

The Environmentally Sensitive Poop

Ben Kruser, The Leader, April 1992

One of the interesting literary obstacles to presenting an article on this subject is knowing that many people have difficulty talking about their bodily functions. As an outdoor organization, Scouting spends a good deal of time discussing, training, and practising technical outdoor camping skills. Learning about proper sanitation practices is an important lesson in basic camping. We all know that the more clothing layers we add the warmer we'll be and the greater will be the need to go to the bathroom when we're finished dressing.

While it might be uncomfortable to address the topic of defecation, the increasing public use of wilderness areas and rising concerns for health make it necessary for Scouting to explore the parameters of the high fibre experience.

To begin, a small hole called a cat hole, dug 10 cm to 25 cm into the ground is recommended for one person's solid waste. The humus or top layer of soil contains the most active decomposers, and will hasten breakdown. For that reason, a deeper latrine is not necessarily better or as environmentally efficient. Experienced campers suggest the relieve-yourself-first, dig-later, approach. Spreading a layer of dirt or replacing the sod intact into the hole aids the biodegradation process and keeps the smell down.

If your group has six or more people planning to stay camped for a few days, dig a latrine. Human diseases are carried through our wastes. Latrines minimize the likelihood that animals will dig up these wastes and distribute disease.

To prevent pollution, do all bathroom functions well away from water courses and marshes. The recommended distance is at least 50 metres.

Water-Borne Disease

Giardia (pronounced JAR-deeya) is a common parasite that causes a diarrhea infection, also known as "beaver fever" and "purple burps". When you drink contaminated water, Giardia enters the body as a microscopic cyst. Once inside the stomach the parasite hatches out and causes intestinal problems. Symptoms are:

- Onset of explosive diarrhea seven to 10 days after ingestion
- Foul smelling, loose (not watery) stools
- Abdominal distention, flatulence and cramping, especially after eating
- May include nausea, vomiting, lack of appetite, headaches and low-grade fever

The sad thing is that many of Canada's pristine rivers and lakes now have Giardia, thanks to careless campers who defecate in or close to water. The disease is spread further by aquatic mammals such as beavers and muskrats.

Health ministries now recommend that campers always boil their water, no matter how clean it looks, for at least five minutes. This includes the water you use to brush your teeth. And wash your hands before handling any foods, since Giardia is spread by a fecal-oral route.

Other Problems

For wilderness campers, there's also the question of toilet paper. Some prefer the stick, smooth rock, pine cone, or leaf approach. If you are one of these, beware of using grass that can cut. Never strip off entire branches for leaves and be reasonably sure what leaf you are using.

If you use toilet paper, be sure it is well buried and not left hanging about. Some suggest burning it, but this method has

caused several forest fires, something you don't want to be caught in with your pants down!

And what about bowel movements at winter camps. What do you do when the snow's too deep or the ground too frozen to dig a hole? In high use public winter camping areas, the thought of frozen body wastes being washed into rivers with spring melt should send shivers down our spines. Again, make sure you are well away from water course areas. You then can dig a convenient stoop hole in a snow bank to sit on, or use a can or plastic bag in your tent and carry it far away from camp and traffic.

This leads to a discussion around a growing trend, both ethically and regulatory, of packing out your waste. With the rise in pooper-scooper laws for dogs, more campers will start running into similar expectations for people in high use public wilderness areas. Already in the U.S., many river trip outfitters are required by law to pack out all solid waste.

Admittedly, the idea of carrying your body wastes in your backpack is not only revolutionary, but somewhat revolting. But then, perhaps it is no more revolting than having to pick your way through a minefield of poop, sanitary napkins, and disposable diapers at a local campsite.

And remember, to preserve environmentally sensitive areas such as alpine meadows, we simply can't dig them up under any circumstances. The choice for Scout groups who want to explore and enjoy these fragile areas in the future, if not now, will include packing out their excrement until a more suitable habitat or waste station is found.

The environmentally-sensitive poop may seem an absurd topic but, at heart, it is a very important topic to think about. And we all know when we do our best thinking, don't we?

Resources *How to S--t in the Woods*, by Kathleen Myers; Ten Speed Press, California. *Explore Magazine*, May #42, *Earthwatch test* *What is Giardia*, Ontario Ministry of Health brochure

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