

## Woods Tools for Conservation, Not Camping

Jeffrey L. Marion, Ph.D.

Park and forest managers frequently cite an extensive list of resource impacts attributable to collecting firewood and burning campfires. They single out woods tools (axes, hatchets, and saws) as the cause of the most egregious and avoidable impacts: damage to and felling of trees and shrubs, including dead snags important to wildlife. A research survey of 81 wilderness campsites I conducted in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness found that 44% of campsite trees had been damaged by campers and tallied 18 tree stumps/campsite. For all 2000+ campsites that would be over 36,000 felled trees! In a 1991 survey I conducted of 106 National Parks with substantial backcountry, 43% prohibited campfires and 83% prohibited cutting standing deadwood. Public land managers are increasingly adopting campfire prohibitions due largely to tree damage and felling – a trend that could be reversed if campers stopped using the tools that enable such damage. Thus, limiting one nonessential freedom (using woods tools), can preserve a more important freedom (having a campfire).

While knife wounds to trees were seen in the Boundary Waters study, the most common and severe forms of damage were caused by axes, hatchets, and saws. The damage from these woods tools, including both malicious damage and the cutting of branches for firewood, opens wounds that can weaken or kill trees and allow invasion by fungi or insects. These implements also permit the burning of large-diameter wood that contribute to larger campfires and larger amounts of charcoal, ash, and partially-burned wood. These by-products are a leading contributor to the excessively large fire sites mounded with charcoal and ash seen on many campsites.

The public land management agencies urge all campers to follow the national *Leave No Trace* practice of collecting *only* dead and down wood that can be broken by hand. Leaving woods tools at home protects live and standing dead woody vegetation, lightens your pack or camping gear, and enhances your safety. Some scouts suggest that such tools are needed to cut and split logs that are brought from home. However, most public land management agencies are actively discouraging or prohibiting campers from transporting wood to prevent the spread of invasive insects and diseases. Due to this concern, my own scout reservation prohibits this practice and has purchased a log splitter to convert felled hazard trees into firewood for scouts when needed.

Campers can have campfires *without* these implements, and leaving them at home *entirely avoids* injuries, tree damage, and the felling of live and dead trees. The BSA continues to *require* their teaching and use on campouts by retaining rank advancement elements involving the use of woods tools. When nearly all scouting units now cook on stoves, why do we retain archaic requirements that require teaching the use of tools that are unnecessary, dangerous, and that public land managers are specifically asking us to leave at home?

Isn't it more important for youth to learn they can easily gather appropriate firewood without the use of woods tools? When scouting teaches millions of youth woods tool use during their first few outings we are creating a lifelong association between these tools and camping. While safe

tool use practices are learned quickly and reinforced by personal safety concerns, ethical learning occurs more slowly, and becomes ingrained only from years of camping experience. Unfortunately many youth who join scouts drop out before such ethical learning is complete. Even if that weren't the case, research on educational efficacy with low impact practices reveals that education can't be counted on to deliver more than about 75% compliance. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most tree damage and felling are contributed by a small proportion of campers. Completely severing the association between woods tools and camping is therefore the most optimal and effective strategy. The BSA, with a membership of approximately four million, is therefore sustaining a critical *high-impact* practice that every other outdoor education organization has long since abandoned.

For those who suggest that the BSA has an excellent track record of teaching the ethical use of woods tools I ask you to survey a few of your local scout reservation campsites – I guarantee you will find plenty of evidence in the form of woods tool tree damage and felling.

**What I propose:** The safe and ethical use of woods tools can more appropriately be taught in the context of conservation and stewardship projects, such as trail maintenance and construction. Use in that context allows the teaching of these tools to accomplish tasks commonly encountered by home owners: trimming tree branches, felling a tree, and chopping out roots and tree stumps. Contact your local park, forest, or scout reservation to make arrangements for a conservation project that can involve the use of woods tools.

I have researched and fully appreciate the long traditions of scouting's woods tool use. Robert Baden-Powell's book "Scouting for Boys" (1907) is often cited as the original blueprint for Scouting. His writings describe what today would be considered "high-impact" camping practices, yet also incorporate a strong ethical concern for protecting nature. For example, he thoroughly embraced the use of woods tools when camping:

"To make a bed, cut four poles ... cut down a fir tree, cut off all branches ..."

However, his words indicate a prescient concern for environmental ethics and resource protection that were decades ahead of his time:

"Only a fool will go banging about with an axe – hacking at trees, chopping at roots and branches on the ground, in this way destroying valuable trees..." "As a Scout, you are the guardian of the woods. A Scout never damages a tree by hacking it with his knife or axe. It does not take long to fell a tree, but it takes many years to grow one, so a Scout cuts down a tree for a good reason only – not just for the sake of using his axe. For every tree felled, two should be planted." "It is seldom necessary to chop trees even for firewood, as usually there is plenty of dead wood lying about on the ground."

"When you leave (the camp), leave nothing but your thanks and a good name."

***Lord Baden-Powell***

Over time, the Scouting movement has abandoned many other “traditional” high-impact camping practices, such as the felling of trees, construction of primitive lean-to shelters and beds made from living materials, and ditching tents. Scouters and millions of other outdoor visitors have responded to the tremendous growth in outdoor recreation and articles about “Loving our parks to death” by adopting low impact outdoor practices. Leading scouts in developing and adopting these practices, Philmont Scout Ranch switched to backpacking stoves and abandoned use of woods tools in the early 1980’s. Other outdoor education organizations have similarly abandoned the use of woods tools, leaving the Scouting movement as the *only* organization that continues to perpetuate their use. The BSA formally adopted *Leave No Trace* as its minimum-impact program in 1997, as the BSA moves into its 2<sup>nd</sup> century, isn’t this an appropriate time to relegate woods tools to conservation work and disassociate them from camping?

I believe it is and I encourage you to help make it happen now! We can do that by teaching woods tool use only in the context of conservation and stewardship projects, with supporting changes to the BSA 2<sup>nd</sup> Class rank requirements.

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**Scouting background:** Eagle Scout, Philmont staff (5 summers), Scoutmaster (5 yrs), Venture Crew Advisor (11 yrs), LNT advisor for BSA Fieldbook and Handbook revisions, BSA Outdoor Ethics Task Force member (7 yrs), BSA Hornaday Gold Medal Conservation Award (2007), and Hornaday Gold Badge Award (2006).

**Leave No Trace background:** Founding Board member (8 yrs), Chair, LNT Education Review Committee (10 yrs).

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**Examples of tree damage on campsites from woods tool use.**

