

Case 8: No Trace Left Behind?

Amanda and Jen are on a late summer backpacking trip in northern Michigan before heading back to college in the fall. They are hiking a trail along the Manistee River in the Manistee National Forest. The trail is fairly popular among backpackers because of its beauty, but this is their first trip on this particular trail.

Amanda and Jen are experienced backpackers and try to practice Leave No Trace (LNT) principles as set forth by the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics in order to minimize their impact on the environment. These include: camping on durable surfaces such as established campsites, camping at least 200 feet from lakes and streams, dispersing usage to prevent creation of campsites and trails, leaving plants as you find them, keeping campfires small or avoiding them, and never feeding animals. Amanda and Jen also conscientiously follow the National Forest Service rules (posted on the National Forest Service website). These include: camping only at designated sites within the Manistee River corridor and no camping within 200 feet of any body of water, except at those designated sites.

At the end of their first day of hiking they begin to look for a campsite for the evening. Although they knew of several designated campsites along the trail, each site they passed was occupied. It was getting late so they needed to make a decision about where to camp. They also came upon several spots along the river that had obviously been used as campsites numerous times but were not official designated campsites, and so were strictly speaking against the rules. They considered the alternative of moving 200 ft. away from the river and setting up camp in a pristine spot that was technically within the rules, but would actually create a greater impact on the environment by impacting vegetation and creating pathways in and around their site in the woods. They debated about where to camp: was it better to technically break the rules but have a lower impact on their environment by camping in already established sites, even though they were not officially designated? Or better to follow the National Forest rules and head into the woods away from the water knowing they might be having a negative impact by camping on a pristine site?

As they continued their hike the next afternoon, Amanda and Jen came upon three men who were setting up their campsite at the side of the trail. The men appeared to be in their thirties, and two of them were carrying sidearms. One of the men was feeding a huge bonfire in the center of their site. Another appeared to be feeding snacks to a chipmunk and the third was chopping down small green trees and cutting live branches from larger trees. Amanda and Jen weren't sure how they planned to use the branches since they were green and they knew they wouldn't burn well. They said hello and the men returned their greeting. Amanda and Jen walked a short distance down the trail, then stopped for a few minutes. They discussed whether they should talk with the men about their breach of National Forest rules and LNT practices such as cutting live trees, building a huge fire and feeding wildlife. Were the men not familiar with these rules and principles or were they willfully ignoring them? Amanda and Jen felt that they could do good by educating the men if they were in fact just inexperienced and uninformed. But they didn't know how best to voice their concerns, or how the men would respond to them.

Study Questions:

1. Did Amanda and Jen make the right decision by camping in an unauthorized location with lower environmental impact, or should they have followed the National Forest rules?
2. Do Amanda and Jen have a duty to intervene in the men's environmentally irresponsible behavior? If not, would it be permissible for them to intervene? If yes, how does the risk of a violent or hostile response from the men affect that duty?
3. Do the men have a duty to follow the National Forest rules? To attempt to follow LNT practices?