

Wilderness Ethics Training Materials for ADK's Trailhead Stewardship Program¹

“Those of us with a stake in the future of wilderness must begin to develop...an agenda which will place a clear, strong, national focus on the question of the responsibility of the wilderness user to wilderness” –Paul Petzoldt

“In wildness is the preservation of the earth” –Henry David Thoreau

Definitions of Ethic

Ethic n. 1. The body of moral principles or values governing or distinctive of a particular culture or group.... 2. A complex of moral precepts held or rules of conduct followed by an individual. (Random House Dictionary, 1987)

Ethics are the “social approbation for right actions, social disapproval for wrong actions” –Aldo Leopold

How We Develop Ethics

For some people feelings and emotions can guide what they consider to be wrong or right, but education develops knowledge that can also affect our feelings on a topic.

Ethics evolve based on what is honored and practiced by a few people before eventually becoming public opinion and is affected by economic, political, religious and educational institutions and cultural systems.

Below are some of the reasons behind why and how we've developed our own set of ethics. You are encouraged to place them in order from most to least important for your own set of ethics but consider how different backgrounds might affect the order others could place these in.

1. I learned it through experience
2. It's the right thing to do
3. It's the law
4. My parents taught me that way
5. Peer pressure
6. I've always done it that way
7. My culture does it that way
8. It's the easiest thing to do

An ethic must answer the questions “What is the right thing to do?”

Ethics of Leave No Trace

¹ Buck Tilton & Leave No Trace Educational Review Committee, *Leave No Trace Master Educator Handbook*. Boulder, CO: Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, 2003. p 68-70

The actions that define the ethics reflected in Leave No Trace are not based on feelings alone, but on the evidence of scientific research. Science tells us that practicing the principles of Leave No Trace will answer the question “What is the right thing to do in order to act responsibly toward the land and all its inhabitants?”

It is also important to know that Leave No Trace acknowledges there is a spectrum of acceptable behavior while outdoors. It doesn’t matter where you fall on that spectrum but just that you are on it.

Learning and using Leave No Trace outdoor skills and ethics are essential to wilderness preservation. The front country outreach you provide as a Trailhead Steward offers a unique opportunity to contribute to the evolution of a wildland ethic. You can teach important skills that help preserve our wildlands.

Leave No Trace seeks an observable change in behavior due to internal motivation based on ethics.

No matter what their current habits, wilderness travelers and campers, for the most part, really want to do the “right” thing.

How to Teach in a Way that Instills Ethics

1. Establish a comfortable relationship through appropriate voice and body language and establish a common ground of interests or activities. That commonality is the base upon which we can build a new ethic.
2. Convince the public that you are there to help them, not dictate their actions. Deliver information in a non-judgmental way.
3. Emphasize why adhering to a specific guideline will protect their resources. Focusing on the resource will help the public embrace the ethic and pass it along to others.
4. Put Leave No Trace Principles in their real context. Be able to cite research, personal experiences and the higher philosophical goal of Leave No Trace.
5. Serve as a role model for inexperienced outdoor enthusiasts. When it is clear to the public that we really care, and that we follow the “rules,” it becomes easier for them to do the same.

Remember: Training + Motivation = Outdoor Ethic & Action

Now let’s put your Wilderness Ethics to the test! On the next page are a series of pictures showing a variety of different natural resource impacts. Go through each of them and consider exactly how the resource is being impacted and how it makes you feel. What are the implications to that particular resource and what can be done to correct the behavior.