *conflicts of interest and values* an adequate starting point, as suggested early in this article?