

# Seeking Truth About *The Ten Essentials*

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Yvon Chouinard says it is better to leave the “ten essentials” at home because your best security is to move fast and be up and off the mountain before it ‘erupts’.

— Yvon Chouinard, *Climbing Ice*, p. 153

Regarding what can be classified as emergency equipment, [the answer is] EVERYTHING. In an emergency, every single item on your person becomes emergency equipment, and every skill and bit of knowledge. The goal is to have the right combination of gear and knowledge to come out ahead—alive—in any situation. It is very dangerous to believe that your gear will save you, no matter what gear you have.

—Bors Vesterby, *Signpost*, August 1999

## **Central Issues Addressed in This Article**

How should hiking “essentials” be defined? Should “essentials” be used in the narrow minimum survival sense or a broader sense? Are there questionable items on most “essentials” lists? (Knife? First aid kit? Extra food? Map and compass?) What are the overriding principles for being prepared to deal with wilderness emergencies beyond carrying the “essentials”?

## **Starting Assumptions**

To begin answering the above questions, assume that we are not highly trained and coached survivalists who can make do with almost nothing. Further assume we are not dealing with aboriginal tribes or “mountain men” who have learned to adapt and survive in the most inhospitable of places. In contrast, assume that most of us are modern day wilderness travelers who spend most of

our time in the frontcountry surrounded by most of the comforts. Even though the original concept of the “Ten Essentials” apparently started with mountaineering organizations in the 1930s, assume we are not dealing with this topic as mountaineers and alpinists, but as hikers, off-trail scramblers, canyoneers, river runners, and so on. Finally, assume we are dealing with experienced wilderness travelers rather than inexperienced beginners. In this context, it is interesting to note that the original classic concept of the “Ten Essentials” started with classes for *beginning climbers*.

### **Failed Attempts to Define the “Essentials”**

There is considerable debate and oftentimes confusion regarding the “essentials” for wilderness travels. Is it 10, 12, 14 or some other specific number of gear items? What is usually meant by “essentials” when a specific number is given? Should it be defined broadly to cover almost everything carried except luxury items (as some suggest) or defined narrowly to mean something like the minimum essentials to stay alive in times of emergency (i.e., life or death survival)? Most lists of essentials are vague and ambiguous on this point.

One way to clarify any concept is by listing synonymous terms and phrases (e.g., concise dictionary definitions). Following this suggestion, there is a long list of terms and phrases roughly synonymous with “essential”: necessity, indispensable, required, minimum, important, critical, imperative, mandatory, compulsory, nonnegotiable, must-haves, basic requirement, insurance item. While providing a starting point for clarification, a list of synonymous terms and phrases accomplishes little in the present context.

Adding qualifiers to indicate the strength of feeling behind a phrase also does little to clarify (e.g., truly necessary, really important, absolutely essential, extremely critical, bare minimums, highest priority, cover the worst possible events, and so on).

Giving examples is another common and useful way to define a concept. For example, we could consult the lists provided by outdoor stores, hiking books or websites to determine what the author, organization or company view as the “essentials.” Compiling these many lists into one long list would produce at least 25-30 different items. To add more value to this approach, we could conduct a popularity contest to see which items received the most votes. However, a popularity contest is of limited usefulness at best and totally inadequate at the worst. The following analysis will explain why this is the case.

## Using a Contextual Model for Identifying the “Essentials”

The best way to attain the needed clarity for the concept of “essentials,” as related to wilderness travel, is to provide specific *contexts* in which the concept is often used or might be appropriate. In other words, provide a *contextual* or situational definition. Sometimes the context is clear, but often it is not. Often several meanings or contexts get combined. Here is one hiker who supports this position:

Essentials are different for each type of trip; situational. Who you are, where you live and hike, and who you travel with, all influence what you should carry—there’s no one-size-fits-all formula.

—Rick Dreher

Following are nearly 30 different ***contexts***, each accompanied by examples of gear often seen as “essential” for that context.

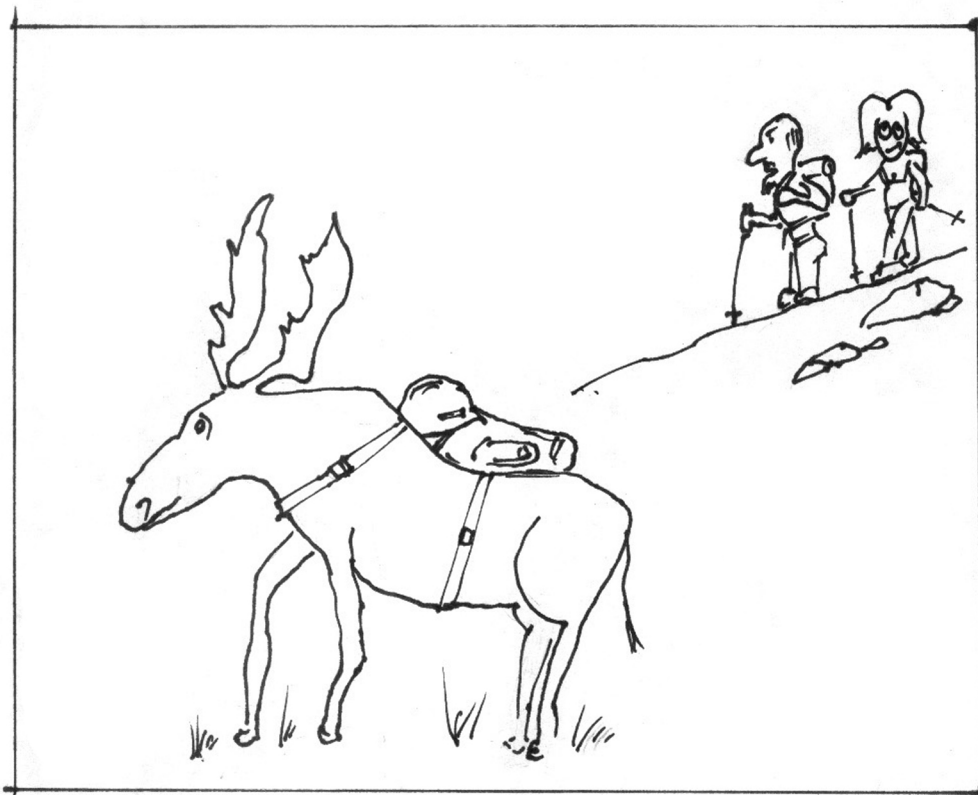
- Essential for mere survival in colder temperatures; essential to prevent hypothermia (e.g., shelter, storm shell clothing, insulating clothing, calorie-rich food, water)
- Essential for survival in winter conditions (e.g., layers of insulated clothing, insulating sleeping pad, vapor barrier liners, snow shovel, stove for melting water, calorie-rich food, snowshoes or skis)
- Essential for starting a fire or lighting a stove in severe storm conditions (e.g., chemical accelerant, knife, tinder, stormproof matches, butane lighter, sparking tool)
- Essential to avoid developing an infection from an abrasion or wound (e.g., purified water, antibiotic ointment, bandage)
- Essential to moderating aches and strains and pains (e.g., over-the-counter pain relievers and anti-inflammatories)

- Essential to avoid excruciating pain and suffering from a serious injury (e.g., prescription pain medications)
- Essential to dealing with specific medical conditions (e.g., electrolytes for cramps and dehydration, blister kit, insulin for diabetics, EpiPen syringe to neutralize serious allergic reactions, high altitude sickness medications, first aid card information detailing instructions for specific medical conditions)
- Essential to developing the knowledge, skill and experience necessary to deal with most emergencies (e.g., combination of appropriate instructional materials, first aid and survival courses and outings with highly experienced and skilled wilderness travelers)
- Essential to being found if seriously incapacitated and alone (e.g., detailed itinerary left with a responsible person(s), whistle, orange tarp, fire starter)
- Essential to being found *quickly* if seriously incapacitated and alone (e.g., personal locator beacon, satellite phone)
- Essential to keep from getting lost and to get one's bearings if lost (e.g., map, compass, GPS, altimeter)
- Essential for travel in hot desert areas (sun shade for midday stops, detailed maps of water sources, sun hat or umbrella, full coverage clothing)
- Essential to prevent damage from the sun (e.g., sun hat, sunglasses, sunscreen, sunblock clothing)
- Essential for travel over snow or ice covered terrain (e.g., traction devices, gaiters, ice axe)
- Essential to navigate or set up camp in the dark (e.g., hands-free light source, extra batteries)
- Essential to make minimum repairs in the field (e.g., duct tape, combination tool, cord, sewing kit, stick-on cloth tape)

- Essential to fend off human or animal predators (e.g., gun, knife, pepper spray, trekking poles)
- Essential to deal with potential grizzly bear attacks (e.g., comprehensive knowledge of bear behavior, minimum of two cans of pepper spray, high-powered rifle)
- Essential to deal with the microscopic nasties that might inhabit drinking water sources (e.g., chemical water treatments, water filter or purifier)
- Essential to protect food from animals (e.g., bear-proof container, hanging cord, information about location of bear wires or vaults)
- Essential to protect body from stinging and biting insects (e.g., full coverage clothing, netting, repellent)
- Essential for personal hygiene (e.g., soap and water)
- Essential to achieving a specific objective (e.g., crampons, rope, harness and ice axe to achieve a difficult summit; a 10 pound or less pack to hike 200 miles in five days or less)
- Essential for maintaining dry feet in wet conditions (e.g., gaiters, waterproof and breathable shoes, boots or socks, changes of socks)
- Essential for on-trail comfort (e.g., comfortable shoes or boots; lightweight pack)
- Essential to camp comfortably most of the time allowing some discomfort in extreme conditions (e.g., tarp, sleeping bag, thin sleeping mat, sleeping pills)
- Essential for real camp comfort (e.g., bomb-proof tent, thick air mattress, extra-warm sleeping bag, portable chair, tarp for eating and sitting areas, firewood, stove and ample fuel, appetizing food)

The above analysis starts with a specific *context* in which the word “essential” is often used and then gives examples of what might be considered essential for that *context*. The examples are only that; they are not meant to be definitive or the final answer. Exactly which items might be considered “essential” in a specific context is often debatable and beyond the scope of this article. Also, it often depends on having more detailed information about the specific contexts.

The analysis given in this section starts from the most extreme end of a continuum and goes to the opposite. How far down the continuum we go and still use the word “essential” is also debatable. Do we define it in the broadest or narrowest sense or somewhere in between? If defined in the broadest sense (my preference), then nearly everything carried in one’s pack or on one’s person is “essential” *for some context*.



**NEW RULES IN THE PARK REQUIRE  
EVERYONE TO CARRY THE TEN ESSENTIALS.**

JIM MORRISON

## Conclusions from This Contextual Analysis

As the analysis in the previous section clearly illustrates, there is no one meaning of the concept of “essentials;” there are many possible meanings depending upon the specific contexts, situations, priorities, type of trip, etc. Put simply, no one list will cover all situations for all wilderness travelers, experienced or inexperienced.

Another conclusion is that all 20+ contexts listed in the previous section for the term “essential” are legitimate even though some purists will try to limit the concept to the first few contexts on the continuum. Those desiring simplicity and certainty in these matters will likely react negatively to this contextual approach to the subject. My position is to define the concept quite broadly with much complexity and to resist the desire for simplicity. Making this point in a different way: the list of contexts and meanings in the previous section is both *descriptive* (how the concept is often used) and *prescriptive* (how it should be used).

I grant that simplified lists with a specific number of items do have their place in one context—dealing with beginners. Hiking book authors and instructors in beginning classes often provide a simple list of essentials stating that the items listed should be carried by everyone. These simplified lists are often provided to make the subject easier to deal with. The subject quickly becomes too complex and complicated if dealt with in a rational and comprehensive manner (as I have attempted to do in this article).

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis in the previous section is that almost every item carried in your pack or on your person (if carefully considered when loading the pack) is probably “essential” in one way or other. Instead of a list of essentials in your pack, view everything as essential, even those things identified as luxury or comfort items. An extreme example would be a paperback book that could be used as a fire starter, crumpled up as extra insulation, or to keep from going crazy while waiting to be rescued. Items having dual or multiple uses are preferred in this context of essentials.

One final conclusion: The specific choices of gear for the specific contexts detailed in the previous section will vary a lot from individual to individual. These choices of “essential” gear depend upon the level of experience, confidence, risk tolerance, priorities, comfort level and gear availability for the individual making the choices. To the highly skilled survival expert or aborigine, almost no gear would suffice. The question “What are the essentials for everyone,” is based on a mistaken premise. To repeat an earlier point, only with true beginners does it

make sense to provide a list of the specific *minimum* pieces of gear and require that these items be carried.

### **Overriding Principles in Preparing for Wilderness Emergencies**

Here are some principles for your consideration that I hold dear in thinking about what is essential for wilderness travel, especially for dealing successfully with most wilderness emergencies that might arise.

- No one list of “essentials” (whether it is 10, 12 or more) will handle all situations for all wilderness travelers.
- Before each major trip, review the goals, weather, party makeup, terrain, etc. Get consensus within the party as to which essential gear items are needed. If consensus is not possible, try to convince everyone in the party to carry those minimum essentials *you* deem necessary for a highly successful trip.
- Rely only on yourself for survival gear; do not rely on others; generally, do not team up on this kind of gear.
- Safety is more important than comfort and convenience; never sacrifice needed safety and survival essentials to save a few ounces of carried weight.
- The more skilled you are the less need there is for the classic list of 10 essentials; the more skilled you are the absolute essentials become water, shelter and warmth. All else is can be useful, but is not essential.
- Think in terms of functional *systems* rather than individual essentials. For example, an adequate communication system in case of emergency might include a signal mirror, flashing LED, fire starter, note pad and pencil. An minimally sufficient insulation system might include a space blanket, warm hat, gloves and a vest. Other potential *systems* for emergencies: hydration, nutrition, repairs, sun protection, shelter, fire.
- The bottom line essentials are not specific items of gear but individual knowledge, skill and experience (i.e., your brain).



- It is more important to focus on *avoiding* emergencies than to make sure you have the right gear for dealing with one. (Reviewing the several articles on this website in the “Safety and Prevention” category is highly recommended.)
- Because they are so light in weight, common sense dictates that you carry most of the following highly useful items most of the time, whether or not you see them as part of *the* “ten essentials”:
  - sun protection (e.g., sunblock, sun hat)
  - navigation aids (e.g., map, compass, watch, altimeter; LED lights)
  - repair kit (e.g., razor blade, duct tape, flossing string, needle and thread)
  - communication aids (fire making materials, flashing LED, pad and pencil)
  - water treatment chemicals.

### **Reader Participation: Preparing For Wilderness Emergencies**

*First*, add any basic principles missing from the above list. *Second*, circle 3-5 principles that are most important to you. Third, flesh out those principles you deem most important.

### **Ultralight Philosophies of Safety and Carrying the “Essentials”**

Ultralight (UL) and super ultralight (SUL) hiking and backpacking is becoming more popular. This phenomenon raises the question of whether those who push the lower limits of carried weight are sacrificing personal safety and the ability to deal adequately with emergencies. On the surface, it seems obvious that when drastically cutting pack weight, safety and security will be sacrificed. However, this claim is quite debatable. In fact the opposite claim is often made by lightweight packers: the amount of gear is not the critical factor in safety and security in the wilderness. For an in-depth analysis of this issue, go to [“Wilderness Safety—A Debate Between the Ultralightists and the Traditionalists.”](#)

### **Questionable Items Appearing on Most Essential Gear Lists**

Following are four items (extra food, knives, maps, first aid), items that usually appear on lists of “essentials,” that are questionable. They are not questionable in the sense of there being no reason to carry them into the wilderness (e.g., for utility and convenience), but questionable as “survival”

essentials. I present the following four analyses not as the last word, but to increase understanding about what is often taken for granted.

### Extra Food?

Bread without flesh is a good diet, as on many botanical excursions I have proved. Tea also may easily be ignored. Just bread and water and delightful toil is all I need - not unreasonably much, yet one ought to be trained and tempered to enjoy life in these brave wilds in full independence of any particular kind of nourishment.

—John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*

How important is carrying extra food rich in calories for emergencies in the wilderness? If a lightweight pack is a high priority, is having a pound or so of food left over at the end of a trip a good thing? Is purposely carrying considerably less food than the calories you know you will expend a bad thing?

Like most issues revolving around “essential” gear, there are no clear-cut answers to these questions and much debate. However, here is a summary of what experts usually agree upon, relative to this issue.

- One can survive for a long time (weeks) without food when sufficiently hydrated.
- Food rich in calories is an important factor when hypothermia is a serious threat. If one can keep warm during emergencies, the need for food becomes less important.
- Without enough food the body will naturally start burning fat from adipose tissues. When the body runs out of fat, it will start tearing down muscle for needed fuel.
- Burning muscle protein is not good, but it is not permanently damaging unless taken to extremes (i.e., approaching starvation). Burning muscle protein will mean less stamina and more fatigue.

- Food rich in fats is more efficient than protein or carbohydrates, ounce for ounce, in providing the calories necessary for high exertion rates during emergencies.
- Those carrying heavier packs and body weights will burn more calories than those who are relatively light in weight.
- Starvation diets are easier, physically and psychologically, for those who commonly restrict their food intake for some reason (i.e., dieting, religious fasting, forgetting to eat). Such diets are much more difficult for those with food addictions.
- A highly conditioned body can be trained to do heavy exertion with insufficient food; a highly conditioned body can accomplish more with the same food than a less conditioned body.
- Losing weight during a rigorous wilderness trip is common and not bad, especially if putting on muscle while losing body fat.

Do you see a pattern emerging here? Do you see specific answers to our starting questions about extra food for emergencies? My interpretation involves a lot of “ifs.” *If* you carry extra body fat and are not addicted to food, *if* you are able to stay warm and dry and hydrated, and *if* heavy exertion is not necessary during emergencies—then you will do just fine for quite a while without food. That being said, it is obviously more enjoyable and less stressful (but not essential?) to have extra food for emergencies. Also, extra food could be useful to share with those who need it more than you.

### Knives for Emergencies?

Among wilderness travelers, strong feelings are often expressed about carrying a substantial knife. In this context, a substantial knife is something more than a razor blade or one ounce utility knife. Sometimes an easily accessed large knife is seen as essential for self-defense. Sometimes having a magnum size sheath knife hung on the belt is seen as a sign of masculinity. What is your philosophy about carrying a substantial knife?

In my years of wilderness experience I have found that a knife is useful to pry, scrape, screw, drill and to slice food. But it does not seem *essential* for emergencies (the specific issue in this section). A single-edge razor blade or small utility knife will usually handle most emergency cutting tasks (e.g., preparing bandages, cutting cordage, replacing a shoestring, sewing up a rip). This is not to say that an emergency will never arise where a good size knife is highly desirable, but it is doubtful it will make the difference between life and death. Without a knife, other skills and gear will be brought to bear in emergencies. However, if carrying a substantial knife is an absolute essential in your mind, make sure it has a locking mechanism to keep it open when in use. Consider that sharp knives are a common source of backcountry injuries.

I find it useful on longer trips to carry a small combination tool weighing 1.5 ounces that includes a small knife and scissors. The scissors are great for trimming nails and other tasks. A single-bladed, folding utility knife weighing less than an ounce can be obtained for those concerned with weight. Again the purpose of the knife or combo tool is utility, not life-or-death survival.

An exception to the practice of carrying only a razor blade or small utility knife would be trips where:

- (a) survival skills are being practiced without access to one's regular gear (like those highly staged episodes seen on TV)
- (b) there is some probability of losing your full pack in a fall or in crossing a river
- (c) there is some probability of coming face to face with predators (especially of the human kind).

Carrying a substantial knife on your belt would be advantageous in these kinds of situations.

### First Aid Kits?

Should one carry a first aid kit and, if so, why? Like knives, a case can be made that first aid kits are often useful, but not essential. Consider the fact that most first aid kits have nothing to recognize or treat the symptoms of cardiac arrest, shock, neck or spine injuries, hypothermia, frostbite, dehydration, severe burns or heat exhaustion. Consider the proposition that

knowledge of wilderness medicine and emergency first aid is essential, but a first aid kit is not.

One exception to this extreme position is carrying written information into the field about how best deal with serious injuries, illnesses and other emergencies. This information could be easily carried in a map case. Consider going to this [webstore link](#), purchasing the article and then copying it: "[Wilderness Medicine](#)."

Yet another exception is carrying prescription medications essential for personal health and well-being. In this same vein, it is also important to carry a "medical condition" card on your person and inform party members of any conditions that might contribute to or compromise an emergency. Regarding the original issue, the medications and information sheets are essential, but they are not part of what is ordinarily thought of as a "first aid" kit.

Some would argue that sterile dressings, antibiotic ointment and other first aid items are necessary to prevent infection from wounds and abrasions. There are at least four arguments against this line of reasoning:

- (1) Most wounds can be cleaned and kept free from infection without first aid kit materials, especially by either using soap and water or irrigating the area with water made sterile by water purification methods.
- (2) Infecting agents are at a minimum in the wilderness, especially if hands are kept extra clean.
- (3) A healthy, well conditioned body can handle most of these kinds of infections (if they occur) without special treatment.
- (4) Even if an infection starts to get out of hand, it will seldom be life-threatening if clinic-based medical treatment is given within a reasonable period of time.

The above lines of reasoning might seem beside the point since most hikers do carry first aid kits with materials to prevent or control most infections. But the main point of this whole section is to suggest that first aid kits are mostly for utility and to provide a sense of security for their owner, *not for survival*

*purposes*. The intention of this section is to challenge conventional wisdom (i.e., play the devil's advocate) to get closer to the truth of this matter.

Assuming you do carry a first aid kit, what "essential" (as opposed to useful) items must it contain and how do you define "essential"? What is the truth in this matter?

### Maps As Essential?

Maps and compasses appear on nearly every list of essentials for the experienced and inexperienced wilderness traveler alike. While there are many situations where a map is absolutely essential for safe travel, under what circumstances might an *experienced* wilderness traveler argue for going mapless?

Before going further on this topic, let's be absolutely clear about the real issue being considered. The issue here is *not* whether to carry a map if you have one (most do because they are readily available, nearly weightless and take up little space). The issue is *not* whether one feels more secure and comfortable carrying adequate maps. (Most do because of prior conditioning?) The issue is also *not* the utility of maps (e.g., helping others less familiar with an area to get oriented). The issue is *not* that of utilizing electronic maps like those found in most GPS units. The primary issue in this context: *whether to go out of our way to both obtain quality maps for an upcoming trip and to use them in the field?*

Assuming there is agreement about the main issue, there are at least three contexts that are candidates for going mapless. The *first* situation in which to seriously consider going mapless is commonplace and revolves around familiarity and predictability. To make the argument as strong as possible involves making several assumptions. First, assume the person knows the area intimately based on both field experience and extensive home study of maps, guidebooks, trip reports, etc. Second, assume the trails are well-defined and well-marked and that little off-trail travel is anticipated. Third, assume the geography of the area (e.g., drainages, peaks, lakes) is predictable and well defined. A typical example of this would be a trail that wanders up a steep river valley to a high lake in a cirque bordered by steep ridges. These preconditions are common for many hikers and scramblers much of the time. Granted, the preconditions are a matter of degree (e.g., how much field experience?), but taken as a whole they provide a sound argument for going mapless.

A *second* much more controversial line of argument for going mapless revolves around what is usually referred to as "dead reckoning." In these

situations, the person has a good sense of direction and is a skillful "dead reckoning" navigator. They have developed a good memory for recognizing crucial landmarks on the return route (even in bad weather). They keep close track of time, speed, direction, landmarks, etc. (similar to sailors who use dead reckoning on the sea). In line with this last characteristic, assume the navigator has both a watch and a compass. Dead reckoning is an important skill to develop. The more time a person spends in the wilderness without navigational aids, the more likely they will develop these dead reckoning skills. A logical extension of this line of reasoning is that use of traditional navigational devices (map, compass, altimeter, GPS) decreases the likelihood of developing these navigation skills. A quote from an unknown source captures this position: "Navigation devices are not essentials. *The need to engage yourself in the wilderness is.*" Two longer quotes use this same line of reasoning, but focus more on the quality of the experiences. In other words, they go beyond the issue of essentials to the interesting issue of the quality of wilderness experiences.

I think mapless hiking would free you up to think more about macro-level navigation. Instead of point-to-point, you start to consider broad, general trends in terrain and ecology and use your knowledge to predict the specific type of terrain you will encounter ahead of time. Seems like higher-order, integrated thinking, which will be much more rewarding.

—Mark Larsen, *BackpackingLight.com* forum

Sometimes, walking is more pleasant when it's inspired by the microcosm of real-time information that is impossible to extract from the best available maps and technologies. Technology had slammed squarely into my desire to feel the terrain below my feet and bring some art back into the act of navigating. I camped where I felt like it, walked where I pleased, and enjoyed the beauty of navigating artfully, focusing on choosing a route based on efficient walking along ecological and geological edges: a treasure that could have never been granted to me by any navigation technology, trail network, or topo map.

—[Ryan Jordan, "On Going Mapless in a Digital World: Engagement, Simplicity, and the Art of Real-Time Navigation," BackpackingLight.com](#)

A *third* potential situation (there might be others) for going mapless is

intentionally getting lost for the adventure of it. Yes, hikers sometimes do this and report that the experience can be quite rewarding. Usually this situation involves a planned itinerary where the person has the time and is equipped to spend a few extra days getting found (if successful in getting lost). Granted, this third context for going mapless stretches this debate about essentials somewhat, but it is nevertheless relevant to the issue at hand.

What conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis (whether or not you agree with all the positions taken)? Consider the following:

- Maps might not be essential in some situations, but are absolutely essential in others.
- Wilderness skill and experience are necessary to know when one can safely go mapless (i.e., novices on their own must have maps).
- Developing navigational skills in absence of navigation aids is an invaluable asset.
- Regular use of common navigational *devices* can easily interfere with the development of valuable navigational *skills*.

### **Reader Participation: Evaluating Questionable “Essentials”**

After rereading the analyses of the four items discussed in the previous section (extra food, knife, first aid kit, maps), rate each from 0-10 as essential for you on longer trips into the wilderness (10 = highest priority/absolutely essential; 5 = utility and convenience, but not essential; 0 = no good reason to pack).

### **Final Observations**

The kind of critical analysis illustrated in the latter part of this article (e.g., food, knives, first aid, maps) can be applied to each item in one’s “essentials” kit. I recommend applying this kind of reasoning to assist not only in making decisions about *what* to take, but *why*. Is the item really essential or is it carried mostly for utility, for convenience or to provide comfort?

Like most issues revolving around survival and emergency situations, there are no certain and clear-cut answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this article. This is the nature of the beast. However, the saving grace is that as



knowledge, skill, experience and preparation increase, this lack of certainty becomes less important. Hopefully, this article has increased your level of knowledge and decreased your need for certainty about a highly controversial topic.

***Legal Disclaimer:*** *Nothing in this website article can substitute for experience, careful planning, the right equipment, and appropriate training. There is inherent danger hiking and backpacking and viewers must assume full responsibility for their own actions and safety. The Author will not be responsible for the safety of those who visit this site.*

### **Additional Issues for Reflection**

1. Is a list of specific gear items (e.g., knife, matches, sunglasses) or a list of gear systems (e.g., navigation, communication, insulation, hydration) the best way to organized an essentials list?
2. Should some extra essential items be carried simply because members of the party are inexperienced and unskilled (e.g. an extra pair of sunglasses)?
3. Should inexperienced members of the party be required to show they are carrying those items deemed to be essential by the leader?
4. How do you define a “first aid” kit? A “wilderness medical” kit? A “survival” kit? An “emergencies” bag? Assuming there will be some overlap in types of kits, is the terminology important? If it is, which kit(s) is most important? Should these kits be physically separated and easily identified?
5. If these kits are a necessity, what must they contain for regular trips? For an extended trip far from civilization?
6. What items should be carried on your person (on your belt, in pockets or hung on a lanyard around your neck) in case you do lose your pack? How important is it to carry the following on your person: compass, map, fire starter, whistle, LED light, knife? What are the probabilities for most hikers of losing their pack in a fall, in a river crossing or to a bear?

7. How important is having a sharp cutting instrument for emergencies? Is some type of razor blade enough (a position often advocated by Ultralightists)? What about scissors? If it's important to have a knife, what size blade? Should it be on your person (on a belt or lanyard) rather than in your pack?
8. How important is food as an emergency item? What if one runs out of food in the middle of a trip for some reason? Should the trip be aborted, modified or continued?
9. What are the best emergency fire starting materials, especially for wet climates?
10. What about emergency shelter? Is a full storm suit or large garbage sack enough or is it best to have an additional shelter (e.g., light tarp or bivy or space blanket)?
11. How important is water purification (e.g., chemical tablets) as an emergency item, especially to supplement a non-functioning filter or purifier? How disabling are water-borne illnesses?
12. What is essential from a mental health standpoint? What red flags should go up regarding the mental condition of oneself or of party members?
13. Should you make a master list of emergency/survival items and check it off as you pack for each trip? Or is it best to think of your entire packing list as the essentials for a trip?