

## When nature calls ...

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### ABSTRACT

When nature calls, will park visitors use the toilet facilities provided or let urgency dictate where they go? It is reasonable to expect that park visitors will use toilet facilities when they are close at hand, but what about when they are out on a walk or at some other location far away from the nearest loo? Convenience means that many visitors will use the nearest tree, rock, creek, freshwater lake system or some other inappropriate location!

### INTRODUCTION

We often tend to concentrate park management efforts on managing recreation impacts after they have occurred through site hardening and the provision of more facilities. But a toilet every 50 metres would be absurd. Interested in a more proactive and less costly approach? ... Try minimal impact education!

Minimal Impact is a code of practice for users of natural areas (O'Loughlin 1989). It has an important place in park management through its ability to minimise recreational impacts through awareness, knowledge and skill development. Minimal Impact education is an opportunity to learn from nature in order to protect nature (Parkin 1997).

Protected area managers need to ensure that visitors have adequate access to information about the natural area they are visiting and about appropriate codes of practice to "walk softly" or "tread lightly". For example, minimal Impact education promotes, amongst other things, the notion that people should use a toilet or defecate at least 50 - 100 metres away from

campsites and watercourses (Figure 1). It also emphasises that faecal waste and toilet paper should be buried 15 centimetres deep in the ground amongst soil and humus layers (Figure 2). Often this message is achieved through a brochure, sign, information on the reverse side of a camping permit or display.

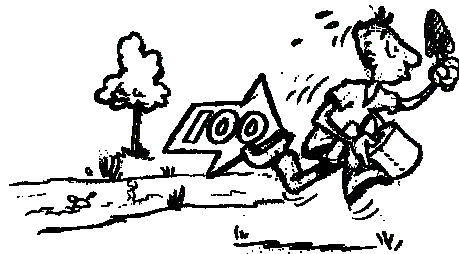


Figure 1: How far to the loo?

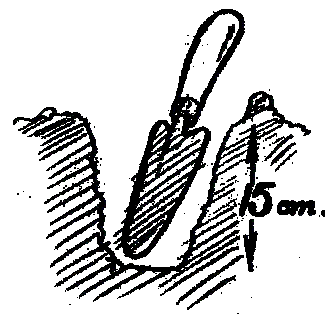
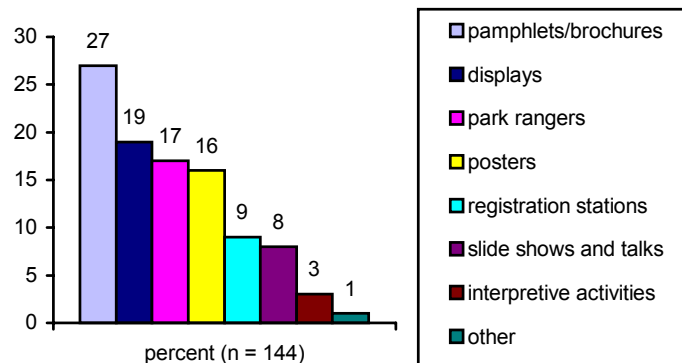


Figure 2: Dig a hole 15cm deep

Unless people are interested in knowing how to act, will they understand these messages? Probably not, as research conducted at the Bunya Mountains in Queensland revealed that visitors who had heard of the terms “Minimal Impact Bushwalking” or “No-trace camping”

were only 10 percent more likely to practice minimal impact techniques ahead of those who had not (Parkin 1997). Visitors who had heard of these terms had primarily received their information through pamphlets and brochures (Figure 3).



**Figure 3: Most common QPWS activities through which Bunya Mountain N.P. visitors had heard about “Minimal Impact Bushwalking” or “No-trace Camping”**

On the issue of toileting, the difference in stated behaviour on what to do when “nature calls” was less observable between the two groups of respondents – except that the fact that visitors who

had **not** heard of the terms “Minimal Impact Bushwalking” or “No-trace camping” were more likely to travel the recommended distance than their Minimal Impact (MI) counterparts! (Table 1).

**Table 1: How far to the toilet?**

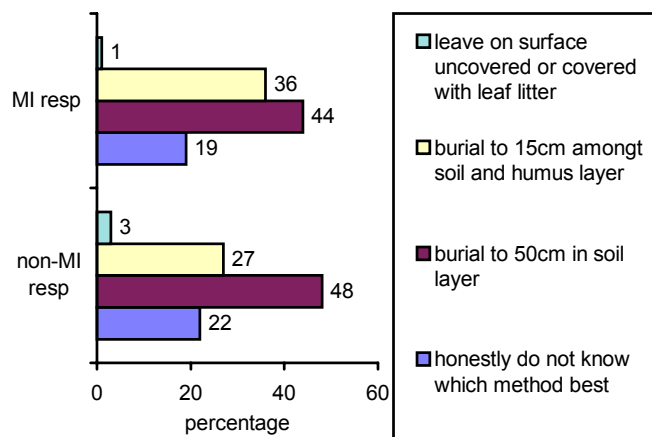
Distance from campsites (n = 183)			Distance from watercourses (n = 177)		
metres	MI resp (n = 99)	non-MI resp (n = 86)	metres	MI resp (n = 94)	non-MI resp (n = 83)
0 - 9	0	2	0 - 9	1	4
10 - 49	21	14	10 - 49	17	14
<b>50 - 100</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>50 - 100</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>51</b>
101 - 200	15	13	101 - 200	19	14
> 200	11	16	>200	15	17

Interesting observations between the two groups also include:

- The preference of Minimal Impact respondents (21%) to stay close to the campsite (0 – 49m) when they went to the toilet than non-Minimal Impact respondents (16%);
- Eighteen percent of both groups went to the toilet between 0 – 49 metres from a watercourse; and
- Minimal Impact respondents were more likely to go further than the recommended distance to the toilet than non-Minimal Impact respondents.
- The number of respondents in both groups who said that they would

travel a distance greater than 200m from a campsite or watercourse to defecate! In reality this is unlikely to occur, as geographical embarrassment rather than being caught in the act is a consequence of wandering too far away.

Those aware of the Minimal Impact Code were 9 percent more likely to bury their faecal waste at the correct depth than non-Minimal Impact respondents (Figure 3). However, what is noticeable is that a large percentage of each group detailed that faecal waste should be buried to 50cm depth in soil layer. In reality, this would take considerable effort and probably not occur (especially if the person was in a hurry 'to go')!



**Figure 4: Most environmentally friendly method to dispose of faecal waste**

So ... what do these results mean? Our interpretation concludes three possible scenarios:

1. that MI respondents do not understand the minimal impact concept;
2. that MI respondents only skimmed the material explaining the Minimal Impact concept; or

3. brochures, pamphlets, displays and posters on their own are not sufficient to educate park visitors about Minimal Impact and the "walk softly, tread lightly" ethic.

It is likely that a combination of all three scenarios is occurring. The Minimal Impact message is based upon sound environmental principles, however, the results of the Bunya Mountains study indicate that the general

visitor to national parks and other areas of natural landscape may not have developed the knowledge or skills to wander far from the nearest loo. If visitors are not familiar with recommended minimal impact techniques, they cannot be expected to act in an appropriate manner or effectively implement methods to minimise their impact during their visit.

How else can we get the message across about how to go to the loo? Maybe there's a need for a more novel approach. A combination of techniques will work best (Parkin & Bauchop 1998). Avoid the straight out provision of information — find a way to make it interesting and fun, while still educational. Try running an interpretive program that involves taking participants to a problem area. For example, if people are toileting in or near a freshwater creek or lake, go fishing! Set some fish traps and show participants the freshwater fish you catch. And the punch line is ... '*do the deed in the creek and this is what you'll eat!*'

If it is exposed faeces around a campsite you wish to address, conduct a toilet tissue scavenge hunt, count the number/types of blowflies present on each deposit and explain how poor sanitation may lead to the spread of diseases such as *gastro* and *ghardia* (a blowfly index to the spread of disease!). There's no better grabber for locations where the issue may affect one's health, but each park or location will need to find their own unique grabber. But remember to keep the take home message simple. Simple messages are processed and stored and more likely to be remembered than those that are

complicated and require much thought processing (Parkin & Bauchop 1998).

Minimal impact education aims to create an awareness of the environment and the impacts that recreators have on it. Done correctly, minimal impact education can play an important role in providing experiences that contribute towards the development of active and informed members of society who can limit their impacts while visiting natural areas.

A brochure or sign doesn't always work, whereas a face-to-face activity, although more time consuming, may be more effective ... especially if it's novel and related to your visitor interests. Don't be afraid to use innovative interpretive and educational approaches when you've got a sticky problem. It can be a novel process for promoting environmental awareness and appropriate outdoor behaviour through discovery, learning and understanding of natural environments. Give it a go, you will be surprised by the results!

## REFERENCES

- O'Loughlin, T. (1989), 'Walk Softly - but carry a big education campaign', *Australian Ranger Bulletin*, Vol. 5 N<sup>o</sup> 3 pp4-7.
- Parkin, D.R. (1997), 'Walk Softly, Tread Lightly: What's all the fuss about?', *Australian Parks and Recreation*, Vol. 33, No.3, pp.21-28 & p46.
- Parkin, D.R. and Bauchop, D.A. (1998), Minimal Impact Education: turning technique into discovery, learning and understanding, *proceedings of the 4th Queensland Outdoor Education Conference*, Ferny Grove State School, Brisbane, Qld, pp42-47..