



CHAPTER 1

Before You Take the First Step

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”

—Lao Tzu

While Lao Tzu, the influential thinker and proponent of the Chinese mystic tradition Taoism, hits the proverbial bull’s-eye with most of his perceptive writings, we wouldn’t recommend that you hire him as your guide for a backcountry trip. Oh, sure, he’d be great around the campfire for talks about philosophy and the meaning of life, but we’re not sure he would have brought the right map or thought much about how many calories each person should have in his or her provisions. So instead, we might say, “A journey of a thousand miles begins a couple of months before the first step.”

The Camper’s Guide is all about what happens *before* and *after* your trip, as well as what happens while you’re in beautiful wild country.



Figure 1.1

**An interesting conversationalist?
Certainly—but we don’t recommend hiring
Lao Tzu as a backcountry guide!**

WHY ARE PEOPLE GOING TO WILD PLACES LIKE NEVER BEFORE?

It seems like everyone’s doing it. Now as never before, people stream to National Parks, forests, wilderness areas, and almost any undeveloped expanse of public land to travel, explore, and recreate. The Outdoor Industry Association reports especially large increases in participation in kayaking, canoeing, trail running, cross-country skiing, and snowshoeing. Further, nearly two-thirds of Americans over age 16 participate in human-powered outdoor recreation, representing more than 140 million people.¹ What brings recreation participants into wild places from the towns, suburbs, and urban centers? Why have so many people caught the wilderness bug?

We’ve found that people go “wild” for a number of reasons. Many simply want to escape from the humdrum routines and hassles of complex civilized life. Cynics say that campers merely exchange them for the humdrum routines and hassles of wet socks, mosquitoes, and camp-cooked macaroni and cheese. Go figure!

Others look to the wilderness for physical challenge and immersion in a natural setting. Some look to study nature, reach stunning vistas in remote locations, explore the lesser-known corners of the country, and test sporting skills against the challenges of the wilderness. Some people look for solitude, others for quality social experiences with family and friends. The list goes on and on.

People have a wide spectrum of goals and activities. Not all people can get the “wilderness experience” that they want from a given outdoor setting. We find that this range of goals

and preferences is best met in a variety of areas with vastly different characteristics. As mountaineer and wilderness educator Paul Petzoldt might say, wilderness is like love; it means different things to different people.

WHAT DOES WILDERNESS MEAN TO YOU?

Ask a dozen people to define wilderness and you will probably get two dozen answers. What people look for in a wilderness experience is extremely personal. That's what makes wilderness so special. To some people, wilderness is Central Park or the state campground in the mountains. To others, true wilderness is the Brooks Range in Alaska.

When we think of wilderness, we think of a description of certain conditions. People often use terms like "naturalness," "minimum signs of human presence," "solitude," "undeveloped," "beautiful," "allowing for escape," "self-powered travel," and "primitive conditions." Wilderness historian Roderick Nash suggests that wilderness lies along "a spectrum of conditions or environments ranging from the purely wild on one end to the purely civilized on the other."²

The idea of a spectrum (Figure 1.2) makes sense to us. It allows for people to have a range of outdoor experiences in a variety of environments. "Wilderness" becomes a relative term, depending on the available land resource and the mindset of the outdoor person. In the range of wilderness conditions, some are more "pure" than others. Throughout this book we use the term "wilderness" generally to describe the range of outdoor experiences at the "purely wild" end of the outdoor spectrum. We use the term "backcountry" synonymously.

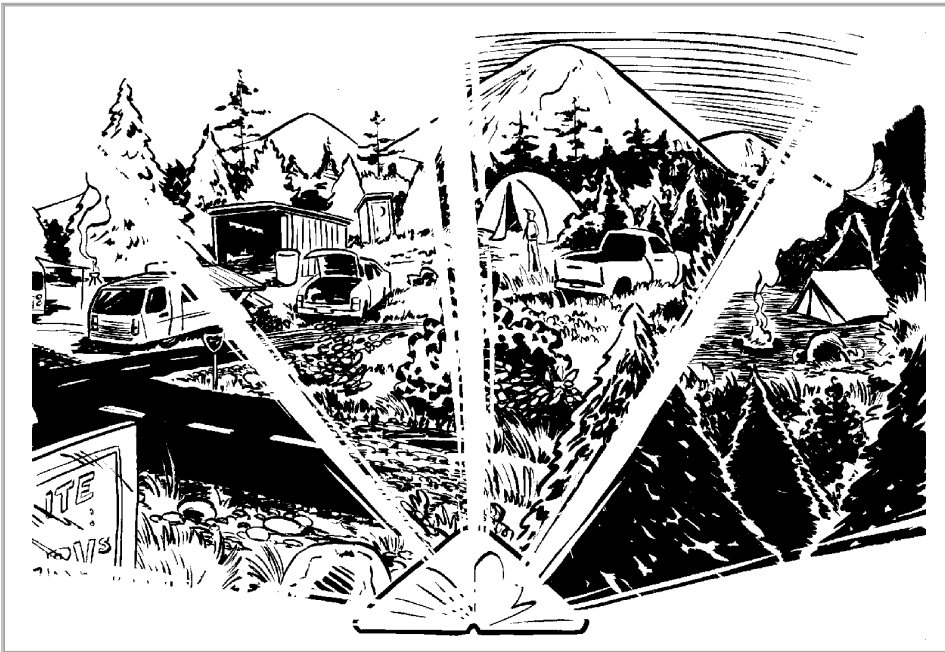


Figure 1.2
The Wilderness Spectrum

Sometimes it is easier to define what wilderness is not, rather than what it is. Wilderness is not about large numbers of people. By and large, it is not about those activities that can be done in non-wilderness settings. For example, dirt-bike travel, large-group picnics, and rowdy parties can all occur in non-wilderness settings. You don't need to be 7 miles back in the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana to throw a graduation party. These activities can and should take place closer to civilization, in less wild, yet still substantially natural areas.

Even though wilderness is not about large numbers of people, we think people naturally belong in wilderness settings, as long as their presence does not adversely alter natural conditions. We will see, however, that people often do have a negative impact on natural conditions in wild areas. Our challenge is to learn to minimize this often unintentional environmental impact.



Figure 1.3

As the number of human visitors to the backcountry increases, so too do their effects on the wilderness.

WHAT'S HAPPENING TO OUR WILDERNESS AREAS?

A cursory tour through many of our national and state parks reveals a “natural” landscape severely affected by the presence of humans and their play. Parking lots, eroded trails, flattened campsites that spread from year to year, braided trails that run everywhere and nowhere, garbage, dependent wildlife, cut trees, filthy fireplaces, human waste, overflowing outhouses, and scores of other effects mar the beauty and scar the ecosystems in our wild places.

Some people are sickened by the carnage, while others scarcely observe that it exists. Of this last group of outdoor people, many have never known an alternative and simply don't realize that their actions cause the aesthetic and ecological consequences that they do. However, most people at some level recognize the increasing shabbiness of overused areas.

In addition to scars on the land, outdoor people affect each other and themselves through unsafe practices. Misinterpreted maps and compasses lead many people into danger and exposure in rugged country. Lack of appropriate clothing leads to great discomfort or dangerous hypothermia for campers in weather both foul and fair. Stove flare-ups cause a great many burns in backcountry campsites. The underlying source of all of these unfortunate mishaps is a lack of outdoor judgment in backcountry travelers. People just seem to make the wrong decisions at the wrong time or make good decisions far too late.

How can you avoid these hazards of life in the wild? Reading this book is one small, but important step in developing solid outdoor skills and judgment. It contains the distillation of over 50 years of the authors' combined backcountry expedition leadership experience in areas ranging from the Adirondack Mountains of New York to the desert southwest to Denali in Alaska. This book offers information essential for safe, environmentally sound, and enjoyable backcountry travel for people pursuing everything from overnight trips to monthlong expeditions.



WHO, ME, AN OUTDOOR LEADER?

Many of the people who pick up this book have absolutely no aspirations to lead anybody anywhere, especially into the wild outdoors. They may think, “What is the one thing I can do to ruin both my experience and that of people around me? Answer: Try to be the leader.” Most people go to the outdoors for relaxation, challenge, fun, and natural beauty. They may think leadership is for the military, the Boy and Girl Scouts, or for marching bands.

In the following pages, you’ll find that leadership doesn’t have to be “Leadership” and that you don’t have to deliver “Win One for the Gipper” speeches or bark orders like Napoleon on your next camping trip. You’ll also find that safe, enjoyable outdoor experiences require leadership in the form of skills, knowledge, and working with your own as well as other campers’ emotions and preferences.

SAFETY, THE ENVIRONMENT, COMFORT: THE BIG THREE

The Camper’s Guide’s subtitle, “Finding safe, nature-friendly, and comfortable passage through wild places,” states the three major themes that run through each chapter of this book. We call these our three priorities when it comes to making decisions, both in the backcountry and when planning the trip. For that matter, the “Big Three” priorities come into play when you are standing in the sporting goods store or supermarket trying to make decisions about what to buy for your trip.

Safety

Our first priority, safety, makes everything else possible in the backcountry. We’re not suggesting that you strive to eliminate risk and challenge from your outings; in fact, risk and challenge are two of the most attractive qualities that the backcountry offers for many people. We do suggest that you plan for risk and challenge within a framework of safety and risk management. You may find that planning your trip well allows you to have more challenge *and* more safety.

Planning a safe trip, using safe equipment, and making safe leadership decisions along the trail or stream allow you and the people around you to experience the beauty and rigor of the outdoors as you planned and wished to. Preventing emergencies by reducing or eliminating risk minimizes the chances that your trip will be shortened or altered by illness, injury, or poor decisions. You’ll find out how safety plays into every aspect of trip planning and activities once you’re in the woods.

The Environment

As members of the increasingly large wave of recreators in beautiful undeveloped places, it has become critically important for each one of us to consider the effect our actions and choices have on the natural systems around us, especially in delicate and highly used backcountry destinations. You will learn how to shape your practices to minimize the impact your presence has on ecosystems and how to become as unobtrusive as possible during your stay in the wild outdoors. Most people find that learning these simple techniques actually adds to the pleasure of their experience in the outdoors, since they have a feeling of responsibility and service that comes with ethical camping practices.

Comfort

Only after the first two priorities are met can we focus on comfort. We want you to come back to the outdoors once you get home again. We don’t want campers to be so exhausted and uncomfortable from their outdoor adventures that they (or their children) vow never to leave their recliners and home theater systems. We want people to say “No!” to virtual reality and “Yes!” to actual reality! One way we can make sure people and their families and friends return to the wild outdoors time and time again is to make outdoor living comfortable. You don’t need to prove that you can survive for a week by sucking on pebbles, unless you’re trying to live out a Jack London fantasy. (In that case, more power to you, and give this book to your neighbor!) Camping and outdoor travel don’t need to be ordeals. With modern fabrics, packs, boots, and other products, we can live in the sun, rain, wind, and cold with relative comfort. Why not use your information and resources to help you have a good time?

INSIDE THE CAMPER'S GUIDE

As we mentioned in the introduction, *The Camper's Guide* is different. Instead of page after page of facts and testimonials from the dusty corridors of the authors' memories, we present important camping concepts in ways that the reader may find fun, challenging, and vivid. We use stories and characters. Our characters are meant to be symbolic or representative of many outdoor campers and adventurers and the struggles and challenges they go through in planning and participating in outdoor camping trips. We hope you find these people interesting, frustrating, and most of all, stimulating to the imagination! The bottom line is that we want you to think about the concepts in this book in an active and realistic way.

Who Are the Stumps?

We'd like to introduce our literary family, the Stumps, who will pop up from time to time in *The Camper's Guide*. The Stumps are a "normal" American family with standard family traits. Forrest is the father, who thinks of himself as benevolent dictator, exasperated coach, overworked referee, and family doormat. He is profoundly excited about camping and often tells stories about the wide-ranging Stump family and its famous (and not-so-famous) relatives. Holly, the mother, offers a realistic and gentle counterpoint to the sometimes hectic family scene. Woody, the oldest child at 18, loves the "high adrenaline" side of outdoor pursuits and is hard at work stockpiling a full array of high-technology gear. Willow, 16, and Moss, 12, are the sometimes loving daughter and son who have an ambivalent attitude toward family camping. Together, the Stump family and the menagerie of Stump relatives illustrate many of the camping concepts throughout *The Camper's Guide*.



Figure 1.4

Introducing the Stumps: Holly, Forrest, Moss, Willow, Woody, and Friend.

Introducing the Muskrat Pack

We will also describe a group of adults who have loosely organized a social paddling club they call the "Muskrat Pack," after the funny little rodents that they encounter on certain slow-moving rivers. As a group of adult peers, the Muskrat Pack has different needs and issues from the Stumps. They interact differently, plan trips differently, and have had many experiences outside of their group.

The extraordinary thing about the Muskrat Pack is that *you* are a member! We decided to write you, the reader, into the action. We have given you a part, along with a job and certain abilities and limitations. We did this to connect both with adult outdoor people and people new to camping. Any questions? Well, read on. . .

You and three friends from Wynotgota College, Juan, Anne, and Stella, created an informal paddling club, the Muskrat Pack, several years after graduation. Most of the Muskrat Pack's activity in *The Camper's Guide* revolves around planning for a late spring canoe trip in the Drifting Paddle National Canoe Area. Anne is your best paddler. In the winter she's a ski instructor at Killington, Vermont, and during the rest of the year she is a rafting guide in West Virginia. She's also a certified American Canoe Association white-water canoe instructor. Juan, a Pittsburgh marketing executive for Heinz, Inc., is looking for the 58th variety. He is the only person in the group who has been to the Drifting Paddle Canoe Area, having canoed there a few years ago. Stella is a seventh-grade biology teacher from Mystic, Connecticut. Stella has great camping skills, and last summer she took a National Outdoor Leadership School course in which she backpacked for a month and learned camping and adventure skills in Wyoming.

You, however, have never gone camping in your life. You're the victim of peer pressure—Juan called you up and recruited you to go on your first overnight trip. Maybe that's why you're reading this book! You do, however, have the most experience working with groups of people from your job as assistant director of the Butternut Substance Abuse Center in Big Boulder, Arkansas. You're anticipating the trip, perhaps with a bit of trepidation, but you trust that your friends know what they're doing and expect to learn a great deal about camping and outdoor travel.

LET'S GO! TAKING THE FIRST STEP

At this point, we've presented our wilderness philosophy and our priorities for planning and participating in great outdoor trips and have introduced some of the characters who will accompany you through *The Camper's Guide*. You will also encounter various tips that underscore and highlight important bits of information. In other words, we've laid the groundwork for your "journey" through this book. You're now ready to take the first step in your thousand-mile journey. Have fun!

Notes

¹ Outdoor Industry Association. (2004). *Outdoor Recreation Participation Study for the United States* (6th ed.). Boulder, CO: Outdoor Industry Association.

²Nash, R. (1982). *Wilderness and the American Mind* (3rd ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 6.



Figure 1.5
The Muskrat Pack—you're about to embark on a wilderness adventure!