

Eco-etiquette

Mohonk Preserve partners with Leave No Trace to educate novice hikers

by Erin Quinn

THE MOHONK PRESERVE has announced a partnership with Leave No Trace, a program dedicated to safeguarding the nation's wildlands through education, research and relationships with other land stewards. Their mission is to teach people how to go about minimal impact hiking, camping, conservation ethics and allowing wildlife to remain wild.

In 2020, parks and preserves all over the country were overwhelmed with unprecedented levels of visitation due to the COVID-19 pandemic and health officials encouraging people to go outside for health, safety and sanity. A large portion of these visitors were new to the outdoors and were less aware of how their behaviors could have negative impacts on the beautiful lands and ecosystems they were inspired to enjoy.

"We found more trash on the ground and saw more use of unauthorized social trails," said the Preserve's director

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LAUREN THOMAS

For the staff of the Mohonk Preserve, like Director of Visitor Services and Chief Ranger Andrew Bajardi, the new "Leave no Trace" program is about sharing information and about providing our greater community with guidance that supports having a more sustainable relationship with the land.

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of visitor experience and chief ranger, Andrew Bajardi. "It became clear that we needed to focus more effort towards educating our users and provide the community with Leave No Trace guidance, which is leading the effort to create mindful and sustainable relationships with our natural world."

Typically, it is rare to spot a piece of trash at the Mohonk Preserve or even its Shawangunk Ridge neighbor, the Minnewaska State Park Preserve. At these low-maintenance parks where visitors come to hike, bike, run, walk, climb and swim, there seemed to be an understanding that littering wasn't acceptable, going off-trail would only damage fragile ecosystems and feeding or getting too close to animals or birds could be dangerous to their survival. But as people kept flooding the mountains, more trash and graffiti accumulated, along with people trying to poke sticks at rattlesnakes or attempting to go off-trail in search of an Instagrammable pic, creating erosion, social trails and damaging flora and fauna.

Trails are an essential component of the outdoor experience, leading people to amazing views, shady retreats from the summer heat and cool swimming holes. By concentrating traffic onto a narrow ribbon of soil, trails help protect natural areas and vibrant ecosystems by limiting the trampling of vegetation and habitat. Park crews and volunteers work to maintain those trails, repairing them after heavy storms and washouts. According to Leave No Trace (LNT), uninformed visitors "greatly hasten the degradation of trails when they cut switchbacks or ignore trail closures" (www.lnt.org). This leads to what LNT and Bajardi refer to as user-created "social trails," which lack important features of those designed for human impact, leading to greater erosion and heightened negative impact on plants

and animals, from which an ecosystem can take decades to recover.

Leave No Trace's unofficial credo of "When people know better, they do better" is something from which Bajardi believes both the land and the visiting public can benefit. "We can support our community in building a more sustainable relationship with the land, overcoming some of the challenges that grew exponentially following the

close, try to feed or touch or alarm) and be "considerate of others," which can include everything from making sure dogs are on leashes to signaling when you're coming up behind a hiker when on a bike or plugging your earbuds in so that you're music does not have to be the soundtrack for everyone else on the trail.

LNT attempts to utilize the power of science, education and awareness in an

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surge of new-to-the-outdoors visitors," he said. "Changing behaviors can be challenging, but our persistence on this has paid off! There is less trash on the trails, and we have shut down many unauthorized social trails, beginning the restoration process."

A key component of Leave No Trace is to observe signs and/or postings when a trail is closed. This can be for maintenance, to clear felled trees after a storm or even for sensitive wildlife breeding. There are a plethora of trails to be explored without needing to trample, and each one is designed to help visitors get to the most beautiful places the 8,000-acre Preserve holds sacred without marring the landscape.

There are Seven Principles of LNT, which include planning ahead and preparing, so that you don't get lost, caught in bad weather or end up carrying a cooler eight miles on a single-track trail. The second one is to travel and camp on durable surfaces. Also on the list are to dispose of waste properly (which typically means to pack it out), leave what you find, minimize campfire impacts, respect wildlife (don't get too

effort to "ensure the sustainable future for the outdoors and the planet. because no matter where or why you get outside, it's yours to protect. It's your nature."

The organization accomplishes its mission by providing innovative education, skills, research and science to help people care for the outdoors. By working with the public and those

managing public lands, Leave No Trace focuses on educating people - instead of costly restoration programs or

access restrictions - as the most effective and least resource-intensive solution to land protection. The Preserve utilizes social media, e-mail, website postings and good old-fashioned telephones to help alert people if there's a rock-climbing route closed due to a peregrine falcon nesting site or if trails are closed to bicycles after a heavy rain or ice-storm where trees need to be removed. Another part of LNT is that even if the garbage is not yours, you can still pick it up. If not you, then who?

The Preserve and LNT seem to go hand-in-hand with their emphasis on citizen science, connecting youth to the outdoors and utilizing both research and a highly educated and experienced staff to guide their land conservation and stewardship ideals.