
book review

Bruce Hampton and David Cole. 1988. *Soft paths: how to enjoy the wilderness without harming it*. Stackpole Books, Cameron and Kelker Streets, P.O. Box 1831, Harrisburg, PS 17105, 173 p., \$10.95.

Dramatic increases in wildland recreational use have led many park and wilderness managers to pose the question: Are we literally "loving" our wilderness to death? The impacts to vegetation, water quality and wildlife associated with this use has prompted many managers to implement regulations which directly or indirectly restrict the freedoms of wildland visitors. The NPS, in particular, has more restrictive visitor regulations than the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, or Fish and Wildlife Service, as shown by a 1980 survey of wilderness managers.

The stated philosophy of this book is that most

damage stems not from malice, but from lack of visitors' awareness of the consequences of their actions. Furthermore, most backcountry visitors are anxious to do the right thing and need only to be taught the appropriate minimum impact practices and when to use them. A monumental task indeed, but this book provides a wealth of information, practices, and insights that define and provide the basis for a wildland ethic.

Soft Paths was sponsored by the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), a private, nonprofit, educational corporation which offers wilderness skills and leadership courses. Bruce Hampton, senior staff instructor at NOLS, and Dr. David Cole, Research Biologist with the USFS Wilderness Research Unit, compiled and reevaluated the practices resulting from 23 years of NOLS backcountry experience. NOLS has long been a

recognized leader in the development and instruction of minimum impact camping practices. Cole, who has completed numerous recreational impact studies for NPS and USFS is a recognized authority on recreational impacts and their management.

The book describes the need for minimum impact practices, makes it clear that their adoption by backcountry visitors is critical, and acknowledges the complexity of the variables involved (soil, vegetation, wildlife, moisture, amount and types of uses, etc.)

The book covers backcountry travel, selecting and using a campsite, fires and stoves, and sanitation and waste disposal. The information in these chapters is organized and presented in separate sections relating to whether the visitor is in a core (moderate-heavy use) area of the backcountry or in a remote (low use) area.

Some information may strike some managers as inappropriate at first; e.g. innovative suggestions regarding appropriate methods for disposing of human waste in the backcountry. However, the scientific basis for the recommendations is given, in terms easily understood. An extensive bibliography of literature (primarily scientific) relating to minimum impact practices also is provided at the end of the book.

Particularly pleasing is the thorough treatment of minimum impact practices related to wildlife. The authors note that while the potential impact for each species varies, a general principle remains: respect their needs and minimize the disruption of their lives. (The authors also note the difficulties in applying this rule to mosquitoes).

The book also covers minimum impact practices in Special Environments, including separate chapters on deserts, rivers and lakes, coasts, alpine and arctic tundra, snow and ice, and bear country. Special environments imply special techniques. The authors caution that the basic practices presented in the first chapters may not be appropriate in all situations. What follows in these chapters are descriptions of these unique environments along with discussions of practices. Special topics commonly ignored in most minimum impact literature, such as travel in desert areas and across arctic tundra, are covered in considerable detail here.

Soft Paths is much more than a compilation of minimum impact practices. It differs from earlier works in its recognition and treatment of the complexity of this important topic. The wildland visitor is encouraged to exercise good judgment in applying knowledge and experience of minimum impact practices and the surrounding environment in efforts to reduce resource impacts. For rangers, resource managers, and interpreters with backcountry responsibilities this book is an invaluable reference. Many parks may wish to review and revise their existing backcountry regulations and minimum impact messages based on information in this book.

I would further suggest that the book would make an excellent addition on NPS visitor center shelves next to the trail guides and backcountry maps already being sold.

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