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Trail Etiquette 201

A new code for a complicated era

Mike Cherim



OUR NATURAL SPACES ARE LIMITED IN SIZE AND SCOPE. SO, INSTEAD OF getting away from it all as hikers used to be able to easily do, people are forced to share these locations, which leads to some bruised notions about how things should be, as well as a blight on the landscape in some spots. Some of our nation's most popular destinations are literally being overrun. And, unfortunately, not everyone understands that there are rules and expectations when visiting these places—that there are acceptable as well as unacceptable behaviors. A lot of it is common sense, but as my father once told me, “Common sense is uncommon.”

Hikers need to restore civility. Thanks to current events, many fresh minds who wouldn't ordinarily venture forth into our natural spaces seem to be turning out in numbers. Some of those who have frequented these places for ages don't like it, but hikers are generally a nice bunch of folks. We have to say, “Welcome—but let's talk about a few things before heading out.”

Etiquette is, by one definition, “the customary code of polite behavior in society or among members of a particular profession or group.” Trail etiquette takes this to the trails. I speak of hikers, but I'm considering walkers, hikers, backpackers, runners, bikers, or anyone partaking in any use authorized by the agency governing the land. Trail etiquette encompasses matters of safety as well as civility without ever forgetting or forgoing matters of environmental importance, too.

Safety First, Then the Environment

The customary code on trails is to not hike alone *if* you're hiking with others. In other words, if hiking as a group, go in together, stay together, and leave together. Even if spread out on a trail out of sight and out of earshot from one another, always be sure to stop at every trail junction, every potentially confusing section, and every river crossing. These places are where we need to be there for each other.

To deal with environmental concerns, follow the seven principles of Leave No Trace, which are listed on page 87. Simply by adopting these principles, hikers will find themselves more than halfway there in their mastery of trail etiquette. Adherence to these principles helps ensure our impact is limited.

When you encounter a group on the trail, step off the trail and let them pass. But if you're in a group too, negotiate. MIKE CHERIM

The first six principles deal with physical or environmental impacts, but by “impact,” I am referring to so much more than the physical and environmental concerns that come naturally to our minds.

But my main focus is on the seventh principle: *Be considerate of other visitors*. The seventh principle asks us to be nice.

Consideration may be given easily, at least for anyone with empathy. With empathy we stand in another’s shoes and can see, or at least imagine, the situations that demand some level of consideration.

1. **Music:** If it’s not your music, maybe not even the kind of music you like, should you be forced to listen to it against your will? With empathy, a negative reply is common sense. So, turn down your music to be barely discernible or, better yet, wear earbuds.
2. **Dogs:** Someone unnaturally fearful of dogs does not react well when you say, “He’s friendly.” The only adequate action is keeping your dog on a leash (not a long one) or your hand on the animal’s collar or harness. Give plenty of space.
3. **Smoke:** It doesn’t matter if it’s tobacco or marijuana smoke; hikers shouldn’t have to be subjected to it. To add, smoking may also pose a fire risk.
4. **Noise:** Like music, hikers may not want to partake in the conversations of others. If there are people about, keep noise levels low. Some relish the stark silence. Even if you don’t, empathy again rules the day.
5. **Space:** Crowding is sometimes unwelcome. It often comes with some of the other negatives described earlier. Nowadays, with terms like *social distancing* being part of the world lexicon, space is even more valuable than ever.
6. **Right-of-way:** The person hiking uphill has the right-of-way on trails. The primary reason for this is that hikers look down, so naturally the descending person has much greater oversight and can react more quickly. This rule may be modified in the case of larger groups where the larger group should allow the smaller party the right-of-way. But more on this later.
7. **Litter:** The general rule in the mountains is to carry out what you carry in. Even if it’s natural and biodegradable, if it’s not from there, it can’t stay there. This even includes toilet paper.
8. **Minimize:** Your presence must stay small. Keeping group sizes down, for example, is a huge step in the right direction. Ten people,

including leaders—a federal Wilderness mandate—is a good rule-of-thumb number anywhere you hike.

Following these rules will ensure that the seventh principle is being respected and that other visitors are met with consideration. And that so are you.

That is trail etiquette. It's easy. Or at least that *was* trail etiquette. It *was* easy. Nowadays—meaning post-2020—it's no longer as simple or as straightforward as it once was.

Post-COVID-19

The new coronavirus (SARS-Co-V-2) of 2019 has changed things, requiring modification to the rules of the trail. One day, some time ago, if we encountered another on the trail we'd say, "Hello!" Not so often today. The simple and once harmless passing of another was never as big a deal as it is today. To some, the fear of dying or killing another is cramping their usual style. To others, the fear of being judged is cramping theirs. And of course, there are those who simply do not believe the science or do not care.

I don't point fingers or deny facts. I follow the science. Understanding *why* being concerned about encountering another person on the trail in these times is really important. It's challenging enough, after all, to find ourselves wary of something we cannot see, but choosing to be ignorant about it seems a bit too blissful or defiant.

Fomite transfer, meaning the transfer of viral particles from surfaces to your hands, then from your hands onto the mucous membranes of your eyes, for example, is still possible, but our understanding of this threat has matured and is now less of a concern. Scientists now know that the main threat with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), at least as of this writing, is that it is highly communicable primarily by way of respiratory droplets and even finer respiratory aerosols.

Think of this analogy: A sneeze will produce droplets ranging in size from actual "chunks" of spittle you can plainly see to a very fine mist that will hang in the air for a bit. And aerosols are even smaller. To visualize the aerosols, think of what happens when you can see your breath as you exhale in the winter. How it swirls and spreads and eventually dissipates, but you can see it for as long as the temperature differential remains. These aerosols can float in still air for quite some time, unseen. They are responsible for the majority

of COVID-19's spread. Another way to imagine how aerosols linger is to remember a time you passed someone who wore too much cologne. The smell remains in the air for quite some time. Even in the breezy outdoors we understand the threat. We must address or at least understand that danger.

Moving Forward: How to Pass

So, with all of this information, we hikers realize that one of the most challenging situations we may encounter is that once-innocent act of passing each other. We addressed the basic rules, and they are now more important than ever thanks to the threat of disease. Some things have changed, though. What was once more cut-and-dried is now something that requires actual thought. Here are some rules of thumb:

- If you're going up and are passing someone else who is also going up, you need to speak up, clear your throat, or somehow communicate your presence. The rest should happen naturally. If it doesn't, then say something. Ask if you may pass. Pick a point to pass where distancing can be maintained or don your mask. If you're waiting for this passing point to appear, be patient and maintain some distance (well more than six feet) from the other party in front of you.
- If you're going up and encountering a descender, hopefully that hiker will have already seen you and begun stepping aside. Just a year and a half ago, it used to be common for an ascending party who wanted to take a break to give way to the people coming down, despite the "rules." "No, you go," they'd offer. Nowadays, the first consideration is how we can easily keep distance from each other. Everyone must go into this caring about each other's well-being, for starters, and then balancing the logistics of moving away. It is more important than ever to acknowledge the rules but also to start negotiations of sorts. Ask questions like, "Who can get off-trail while also remaining on durable surfaces?" This is key now that we can no longer safely pass as closely as we once could.
- If they aren't yielding to you, however, you may have to take steps on your own or ask for a little space. Coordinate and compromise. If they don't give you the right-of-way, it's because they don't know, forgot, or simply don't care. Some of this you can change through simple communication. Because we now live with COVID-19, try to be even more cooperative in these efforts to distance.

- If you're going down, give ascending hikers the right-of-way if at all possible. If you're paying attention you will see them well in advance. Many ascending hikers will voluntarily yield so as to break briefly, but let this choice be theirs. The COVID-19 complication in this case is that space is now needed, so being proactive and considerate is more important than ever.
- If you're going down and want to pass another descender (trail runners face this challenge all the time), do the same thing you'd do if you were going up and passing another ascender. Try to be patient with the other people. Patience and consideration will make it easier to respect the environment by helping us limit our impact.
- Finally, consider groups. Here, the rules may be upended. Large groups should yield to individuals, taking upon themselves more responsibility for these elements of trail etiquette. That said, in the COVID-19 era,

Leave No Trace

Mike Cherim summarizes the principles of Leave No Trace, the program of the Center for Outdoor Ethics.

- **Plan ahead and prepare.** In a nutshell, this principle ensures that you don't break the next one by having to do something unplanned or unexpected.
- **Travel and camp on durable surfaces.** Stick to trails, "rock-hop" from rock to rock or root to root, and camp where allowed. Stay off the mosses, lichens, and soft soils.
- **Dispose of waste properly.** Learn how to do your business in the woods, how to bury your feces, how to disperse your urine and toothpaste, and how to pack out the rest.
- **Leave what you find.** Preserve natural and historic treasures for others to enjoy. In other words, take only photos, leave only footprints (barely).
- **Minimize campfire impacts.** Have fires only when appropriate, only where allowed, and only if you are ready to fully manage them from ignition to extinguishment.
- **Respect wildlife.** Do not feed, chase, or bother any animals you may encounter, and manage your food and food wastes properly to mitigate conflicts with the wild.
- **Be considerate of other visitors.** Be nice. This is the important one in the context of trail etiquette.

getting a larger group off-trail far enough to allow for an individual to pass with sufficient space can be very challenging. In such cases, the individual compromising may be the most logistically sound option. If it is possible to get the larger group off-trail, do be sure to stick to one side or the other. Don't create a gauntlet.

Whether going up or down, this whole business of moving aside is hard. Many trails are inherently tight to begin with. The fact is, sometimes getting off-trail is very difficult because of environmental concerns. This can be the case in the winter, but less so. The delicate surfaces we protected during the growing season are safely frozen, buried under several feet of snow. This can make things easier on one hand, but getting off the packed winter trail can be dangerous what with spruce traps and other trailside threats. To step off-trail and disappear from view is actually possible.

These situations aside, the toughest negotiation will be with the person who is indifferent to you or your concerns. Whether they believe or don't believe, care or don't care, it doesn't matter; the responsibility for your safety in such cases is going to fall on your shoulders. If you take this seriously and choose to act in a way that minimizes risk to yourself and others, there will be times when this action will be yours and yours alone. But don't fret. Although some minds cannot and will not be changed, your actions will still benefit everyone.

I would never tell anyone to stay home. Hiking and enjoying natural spaces are needs for many people, and research has proven that getting out there helps our mental and physical well-being. Trying to deny these spaces to others would be selfish. Since we really do need to share, people must treat each other with kindness, respect, empathy, and consideration. We must consider the environment and our impact on it at all times. With these actions, humanity moves forward.

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