

The Power of a Resource

Imagine that you've just hiked, paddled, or skied a few miles to one of your favorite out-door destinations. It's a place of special magnificence to you and while you're enjoying this meaningful place you observe someone leaving an impact, someone being "less than Leave No Trace." How would you react?

For some of us, our first reaction would probably be to yell at them for disturbing such a special place. But how effective is that in changing behavior? For others, we may utter under our breath, "Someone should do something about this." Well, you can, and there is a special communication technique to help you.

Because of the amount of land they oversee, it's rare for a forest ranger, conservation officer, or land manager to be on hand at every trailhead to reinforce regulations that protect our public lands. Badges, laws, and a ranger's presence can dissuade behavior that disrupts the natural order of a unique place. However, we can't always rely on the authority of the agency to preserve the spirit of wildness that draws us outside. The onus of protecting the places we love falls on everyone who enjoys outdoor recreation. So let's talk about sharing the authority of the resource.

Understanding "The Authority of the Resource"

First, a definition. Merriam-Webster defines authority as "power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior." Often we think of authority in terms of an agency that wields it: The police officer pulling you over for speeding, or the ranger inquiring whether you have a bear canister.

Yet, nature has an innate power, an authority of its own. As recreationists, we experience this power firsthand: It's part of the draw that brings us to wild places. As part of this, nature has its own rules, and there are consequences when we break those rules.

Based on these concepts, the *Authority of the Resource Technique (ART)* is a communication tool we can all use to help recreationists change their behavior and instill an outdoor ethic. It's based on the idea that when we make an appeal based on the power of wild places and a clear explanation of the effect of their actions, visitors are more likely to make choices to leave less of an impact.

The technique was laid out in 1990 by Dr. George Wallace, a professor specializing in human dimensions of natural resources at Colorado State University. Through his research into both recreational impacts and behavioral science, Wallace observed a variety of law enforcement rangers in the field. He noted that those who incorporated an educational message into their interactions were more likely to successfully influence a visitor's outdoor ethic. It is from these observations and from subsequent training that ART evolved.

In order to effectively intercede when observing someone leaving an impact, it's important to think about motivation. Those who are visiting wild places do so because they feel there is something special about those places. They don't want to cause harm to a beautiful place;

largely, Wallace says, those who cause impacts do so because they are (a) unskilled; (b) uninformed; (c) careless; or (d) unintentional.

In such cases, if we can clearly explain the impact and the consequences of the impact, and help others understand the preferred alternative, we're likely to be successful.

Steps in the Technique

1. Start with small talk. It's important to remember we're all enjoying a beautiful place together, which means we start from common ground. *"Gosh, what a beautiful day! Is this your first visit to Pristine Lake?"*

2. Give an objective description of the behavior. *"I see a chipmunk over there with a piece of sandwich."*

3. Describe the consequences of that impact. *"When chipmunks get the reward of human food, it changes their behavior. They become aggressive and less able to forage naturally. Human food also can make animals sick. One of the things I've observed in my years of visiting Pristine Lake is that the chipmunks come closer and closer to the campsites—they've lost their natural fear of humans. The chipmunks have also started stealing from back-packs when they're left unattended."*

4. Give the preferred behavior/offer an alternative. *"One thing that really helps the chipmunks is when we're careful not to feed them, either intentionally or unintentionally. I really enjoy taking pictures of wildlife here, but I find the zoom on my phone usually lets me get a good shot without getting too close."*

It's a straightforward technique, applicable to any natural setting and any impact. And, it works! In 1998, Wallace did a follow-up study, working with rangers from eight different areas, looking at hundreds of interactions. In these interactions, when rangers used only ART, 77 percent were rated as very or moderately effective. But you don't have to believe Wallace: ADK's summit stewards use this technique all day, every day, to change visitor behaviors, and we've seen huge improvements in the health of the alpine zone in the last twenty years. Summit stewards have no authority to write tickets, so ART is the only tool at their disposal.

But simple does not necessarily mean easy. Even the rangers using ART in Wallace's study noted certain difficulties. First, these conversations are awkward (particularly when we don't wear an agency badge). The best way to overcome the awkwardness? Practice.

Second, these interactions take time and are most effective when we really understand the "why" behind the principle or regulation. Weak explanations of the consequence don't work, and it can be hard to have good, clear justification in the moment. If you visit an area regularly, you probably have an idea of the kinds of impacts you're likely to encounter. It really helps to take the time in advance to think about, or even research, information you can give so you're ready when the moment arises.

Using ART as an individual not charged with law enforcement, there are some things you can keep in mind to be effective:

- 1. Attitude is critically important.** Be confident, but remember that no one likes to be told what to do.
- 2. Use body language** to your advantage: standing shoulder to shoulder communicates to the other person that you're on the same side; standing face to face suggests conflict.
- 3. You may not see immediate behavior change,** and this is okay. Largely, by the time we're interjecting ourselves, the impact has already occurred, so we're trying to change behavior for the next time.
- 4. ART doesn't work in all situations.** Some impacts are caused by willful behavior, and in those circumstances, authority of the agency, such as law enforcement personnel, is most effective.

The next time you find yourself in that beautiful place, gritting your teeth over someone else's behavior, take a deep breath, look around you, and give the authority of the resource a try. After all, if not you, who?

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