Mind Your Waste

Dealing with your 'leftovers'

Sheet O.6

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10p (where sold)

If you listened to some politicians we might believe that waste is inevitable – some consider it so inevitable that they look upon it as an energy resource! In fact, waste is just something that has no apparent use and so we discard it to avoid lugging it around with us. When camping or backpacking we can take very simple steps to either avoid the need to dispose of waste, or deal with it in a way that causes no harm.

The first principle

There is a very simple way to avoid the need to leave waste behind you after camping, or as you travel: *don't take it with you!*

Waste isn't just a problem because of needing to get rid of it – often it takes more energy, releases more carbon emissions, and creates more pollution to manufacture something we dispose of than the impact created by disposing of it (this is the core of the argument against waste incineration – it doesn't solve the real problem of resource wastage, and in fact adds to the problem by destroying useful materials).

The problem of waste is, in most cases, a matter of choice: If I buy something from a shop and don't accept it in a plastic bag, I don't have to get rid of the bag; if you buy raw ingredients and take half an hour extra to cook a meal you don't have waste boxes, bags and tins to dispose of; if you reuse bags or boxes for other purposes then you save resources and avoid waste. How we manage waste outdoors is therefore a matter of choice, but it's not a “free” choice. In order to use less materials we have to avoid consuming in patterns that are wasteful and these patterns of activity require us to have the skills to cook, mend, sew or be creative in the way in which we utilise the things we own.

Everything we consume has an impact upon the environment; the critical issue is that we minimise the impact or, if we can't easily minimise the impact, do something different to achieve a similar result; if in doubt, don't do it at all.

Food

Food is a significant contributor to waste production in the home. If you look in the bins around camp sites, food preparation is the principal constituent of the waste produced when camping.

The limitations of camping mean that preparing and cooking food is more difficult compared to the options in the home, and so it's very easy to accept the tinned, freeze-dried, foil-packed ready-meals that are popular with campers. In reality what you are doing to obtain this convenience is paying more money, and having a far great impact upon the environment as a result. To buy packaged meals not only uses more resources to make them compared to raw ingredients, but you have to work more, and have a greater impact due to economic activity, in order to pay the extra money for those goods.

If you don't cook food from raw ingredients for most of your meals then, before you go camping, you need to practice cooking at home. Unless you become “fluent” in the language of food, and are able to understand how we can take different basic ingredients and turn them into different meals, then it's going to be quite difficult to camp without creating waste materials (cooking and food is something that the Free Range Network are beginning to develop new materials on – see the food series sheets and the *'liberation gastronomy'* pages).

Provided that you practice the skills, and are able to utilise a restricted range of cooking equipment in different ways, there is no reason why much of the cooking that you carry out in your kitchen can't be carried out in the middle of a field (see unit 5, *Food*). Utilising fire, and the earth, you can boil, stew, bake, fry, steam and roast. The greater difficulty is the fact that many people don't cook food from raw ingredients at home, and so the obstacle that we need to overcome to learn cooking outdoors is the general lack of cooking skills rather than the techniques to adapt home cooking to the outdoor environment. You don't need to be an expert chef or produce “beautiful” food – just edible food will do. The important thing is that you have an understanding of the basic cooking skills (preparing raw ingredients, and the above mentioned boiling, stewing, baking, frying, steaming and roasting) so that you can adapt these methods to the restrictions of cooking outdoors.

Stuff

After food the next problematic area is the other 'stuff' that we consume and dispose of – snack packaging, newspapers, used batteries, and the other over-packaged and non-reusable materials that we generate each day. For much of this stuff there's only one viable option – ***bin it!***

Of course, if cycling or backpacking,

much of this stuff is 'dead weight' – *if you're going to throw it away then why take it along?* For this reason you must be very choosy about what you take, try to find alternatives which don't require you to dispose of any waste materials, or if necessary re-pack the items into reusable containers or types of packaging that can be disposed of easily (see 'camp fires').

Ideally you shouldn't be producing a lot waste whilst camping. Also, if you're trying to learn the skills of simple, low impact living then if you're leaving a trail of waste behind you you clearly doing something wrong (*go back, think about it and try again!*).

Camp fires and composting

The simple solution to waste is burn it, but the basic law of nature – *The Law of the Conservation of Matter and Energy* – states that we can't actually get rid of anything and all we do is change its form. This means that the materials that you throw away into the environment might rot, but anything non-organic (e.g. tin foil) will just stay there... forever!

This is most relevant to the simplest way of disposing of problematic wastes whilst camping – *camp fires*. It might seem easy to just throw it in the fire but all you're doing is converting some of the materials into gas, small particles of pollution (smoke) and ash – and problematically the action of burning can take relatively innocuous compounds like plastic and turn them into more toxic compounds in the smoke and ash produced by the fire (e.g. a whole group of toxins called the 'products of incomplete combustion').

The basic rule is that if it didn't come from a plant then don't burn it. For example; card or paper comes from plant fibre and is OK to burn, but composite food packaging (e.g., Tetrapak™) isn't.

The other disposal option we can use outdoors is composting. Food waste can be disposed of easily because it rots, but as it often looks unsightly it's better to scrape back some earth and bury it, or throw it over a very wide area to disperse the impact.

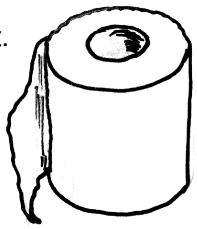
One of the problematic items people produce are tea bags. The tannin in the tea stops the tea bag rotting quickly (herb tea doesn't have the same difficulty in rotting, but they still look unsightly). For this reason, whilst it's OK to throw tea leaves over a hedge to disperse the particles, it's better to burn tea bags or bury them.

The problem of dealing with your waste outdoors will hopefully teach you a skill that we must develop in our everyday lives: ***we have to 'mind' our waste*** *– we have to think about what it is, what has been put into making it, and what the impacts of disposing of it are, before we let it leave our hands*. The pressures and pace of everyday life can make that a difficult skill to have the time to learn – outdoors you will hopefully have the time to work on this skill.

Human waste

There is one obvious waste problem that you have to deal with outdoors – your bodily products. In some ways this is quite easy to deal with, and often the problem is finding a private spot to carry out the act rather than deal with the produce responsibly.

Pee isn't a problem. It just soaks away, and the volumes produced by one or two people are not going to have a significant impact. Poo is a bigger problem. On soft ground you can dig a shallow (10cm/4") scrape with your heel, make your deposit, and then cover it over again. On hard ground you might have to use a trowel to dig a shallow hole. The main benefit of this is that it stops anyone who follows you treading in it. However the biggest problem is the toilet paper. The peculiarities of tissue paper mean that it doesn't rot quickly. For this reason you should also bury the toilet paper, or burn it on a camp fire.



Nappies and sanitary towels are another difficulty. The disposable products contain plastics, and the paper has also been treated with compounds that make it rot very slowly. The better option is to buy 'ecological' products that contain no plastics, just plant fibre, so that they can be burnt on a camp fire or buried in a deep (30cm/1 foot) hole. The best option are reusable products that contain a disposable paper/cotton liner that can be burnt or buried.

Larger groups

The real waste problems arise when you have larger groups of people, either static camping or travelling. The food and human wastes from one or two people are easily disposed of without creating any obvious impacts. But the waste produced by four or five people has to be spread over a much larger area in order to avoid it building up in quantities where it smells or pollutes as it rots down.

Where larger groups are travelling together you have two options: you can split up over a wide area in order to lessen the impact of having everyone in one place; or you can dig a very deep hole (more than 1 metre/3 feet) and bury the food waste and human waste in the same hole. However, if you adopt the latter approach this can represent a large point source of pollution, and so you have to take care to ensure that the leaching/leaking fluids from your waste don't pollute nearby watercourses (tip: if you dig a hole and it fills with water, go somewhere else!). Also, to prevent pollution, you should dig a hole in a different location each day.

In lowland areas digging holes isn't too difficult. In mountain areas the lack of deep soil make easy disposal more difficult. You shouldn't bury waste in saturated or peaty ground – it won't rot very quickly. In these situations the best option is to find some scree or loose rocks, excavate a shallow trench for your waste and then cover it with rocks when you leave.

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