



Leave No Trace and Cairns

It happens every day – millions of Americans venture outdoors to take advantage of our nation’s vast system of public lands. Whether it’s a bike ride, a picnic, an overnight camping trip or a hike in the mountains, Americans spend countless hours each year enjoying the out-of-doors. We are fortunate to find diverse outdoor recreation opportunities, many of which are in sensitive environments such as areas near or above treeline. A prominent feature in many of these alpine areas is the cairn. Special care should be taken to both enjoy these areas responsibly and to ensure that cairns are left as they are found.

Cairns are intentionally constructed stacks of rocks that mark trails and guide hikers in the mountains above tree line, and in other barren areas. These route markers have been in use in the northeastern U.S. since the 1800’s. Cairns are very important guides for hikers during periods of low visibility (dense fog and whiteout) and in winter when snow covers the trail.

By adhering to the following guidelines, you can minimize impact on cairns, and ensure that cairns continue to serve as a critical route finding tool for trail users and resource protection tool for the alpine landscape.

- **Do not build unauthorized cairns.** When visitors create unauthorized routes or cairns they often greatly expand trampling impacts and misdirect visitors from established routes to more fragile or dangerous areas. This is especially important in the winter when trails are hidden by snow. Thus, visitor-created or “bootleg” cairns can be very misleading to hikers and should not be built.
- **Do not tamper with cairns.** Authorized cairns are designed and built for specific purposes. Tampering with or altering cairns minimizes their route marking effectiveness. Leave all cairns as they are found.
- **Do not add stones to existing cairns.** Cairns are designed to be free draining. Adding stones to cairns chinks the crevices, allowing snow to accumulate. Snow

turns to ice, and the subsequent freeze-thaw cycle can reduce the cairn to a rock pile.

- **Do not move rocks.** Extracting and moving rocks make mountain soils more prone to erosion in an environment where new soil creation requires thousands of years. It also disturbs adjacent fragile alpine vegetation.
- **Stay on trails.** Protect fragile mountain vegetation by following cairns or paint blazes in order to stay on designated trails.

A Final Challenge

Leave No Trace combines knowledge and judgment with ethical responsibility. In its simplest form, Leave No Trace is about making good decisions to protect the world around you—the world we all enjoy. Do your part to pass our nation’s heritage of outdoor recreation to future generations. To learn more about Leave No Trace practices for the Northeast mountains, please visit www.LNT.org or call 1.800.332.4100