

(The following is a column which appeared in The Canadian Leader Magazine and two responses to it)

"The Case Against Campfires"
Patrol Corner, The Canadian Leader, June/July 1990

by Robb Baker

The thoughts that follow have been adapted from an article published in Australian Scouting's Interchange magazine. They are meant to stimulate discussion and help each troop examine its outdoor practices.

At the outset, let us take the position that the use of wood fires for cooking, heating and light is a bad practice except in the case of emergency. It is somewhat akin to cutting spruce boughs for a bed or trenching around a tent to keep out the water. All of these practices need to be actively discouraged!

In many parts of the country, such a statement will elicit howls of outrage. Once calm returns, Scouters will offer two responses. The first and most easily dismissed is that fires are necessary for cooking and keeping warm on cool nights.

As Scouters, we should never encourage others to venture into the bush with food and the notion that they can use a wood fire to cook it. Lightweight stoves are easy to use, safe in trained hands, and reasonably cheap, too.

As for keeping warm, anyone knows that most of the heat from a fire goes straight up. Those who huddle around it will invariably need to wear all of their warm clothes and, possibly, a wind jacket as well. If, for some reason, you need to sit around in the open on a cold night, wrap yourself in a suitably protected sleeping bag and wear a wool toque.

Although not quite so easy to dismiss, the other response to our suggestion to ban fires can also be refuted. It comes in a variety of disguises. Some people call the fire a "romantic touch". Others see in it almost mystical properties linked to communion with nature. For still others, it is a fitting way to end a day in the wilderness, a great feature to sit around to swap tall stories and generally unwind.

For some people, the campfire is so much a high point that they consider a day without one like cooking dessert without eating it -- unfulfilling and just plain work. It's an attitude hard to swallow, particularly if you are concerned about the environment. Those who link their enjoyment of the outdoors so closely to being able to have a campfire either cut themselves off from wilderness areas or reconcile themselves to having a miserable time. I have known Scouters who simply would not go into an area, despite its beauty and program opportunities, because of fire restrictions. My exposure to such folks left me feeling that to be so deeply attached to the mystique of fires is sad, ultimately limiting, and totally unnecessary.

Most Scouters are willing to forego fires when forced to by circumstance. If, indeed, this is so, they should also be able to resist the temptation in areas where fires are allowed and possible. This does not include established ceremonial campfire circles properly built in established youth camps and complete with fire suppression equipment and dead firewood.

"But, if there is plenty of dead and downed timber or driftwood, why shouldn't I have a fire?" you might ask. "It's not doing any harm."

You are wrong. First, there is always the danger of a runaway forest fire caused by a carelessly lit or improperly extinguished fire. Do you want that on your conscience?

Second, having a fire is destructive consumption. The wood you burn is part of the ecosystem and spoken for. It is not excess and it certainly is not yours to destroy. There are other inhabitants of these areas, other forms of life at your temporary campsite that will need that wood long after you leave. To complain about litter along the trails and yet happily set fire to the same system smacks of hypocrisy, certainly something we try to avoid in our work with Scouts.

Then there is the matter of visual pollution. To some, blackened rings of stone at camp spots are welcoming signs that push back the unfamiliarity of the bush. There are others for whom the same rings are as repulsive as wilderness littering. In my opinion, they are an affront to the

sanctity of wild places and to other people who come after us. We all have the right to expect the bush to be kept in a pristine state.

Sometimes at the campsite, we quickly forget such niceties. It is as if, by taking off the pack and putting up the tent, we unleash all the possessive, consumptive, untidy instincts that we display in our every day lives. The first act is to ransack the surrounding bush for downed firewood. If this is not readily available, there are those (not you of course) who will actively pull down dead limbs. If they can't find those, they will proceed to pull off living branches.

Now I can hear you say, "But I would never do that and I don't condone it either." Perhaps not, but what about those who come along with you? Are you willing to answer for them? Perhaps they will go into the wilds at some later date without the same degree of constraint.

And let's not forget how much wood you'll need to keep a fire burning through the evening. Then, in the rush to get going in the morning, you forget to put everything back as you found it. Naturally, you pour water on the fire to put it out, but there never seems to be enough time to pull out the burned wood, or to scatter the stones clean side up, or to fill the hole, or to spread the ashes. Your neglect openly invites others who come behind you to use the site in the same way.

It's time we started using current technology and knowledge to preserve the wilderness. In my mind, it is our obligation to the generations of the future.

**"This Barbarian Enjoys a Fire"
Letters, The Canadian Leader, November 1990**

Thank you, Rob Baker for a wonderful position paper. I wish I'd written The Case Against Campfires (J/J'90). Instead, I am left to howl in outrage. I have camped with and without a campfire winter and summer, above and below the treeline, on desert and shore in many countries. I am, I fear, one who enjoys a fire.

We live in the Aspen Parkland in an area where fireblight, beavers, and tent caterpillars have decimated the mature aspen. The destruction is almost total on my home quarter. My house is partly wood heated, but I could not possibly use even a thousandth of the dead and diseased timber within a few hundred metres of the house. I suppose the "other inhabitants" of the area will eventually do their job, but I don't feel at all guilty for depriving them of a few cords.

Your arguments against the "romance" of the fire are forcible and convincing. I confess that a singsong around the old Peak 1 just isn't the same. But we are beginning to substitute the romance of conservation and preservation, and most of the local troops take pride in their no-trace camping. Our troop uses a favourite campsite each year, so we have a chance to monitor our fire sites. Most are indistinct within a week and all are indistinguishable within a year. We make it a point of honour to leave nothing but tracks. Still, I will pass your article to the troop and, perhaps, the Court of Honour will recommend some changes.

Your arguments against using fires to keep warm have less merit. A fire can be a lifesaver, and knowledge of how to start, maintain, and extinguish a fire is vital scoutcraft. The only way to master a skill is to practise it. It follows that Scouts must make fires. It follows, too, that they must be taught caution, courtesy, and conservation. I think this will satisfy our obligation to the generations of the future.

-- Greybeard, 1st Thorsby Troop, Alta.

**THE CASE AGAINST "THE CASE AGAINST CAMPFIRES"
by Peter Wiinholt, sysop, The Den BBS, Toronto (used by permission)**

In the June/July 1990 issue of Leader Magazine, Robb Baker wrote an article in the Patrol Corner which outlined his opinion of campfires, and, more importantly, his stand on environmental ethics. It is a noble stand, echoing the statements of high-tech backpackers (and equipment manufacturers) from the past ten years or more. "Our environment can no longer stand the

strain of overuse," they say. "Take nothing but pictures and leave nothing but footprints," they say.

In his article, Mr. Baker said that we can no longer afford the luxury of campfires. The functions of warmth and cooking can be accomplished through backpacking stoves and warm clothing. As for the romance or warmth that a campfire offers to the soul, that, Mr. Baker says, will be a hard pill to swallow, but for the sake of our environment we must learn to go without those tall stories that unwind around the evening campfire. His reasons were given as the depletion of firewood, the danger of forest fire, the "visual pollution" of fire pits, and the tendency for a camper to generally abuse Nature when they get carried away or careless.

This is seemingly a very environmentally responsible attitude, and is very much in step with current trends in enviro-friendly camping. But in my opinion, it has missed the point entirely!

The greatest caretakers of this once vast wilderness were the Native People. Bill Mason says in "Waterwalker" that when the Europeans first came to North America, they found an enormous, unspoiled wilderness. In saying that they were giving a great compliment to the peoples who had inhabited the continent for over a thousand years. They did not do it with stoves, backpacks and bio-degradable soap. They were equipped with the only tool which can truly lead to harmony with our environment. An attitude.

Tom Brown Jr., who is in my opinion one of the greatest outdoorsmen, environmentalists and supporters of the Indian way of life, describes the Native attitude as being the caretakers of the Earth. They hunted and built fires and cut trees for tools, -but they did it all with a deep reverence for what they were doing. They were very conscious of what the implications of their actions might be on their tribe, and particularly on their children and grandchildren. They were close to the Earth, and very involved in the interaction. And that closeness is what fostered their understanding and gave further strength and validity to their attitude. It was a circle of doing and understanding and love of the Earth.

Today's approaches to our environmental problems seem to be the exact opposite. When we venture into the woods, we take civilization with us. With our backpacks, heavy boots, and bug nets, we look like we are voyaging to the moon. We are aliens in our own world.

In order for our children to put forth the energy and dedication necessary to change the tide of environmental destruction, they must learn to love it the way the Native People did. They spend enough of their lives in insulated, sterile environments. Do we really want to say that we are going to remove the smell of campfires and the act of cooking your food on gathered wood from Scouting, now, when love of the outdoors is so essential?

Rather than running away from the problem, why are we not addressing it? Teach people what kinds of wood to collect. Teach them how to build small fires which don't let all of their heat escape straight up. Teach fire safety. Teach and insist on the obliteration of fire pits, to whatever degree is possible.

And foremost, understand that the act of teaching must allow for mistakes. Only people who never do anything, never make mistakes. And people in the process of learning make the most mistakes. That is why learning and teaching are done on a graduated scale. You don't take a Patrol or a Company into an environmentally fragile area until they have learned the skills necessary to avoid unnecessary human impact.

Are we afraid of that challenge. My God, if we are, then where is the hope for our children?

Yes, it is true that we have an Environmental problem. It is the most critical issue of these times, and if we don't address and solve it, we will surely pay. But is the solution to withdraw and distance ourselves from Nature, or to get closer to it? Is the solution to learn how to use technology, or to understand how to live within Nature, so that she touches our very soul.

The only way we will ever gain the momentum to save our Environment is to love it deeply. I do not believe that promoting an approach and attitude of sterility towards camping will foster such a love. We still have not learned that we are part of Nature. No matter how fast a stove can boil a litre of water, the campfire still warms my heart.