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## Going Camping? Leave the Hatchet at Home

*Hatchets, saws, and axes have a place—and it's not in the backcountry.*

JULY 27, 2022  
ALISHA MCDARRIS



For many, they're synonymous with camping: Axes, hand saws, and hatchets. Equipment that makes you want to don your flannel-iest flannel, pop a beanie on top of your unwashed, uncombed, leaf-littered hair, and chop something down. Build a log cabin. Stack firewood. Carve your name in soft pine.

Woods tools have long been a symbol of self-reliance, of survival, of strength in the great outdoors—just think of the towering monuments to ax-wielding, square-shouldered lumberjack Paul Bunyan and his famous blue ox, Babe, or the scores of survivalist and bushcraft YouTube channels that exist expressly to teach viewers how to chop things down and build impromptu structures in the woods.

But on public lands and in backcountry campsites, these tools have become a plague: Rangers and land managers routinely report dozens of trees hacked at, chopped down, or de-limbed. And in an enlightened outdoor community where *Leave No Trace* reigns supreme, many believe they are tools of a dissolute past and that it's well past time that we retire them or even ban their presence in the backcountry.

It's something Jeffrey Marion feels strongly about. After all, in addition to being a recreation ecologist and USGS federal scientist, he's the author of *Leave No Trace in the Outdoors*, The official LNT manual. And his position is a logical one: Woods tools like axes and saws have their place in the outdoors, but not in backcountry recreation.

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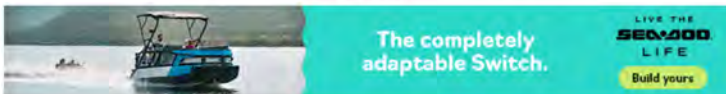
Getting some folks on board with the idea has been a struggle. Many outdoorspeople who ascribe to an older school of thought—a self-sufficient, survivalist, Walden-esque way of life—scoff at the idea of leaving behind their woods tools when they hike into the wilderness. How would one build an impromptu emergency shelter or chop down a tree for firewood without them?



While wooden shelters can be handy for survival situations, they have no place in the backcountry for regular campers. (Photo: VictoriaYurkova/iStock via Getty Images)

Marion's answer: One doesn't. Leave No Trace implores outdoorists to a) collect only dead and downed wood for campfires and b) leave wilderness areas the same as or better than you found them, which precludes chopping limbs, branches, or trees, downed or otherwise.

There are ecological reasons for leaving these tools at home, of course. Damaging or removing healthy flora not only deals a blow to the health of trees, but also opens up forest canopies, which creates unnatural sunny areas that support non-native plants, some of which are invasive, Marion explains.



That doesn't mean you should have at it on dead or downed wood, though. Standing dead trees often function as protective cavities for woodpecker, owl, and flying squirrel nests. Fallen logs can provide cover for wildlife and are filled with insects that are important to terrestrial food chains. Plus, downed wood's natural decomposition replenishes soil, making it a vital part of a healthy ecosystem. If campers are hacking up these large downed pieces, they may be disrupting the natural process of the woods, resulting in more far-reaching implications than you might think.

But Marion has been struggling to get outdoorists to give up woods tools for years, most notably with an organization that's near and dear to his heart: the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). A former Eagle Scout, Marion has helped implement and promote LNT principles in core BSA literature with great success, but many in the organization still hang onto the concept that woods tools are a necessary and vital part of camping and outdoor education.

According to Brian Gray, director of conservation for BSA, the organization has made a lot of changes in past years, including focusing more on outdoor ethics and cooking with gas stoves instead of over campfires as a way to negate the need for woods tools. But while he says they aren't promoting the use of these tools in the backcountry, they're still part of the curriculum. And I can't argue too vehemently with his logic that reminds me of one presented by public school sex-ed teachers everywhere: If you're going to use it, be safe about it.

"There's a time for any type of tool, but the important thing is how you use it," Gray says. "What we teach is safety."

Trail Information Manager for the Pacific Crest Trail Association Jack "Found" Haskel agrees, at least with the first part of that statement. "There are definitely places for axes and hatches and saws," he says, "But a busy and protected piece of land often isn't the place for

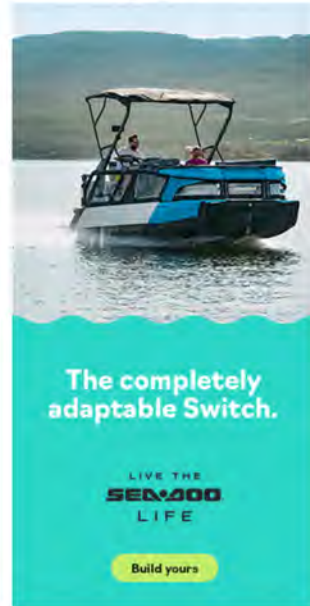
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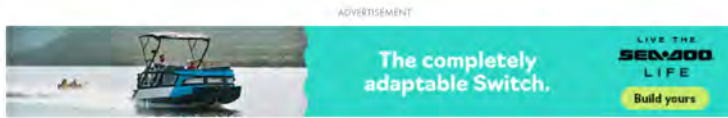
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that.” Especially along popular sections of trail, one campsite might host thousands of visitors a year. And if just a few are playing or practicing with these sorts of tools, it can result in a significant amount of cumulative impact.



Besides, LNT principles recommend not burning any piece of wood larger in diameter than an average person's wrist. When the wood you're meant to use is that small and easy to snap in half, an ax is overkill.

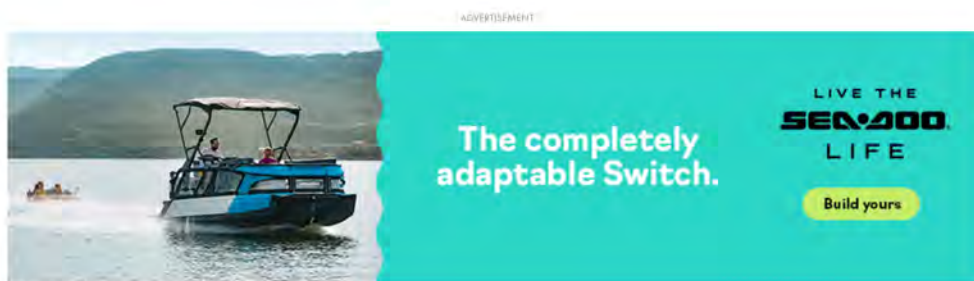
But Marion believes using vague verbiage like, "If you don't need it, don't use it," isn't concrete enough, and his studies have found that educational messaging alone has failed to effectively curb the damage they cause. Instead, he thinks it's time that land managers and parks departments prohibit these tools in the backcountry outright. Doing so, he believes, could effectively prevent the destruction and felling of thousands of trees in protected areas that he, Haskel, and many other park and forest service employees have documented and witnessed.

What good are woods tools, then, if not for camping? According to Marion, they are perfectly suited for conservation, particularly trail construction and maintenance.

"We encourage people who like sharp tools to volunteer with a trail organization," Haskel says, chuckling. "We need your help. We will train you to use axes and saws and you'll do good with them."

Indeed, axes and saws can and should be used to help clear trails. They are invaluable for trimming limbs and clearing areas around campsites of overgrown brush. All have their place on trail work days in the hands of trained volunteers and rangers. So if you want to chop something down, volunteer for your local trail maintenance crew and swing away. But when heading into the backcountry on your own, leave the heavy hitters at home.

From 2022



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