

WOMEN'S SPECIFIC ISSUES



As Leave No Trace Master Educators and Trainers, it is inevitable that questions and concerns about human biology will come in to play. Many workshop or course participants may feel comfortable talking about human bodily functions, while others may find it much more difficult to discuss in a group setting. This is especially evident when discussing women's specific aspects of Leave No Trace. Although there is some information within the Leave No Trace literature that deals with feminine hygiene, it has become clear that having more general knowledge about how to deal with these issues is crucial to many Master Educators and Trainers.

Paul Stonehouse, Associate Professor of Outdoor Leadership at Simpson University, has been teaching Leave No Trace Trainer Courses for the past several years, after being exposed to Leave No Trace in 2002 through a NOLS mountaineering course. Since then, Paul has taken both a literal and philosophical approach to Leave No Trace, which are clearly imprinted on his view of the importance of women's specific Leave No Trace information. Paul sees understanding women's hygiene in backcountry and wilderness settings to be critical in a threefold way as it relates to: 1) the health of the individual, 2) the immediate environmental impact that can result, and 3) the relationship of the individual to wild places. Aspect one, the health of the individual, stems from a personal experience where on a longer trip, a woman began her second period in the middle of her cycle from physical exertion. "It became a medical concern at the time. The women eventually approached me, and luckily another woman in the group had brought along extra supplies," said Stonehouse. "Had we not been that fortunate, we might have had to evacuate in order to protect the health of this woman." In general, keeping up with good hygiene in the backcountry is important for preventing illness, infection, and reducing the spread of bacteria among the group.

Because maintaining good hygiene is not as easily accomplished in the backcountry, Paul stated that both men and women should be informed and given the opportunity to clean the important parts in order to keep themselves and the group health: "On our trips we would boil water every night and suggest that everyone take some and clean themselves. My hope is that females who choose to use feminine hygiene products such as the Diva Cup or The Keeper are getting the chance to aggressively clean these devices, and are scrubbing under their fingernails, keeping their hands clean, etc."

Along with personal health, Paul sees understanding women's needs in the backcountry as directly connected to the protection of the environment. "Potentially, a lot of damage can be done to the environment if someone is not sure what to do with tampons, pads, applicators, and other feminine waste

such as menstrual blood.” It is important to know this information before heading in to the backcountry to prevent contamination of water sources and minimize the spread of pathogens as well as to eliminate trash and waste left behind. Having what could potentially be an uncomfortable conversation about feminine hygiene with a group can go a long way towards protecting and preserving the areas that people love to visit and explore. To Paul, protecting the environment is also connected to an individual’s relationship with wild places. “As an outdoor educator, I aspire to heal, establish, or facilitate a person’s relationship to the natural world. Being comfortable in nature is a large determinant of people’s relationship with it in the future. If a female who is new to backpacking goes out and has her menstrual cycle, not know what to do or who to go to for answers, can become a nightmare situation. If, as Master Educators and Trainers we can provide a little bit of education, we have the opportunity to help them develop a relationship with wild places.” Paul argues that as this relationship grows, the person becomes an advocate for the places they love, and providing this education allows and encourages people to become advocates.

Jessica Wormington, another Master Educator, shares a similar view when it comes to women’s hygiene in the backcountry. Jessie was first exposed to Leave No Trace when she took an Introduction to Mountaineering Course with Alpine Ascents in 2007. She studied environmental biology, and says she has always been passionate about environmental stewardship. “As you learn more and more, you can begin to incorporate more and more into your daily life,” says Wormington. For her, part of this means teaching women’s specific courses in the outdoors. “I like to talk to young women and break down some of the barriers that we are socially brought up with. I believe that women have a lot to offer in the backcountry, but many feel intimidated or do not know where to start in learning the necessary skills. Thus, they either do not go, or venture out and put themselves at risk for fear of discussing an uncomfortable subject.”

Jessie noted that on trips, women are sometimes hesitant to mention that they need to use the restroom, for fear of holding up the group. Her goal is to take women on trips and work through these fears, so that they can start to grow as an individual in the natural world. Jessie also noted that trip leaders should automatically consider women’s needs in the “Plan Ahead and Prepare” principle. “As a leader, you generally know in advance who is going with you, and giving women a heads up about what supplies they may need is a professional and, from a Leave No Trace perspective, an essential thing to do. I believe it is the responsibility of guides to tell women to be prepared to have



their menstrual cycle, even if it is not their time. The temptation is strong to not address it, especially for young women or girls, and that is why it is so important for the leader to be proactive.”

However, understanding the importance of getting this information out to women is only half the battle. Sometimes bringing up these subjects can be unsettling or uncomfortable for many individuals. Both Paul and Jessie recommend treating these topics in a very professional and biological manner. One way to do this is addressing the whole group in a very clinical way, saying, “I have to tell you how we’re going to be taking care of hygiene in the backcountry.” Telling them why it is important also makes for a safe environment to have the discussion. It is also important to consider the age groups you are working with; Jessie suggests that with a group of younger girls, it may be more effective to pull them aside as a group, while others may prefer to discuss it on an individual level. As a male trip leader, Paul noted that, “a trip leader should never publicly acknowledge to the entire group that a group member is on her period. It is a very private thing, but you cannot just assume that they know what to do or how to manage their personal hygiene in the backcountry.”

Clearly, discussing feminine hygiene, in group settings, can be intimidating. However, “as leaders we want people to be comfortable and safe when traveling,” said Jessie. Training current and future educators about the things they will be exposed to can have far-reaching, positive outcomes for the environment, and perhaps the individual’s relationship with the outdoors.

LEAVE NO TRACE TIPS FOR WOMEN

- Bring hygiene products with less packaging: To the extent possible, avoid products that require an applicator or other packaging that will require packing out.
- Consider the use of thinner pads. When possible, use thinner pads and smaller tampons in order to reduce the amount of waste and bulk that will have to be packed out of the backcountry
- Consider using a reusable bandana instead of cleansing wipes. Bandanas can be used for daily hygiene needs. There will likely be some women who will be comfortable with this idea and others that will not. It is a personal choice that the individual must make. If a reusable cloth or bandana is used for hygiene needs, thoroughly clean it daily well away from water sources.
- Pack out all feminine hygiene products and used toilet paper. If packing out used toilet paper is not an option, bury it along with human waste deeply in a 6-8” deep cathole dug a minimum of 200 ft (70 adult paces) from any water source, campsite or trail.
- Diva Cup, The Keeper or other menstrual fluid receptacle. If possible, pack out the menstrual fluid to the nearest acceptable receptacle. Otherwise bury in a 6-8” deep cathole a minimum of 200 ft from any water source, campsite or trail.
- Dispose of human waste properly. Human waste, including urine and feces, should be disposed of at a provided facility such as a flush toilet, outhouse or privy. If no facilities are available, dig a cat hole 6-8” deep at least 200 feet from water sources, campsites and trails.
- Urine. While the odor of urine can be a problem in heavily used areas, it is typically not a health concern. Urinate well away from camps and trails. Animals with salt-deficient diets sometimes defoliate plants to consume the salt in urine, so urinate on rocks or bare ground rather than on the vegetation. Where water is plentiful, consider diluting the urine by rinsing the site.