

TREAD LIGHTLY

We all enjoy a relaxing trail ride – but are you aware of the effect some riding practices have on the land, and how you can help conserve trails for future use?

BY GENE W. WOOD, PHD



“Lonewalker”, my good friend of almost 50 years, visits every year for a spring ride. He rides my horses and we set out for a couple of days of camping.

Since we met as graduate students at Penn State in 1963, Lonewalker and I have shared each other's values, philosophies and many outdoor experiences. As natural resource scientists, we always hunger to know more, but most fundamentally, we know it's not science and technology that drives our enduring love of the land.

We communicate without words as we sense the mystique of a cold mountain stream rushing through shades of sunshine and shadows. We note mammal and bird tracks in soft places along the trail, and stop to photograph wildflowers. A bird feather here or there, a tuft of hair, scratchings in the leaves, a muskrat or beaver slide on a streambank, a buck rub or scrape from last fall, tracks of a doe and her fawn or of a turkey hen and her brood...all speak to us of the ecosystem dynamic we have studied and researched and love so deeply.

The ecologic consequences of trail riding

Unfortunately, our rides are not imbued solely with natural beauty.

- We are often jerked up short by the sight of a tree completely girdled or irreparably damaged because someone tied a horse to it. It's a real downer for us when that tree is a dogwood, which is already disappearing from the Appalachians and Piedmont provinces due to dogwood anthracnose. Was it really too much trouble for the rider to have come prepared to either crosstie or high-line her/his horse and thus preserve the tree? My own conscience flashes back to the day I was hurriedly breaking camp and tied my horse to a small hemlock. A few minutes later I turned to see that my horse had girdled the tree. More than a decade has passed, yet that moment remains clear in my memory.

- Sometimes we approach a switchback in the trail and find it has been shortcut by a number of riders. Storm waters from the trail now run down the shortcut, thus creating the gully the trail builders were trying to prevent in the first place. Were the riders in that much of a hurry? Or did they just lack the knowledge and horsemanship to do the right thing and stay on the trail?

- On occasion, we have come upon groups of riders whooping it up as they let their horses charge up a trail

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Poor riding practices contribute to soil erosion and gully formation.

grade. If the grade is not already eroding, it surely will be now as the horses' hooves loosen soil and rocks that will run off downhill after the next storm.

- We have seen some gullies cut so sharply and deeply that our stirrups drag on the sides. Such situations are in fact set up by incorrect trail design, but abuse by riders exacerbates the problem.


- At stream crossings, we sometimes see the evidence of someone who might have shouted out to his/her fellow riders: "Look what my horse and I can do!" Then they proceeded to demonstrate they had no need to use the crossing specially constructed to ensure rider safety and stream protection. In situations like this, the horse claws his way up the bank, and the subsequent streambank destabilization results in additional silt loads in the stream.

- Last but not least, we often find cans, bottles and other items that were convenient enough to pack in, but once emptied were too inconvenient to pack out. Lonewalker and I muse that while few riders are comedian Jeff Foxworthy's rednecks at home, quite a few seem to slip into that role when on the trail!

Land ethics

Lonewalker and I inevitably spend time discussing the paucity of a land ethic among the many people who claim to love the outdoor experience, including riding a horse on a wildlands trail, but who treat the land with disrespect.

After a lifetime spent on the land, we both know you don't need to be a professional ecologist to have an ecological conscience. An ecological conscience and a sense of ethical behavior are concomitant forces if we are to honestly seek a harmonious relationship with the land.

As ecologist and environmentalist Aldo Leopold said: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." Our "amen" for the trail rider is: "Ride with a smile, a light hand – and lightly upon the land!" 

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