PLANT LIFE COLUMN

HIKING

Cooler weather is ideal for getting outside. Local parks and natural areas offer a variety of opportunities for camping, walking, riding or hiking and enjoying the woods.

Whether you enjoy the outdoors for nature study, bird watching, fishing, hunting, exercise or serenity, it is important to leave as little evidence of your visit so others after you have the same wonderful experience. "Take only memories and pictures; leave only footprints" are messages followed by many outdoor enthusiasts.

Leave No Trace, Inc. is a national non-profit organization based out of Boulder, Colorado. It is dedicated to promoting outdoor recreation through education, research and partnerships. Check out their website. Through a partnership with Subaru, members can save up to $3000 on a lease or purchase.

Leave No Trace messages promote outdoor ethics through several simple principles.

Plan ahead and prepare. Get information ahead of time on the area you will visit. Contacts for Osceola County parks and local Wildlife Management Areas are available online at (Click here) or call the Osceola County Extension Office at our new phone number 321-697-3000. Florida State Park information is available here.

You also want to be prepared for weather changes and emergencies. Be aware that cell phones may not work in all areas. Be sure someone else knows where you plan to go and when you expect to be back. Take plenty of water to drink. When hiking or camping, repackage food to minimize packaging and reduce waste. Take a map and compass if you are not familiar with the area.

- Travel and camp on durable surfaces. Use established trails and campsites when possible to minimize impact. Camp at least 200 feet from lakes or creeks. Altering a site should not be necessary.
- Dispose of waste properly. Pack it in and pack it out. I am amazed to see litter in the woods after years of advertising and environmental awareness campaigns. If it fits in the vehicle on the trip in, it will fit on the way out. Take trash bags with you and bring out litter you encounter along the way. Even left over food should be packed out to avoid feeding wildlife and creating problems. Use public restrooms when possible, but sometimes there are not facilities. Dig a "cathole" about 6 to 8 inches deep for human waste at least 200 feet from camp, trails and water. Cover and disguise the cathole when finished. Use biodegradable soap and wash yourself and dishes at least 200 feet from water. Scatter strained dishwater to keep food scraps out of the environment.
- Leave what you find. It is interesting to observe life under logs and rocks, but leave things as you find them to protect the homes of the critters that live there. Preserve history by leaving historic structures and artifacts in place. Litter is not history and should be removed.
- Minimize campfire impacts. Where campfires are allowed, use established fire rings. Keep fires small. Use only sticks from the ground that can be broken by hand or bring in your own firewood. Allow time to have wood and coals burn completely to ash. When back country camping, spread cold ash to minimize impact.
- Respect wildlife. Use binoculars so you can observe birds and wildlife from a distance. Don’t chase wildlife or disturb their natural behavior. Never feed animals. Feeding alters the animals natural behavior and often encourages nuisance behavior such as feeding in garbage. It also can create health problems. Store food and trash in a secure location inside a vehicle or in a bag hung from a rope high in a tree. Keep pets on a leash or at home.
- Be considerate of other visitors. Be courteous and yield to other users on trails. Take breaks and camp...
away from trails and other visitors. Many have never experienced nature's sounds and peace and quiet of natural areas. Avoid loud voices and music that may distract from other visitor's experiences.

If you enjoy the woods on wheels, another organization, Tread Lightly! promotes education, recreation and restoration to ensure that off road vehicle and boating experiences will be allowed for future generations. Their information is often included in hunter education programs. For more information, call 1-800-966-9900.

Several organizations are active locally to help you get the most from your outdoor experience. The Florida Trail Association has annual conferences, monthly meetings and field trips. Contact Norm McKeown, mckeown@kua.net at 407-892-6598 for local information.

Wilderness Trekkers promotes Leave No Trace outdoor ethics through its many activities. Contact their president, Chuck Russakov, at russakov@mpinet.net or the activity director, David Chapman at dchapman7@cfl.rr.com or check the website at http://www.wilderness-trekkers.org/ for more information.

Looking for a gift for friends or family? Consider a membership to one of the organizations or buy some "toys" to help them enjoy the outdoors.

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