
How Minimal Impact behaviour has changed over time

by Karen Bowden

The idea of limiting impacts in protected areas is not a new concept. Publications from as early as 1933 make mention of such advice as “the bigger the fire, the bigger the fool” (Pallin, 1933), however little mention is given to issues such as correct hygiene practices, disposal of rubbish and other practices that may damage the environment.

During the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, the mass media and park managers, together with the scientific community, increasingly brought the threat of environmental degradation and the implications of human impact on the environment to the attention of the general public (McRae, 1990).

Books and materials produced around this era made mention of recommended practices in minimising impacts on the environment, however the message was clearly “out of sight, out of mind”. Practices clearly indicated a “cover-up” approach to impacts produced through outdoor recreation (Dunphy, 1980; Plate, 1976; Roberts, 1979).

Public perceptions of the behaviours constituting a ‘minimal impact’ approach to camping in protected areas have changed dramatically over the past 30 years. Before 1970, bushwalking environmental practices were relatively basic. Visual evidence of litter was considered offensive, but otherwise there were few stringent guidelines (Bushpeople Publications, 1991). Indeed many bushwalkers shared the common view that bushwalking was mainly a challenge against nature - nature was there to be “conquered” and it was acceptable to modify the environment to suit human needs (*ibid*).

Examples of this philosophy can be seen in publications by Dunphy (1980), Frauca (1978), Pallin (1979), Plate (1976) and Roberts (1979). For instance, in setting up the tent site both Frauca (1978) and Plate (1976) advise campers to cut saplings to be used as tent poles. Frauca (1978:31) also promotes leaving the mattress at home and ‘cutting a few bundles of grass blades’

from grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea*) for bedding. Plate (1976:38) recommends campers dig a drainage ditch around the tent ‘making sure that it is deep enough to cope with a sudden torrential downpour’.

On the issue of campfires, Dunphy (1980:11) believes that ‘a fire is perhaps the most symbolic, basic and traditional part of Australian bushcraft’. Frauca (1978) emphasises the importance of keeping warm whilst camping and recommends collecting enough firewood to keep the fire going all night. In terms of collecting wood for the fire, Pallin (1979) suggests that dry wood is difficult to find on the ground, and recommends breaking dead branches from standing trees or shrubs for this purpose.

Although authors tend to recommend the use of a fire for cooking and heating purposes they do note the dangers of lighting fires in protected areas and emphasise the safety considerations associated with an open flame (Dunphy, 1980; Pallin, 1973; Plate, 1976). The 1973 edition of Paddy Pallin’s *Bushwalking and Camping* there is no mention of fuel stoves at all. However, the revised 1985 edition makes mention of the use of fuel stoves in several places, including the ‘code of ethics’ section on page 117. Here the use of fuel stoves is recommended during fire danger periods or in locations where dead wood is scarce or unavailable.

Procedures for burial as a means of rubbish disposal in protected areas were common amongst authors (Dunphy, 1980; Plate, 1976; Roberts, 1979). Plate’s (1976:22) solution to the accumulation of rubbish is ‘a hole should be dug on the edge of the campsite and tins, bottles, etc., thrown in and finally covered over when the time comes to move on’. Likewise, Roberts (1979:109) outlines the same practice, promoting it as ‘zero-impact camping’. Dunphy (1980) offers two alternatives for the disposal of rubbish - either digging a hole and burying the waste, or alternatively placing edible scraps neatly on a rock for inspection by the local wildlife.

Other issues such as hygiene, keeping to marked tracks and group sizes are covered to varying degrees in early literature (Dunphy, 1980; Plate, 1976; Roberts, 1979). Practices in these areas are often only mentioned briefly, providing broad guidelines and little details on these issues.

The 'minimal impact camping' message presented by authors between 1933 and 1985 is very different to current recommended minimal impact techniques.

It is clear that early philosophies of 'minimal impact' camping practices were developed at a time when visitation to protected areas was limited. Due to relatively low numbers of visitors, protected areas were usually able to recover from disturbances and recreational impacts (Bushpeople Publications, 1991). However, with the increase in population, upsurge in outdoor recreation and decrease in bush localities to visit, experienced bushwalkers were quick to recognise the declining environmental conditions and saw the need for a new environmental ethic (*ibid*).

The 'Minimal Impact Bushwalking' (MIB) campaign was established in 1986 by the Tasmanian Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage to combat environmental impacts caused by increasing numbers of walkers venturing into their national parks and World Heritage areas (O'Loughlin, 1989). O'Loughlin noted that during this time there were very few publications available that dealt with visitor impacts and management issues and that promoted truly minimal impact practices.

As a result of the MIB campaign a range of educational materials were produced including videos, posters, brochures and information kits. The introduction of 'Track Rangers' to Tasmanian national parks coincided with the implementation of the campaign. The Track Rangers' role was to verbally inform bushwalkers of minimal impact practices whilst camping in the protected areas and reinforce minimal impact behaviours.

Evaluative studies of the campaigns success undertaken in Tasmania showed a marked increase in visitors knowledge and attitudes

towards minimal impact practices and an improvement in the condition of campsites (O'Loughlin, 1988).

Sections of the MIB campaign were adopted by the Queensland Department of National Parks and Wildlife service in 1992 (Parkin, pers comm., July 1982). From this date, information on minimising environmental impacts while camping became available in the form of brochures, signs, posters and displays to varying degrees within national parks. The 'new' environmental ethic for bushwalkers included such practices as:

- carrying out all forms of rubbish and disposing of it off-park
- the elimination of campfires and the introduction of fuel stove only zones
- camping at existing sites
- washing 100 metres away from water courses
- toileting at least 100 metres away from campsites and watercourses in a hole 15 centimetres deep
- limiting group sizes to a recommended maximum of 8 as a means of limiting environmental impacts
- keeping to marked tracks where they are evident (QDEH, 1993).

Past practices of burning and burying rubbish, cutting down vegetation, digging drainage trenches around tent sites and lighting campfires are strongly advised against. Some explanation is provided to the increased impacts these practices cause as a deterrent to visitors. In some minimal impact practices in Queensland national parks.

However, it would appear that the minimal impact message is not being received clearly by visitors. For example, research by Parkin (1997) undertaken in Bunya Mountains National Park in the form of visitor surveys revealed that only 54% of respondents had heard of the terms 'minimal impact' or 'no-trace camping'. Furthermore, these respondents were only 10% more likely to act in a manner approaching a minimal impact practice than those who had not heard of the terms. These findings suggest that the respondents who had heard of minimal

impact bushwalking did not follow or understand the main premise of the minimal impact campaign.

Unfortunately, a large proportion of bushwalkers are novices or only bush visitors, and the problem continues that one or two reckless visitors can have more impact than fifty who practice minimal impact bushwalking. Sadly, many Australians continue to associate bushwalking with the pioneering spirit and the 'taming of nature', and there is little doubt that most environmental degradation in bushwalking areas nowadays is caused by people ignorant or uncaring of proper conservation practices (Bushpeople Publications, 1991).

Even visitors who consider themselves as having a high level of concern for the protected environment often have a low level of knowledge of appropriate minimal impact practices (Hanna, 1989).

Limiting environmental impact is more than just a numbers game. Two careless campers will have more devastating impacts than fifty environmentally conscious campers. Therefore, minimal impact education and approaches to limiting environmental degradation need to be put in place if protected area resources are to be maintained for future generations.

Without this, recreation impact management will remain primarily reactionary in nature and park managers will seldom be able to get beyond treating the symptoms to dealing with the cause of the problems.

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