

When nature calls in the Tetons, don't follow your instincts

Reporter's Notebook
by Jon Waldman

GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK, Wyo. (11,600') — With the Middle Teton Glacier glistening on one side, the jagged West Face of the Grand Teton looming above on the other, and most of eastern Idaho spread out like a tablecloth far below, the Lower Saddle is a breathtaking place.

But something else is taking my breath away. On the other side of an enormous boulder, perched precariously on the ridge, sits an open-air wooden outhouse. Even in the swirling wind, its odor is unmistakable.

The Grand Teton attracts 4,000 climbers a year, most of whom hike through the Lower Saddle on their way up and back. Because it usually takes two days to ascend the 13,771-foot peak, a pause here for nature's call is almost inevitable. With all the rock, though, there are only so many places to dig a proper cat-hole, and human waste doesn't decay in the cold alpine tundra. So, during an average summer, the toilet's 50-gallon bucket fills up in only a week's time.

Without the toilet, the Lower Saddle would resemble an open sewer. But the toilet has created problems, aside from the stench. As one park ranger put it, "It's obnoxious, expensive and dangerous." First, the structure sits boldly in the middle of protected wilderness. Then there's the dreadful task of emptying it, which requires rangers to wrestle the 50-gallon bucket under a hovering helicopter before it's flown away. This task, which costs the Park Service \$10,000 a year, is risky, and at times revolting. Rangers have been soiled by the bucket's contents.

So officials at Grand Teton National Park have adopted a new, safer and cheaper solution to the backcountry excrement problem: the poop bag. You carry it in, do your business in it, seal it up tight, carry it back out of the park, and throw it away in a trashcan. And poop bags aren't popular only here: They're now a key element of wilderness management plans in many high-use areas across the West.

Learning the lost art

Over the last quarter of a century, as outdoor recreation has grown exponentially, so has human waste. As more climbers ventured up Yosemite's El



WHAT GOES IN, MUST COME OUT: Ranger Dan Burgette below the summit of Grand Teton (Jon Waldman photo)

Capitan, an average three-day haul, the base of the cliff began to reek, because climbers just pooped off the wall. On the Colorado River, once-pristine campsites lost their pristine quality as boatloads of passengers disembarked in the same few spots. The pollution piled up on small beaches on Lake Powell, such as Lone Rock Beach, which receives 100,000 visitors a year (*HCN*, 5/26/97).

Public awareness of the problem has grown, thanks in part to the book *How to Shit in the Woods* by veteran river guide Kathleen Meyer. Since its first publication in 1989, the book, translated into seven languages, has sold over 1.5 million copies (with a special, less-offensive version for folks in the Bible Belt). Her book has taught backcountry visitors how deep to dig a cat-hole, how far to travel from a stream, and with what to wipe.

But, it takes time to teach these tricks. "If you go to high-use areas on public lands, what you see would indicate that these things are not obvious to people," says Michael Cheek, the Leave No Trace program coordinator at the National Outdoor Leadership School in Lander, Wyo. "It's not second nature." Hence, the many backcountry latrines, like the one on the Lower Saddle.

The original Lower Saddle toilet, built 25 years ago, was protected by a rock wall, which made it difficult for the helicopter to hover over it in squirrely winds. To reduce the need for the helicopter, park rangers installed a solar composting toilet. Maintaining the new beast proved even more challenging, though, since its contents had to be stirred and smeared onto trays.

"It was a real nightmare," says Dan Burgette, a 20-year veteran climbing ranger who arrives at the Lower Saddle just as dusk is settling in and the wind is picking up. "So we were looking for a better system."

Leaving no trace

After hearing that poop bags were working well in Utah's Zion National Park, Burgette recommended that Grand Teton consider them. The trial began this summer.

The bags are bombproof. Inside the outer plastic bag, which reads, "where to go when there's nowhere to go," there's a large zip-locked bag, made of shiny silver Mylar. Inside it, there's another — larger — plastic liner bag, a little rolled-up wad of toilet paper, and a small antibacterial wipe. The whole package smells unpleasantly sterile, like airport bathroom disinfectant. Each poop bag costs the park \$1.68.

But like the toilet, the poop bag has its critics. Wesley Bunch, a climbing guide for Exum Mountain Guides, which leads about half of the people who climb the Grand Teton, would like to see a biodegradable alternative. "They just go to the landfill and sit there — they don't decay."

"Either you remove human waste, or you reduce the amount of human use," responds Burgette. "We're trying to find that balance."

Other parks have made the same choice. Yosemite climbers are now required to use "poop tubes," three-inch PVC pipes capped on both ends. On Oregon's Mount Hood, climbers are asked to use a "blue bag." On the Colorado River, boaters bring a portable metal box.

And rangers hand out poop bags in the Grand Canyon, Mount Shasta, Utah's Pariah Canyon and Washington's Mount Rainier. And though California's Mount Whitney has a toilet on the summit, climbers ascending the "mountaineer route" use poop bags.

At Grand Teton National Park, the poop bags have proven to be a success. So far this summer, about 90 percent of visitors have opted to use the bags, which are handed out when visitors get their backcountry permits. In early August, three weeks after my visit, rangers flew out the Lower Saddle's infamous toilet, once and for all.

"It's no fun dealing with other people's crap," says George Montopoli, a climbing ranger who was there to see the toilet off. "Especially at that magnitude."

Burgette is pleased the poop bag program is working so well. "Wilderness wins this one," he says. "Everyone's doing their own small part." ■

Jon Waldman just completed an internship at *High Country News*.

