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Riders & Stock Users Learn to Travel “Green”

By Sarah Wynne Jackson

Since Back Country Horsemen of America was founded in 1973, they have recognized their role in protecting and preserving wilderness lands. Point four of their mission statement expresses their feeling of responsibility: “To educate, encourage, and solicit active participation in the wise use of the back country resource by horsemen and the general public commensurate with our heritage.”

Ride Lightly on the Land

For many years, BCHA has been both practicing and advocating minimum impact stock use in America’s back country. In 2006, the BCHA Board of Directors established the goal that Back Country Horsemen of America become the primary provider of low impact training to horseback riders and stock users nationally.

The creation of the BCHA Leave No Trace Stock Users Education Program formalized the partnership between BCHA and their fellow land preservation advocates, the Nine Mile Outdoor Training Center and the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics.

Leave No Trace, or LNT, is a national program designed to assist outdoor enthusiasts in reducing their impact when they enjoy the wilderness. The program educates land users about the nature of their recreational impact and teaches techniques to minimize that impact.

Most conservation organizations work to repair environmental impacts or limit the public’s access to wilderness land in an effort to preserve it. BCHA and LNT focus instead on the *people*, empowering them through education to make the right choices for the environment, effectively preventing those negative impacts in the first place.

Preservation Through Education

As Back Country Horsemen of America has become the premiere equine organization to communicate minimum impact methods and the wise use of horses and mules in the back country, they have embraced the Leave No Trace program and principles.

Each year, BCHA invites twelve students to come to the U.S. Forest Service Nine Mile Remount Station near Missoula, Montana, for five days of Leave No Trace Stock Users Education. Living out in the back country, they learn from Master Educators how to travel and camp with their horses while having a minimum impact on the land, and also learn how to pass that knowledge on to others.

Since their first class in 2007, Back Country Horsemen of America has trained 24 LNT Master Educators. At the conclusion of their third Master Course, May 4-8, 2009, BCHA will have graduated 36 students, representing 19 member organizations. Their goal is to have at least one LNT Master Educator in every BCHA chapter.

These Master Educators then agree to teach two Trainer courses (a shortened version of the Master course) each year for two years in cooperation with their local Back Country Horsemen of America unit. In this way, Leave No Trace stock use techniques and principles will spread quickly among horse users, maximizing the benefit to our back country lands.

Always looking for ways to “give back,” BCHA makes sure that the Leave No Trace Stock Users Education Program tuition is paid for each student. This is accomplished through the BCHA Education Foundation (the non-profit portion of the organization), the BCHA General Fund, and LNT scholarships.

Students must provide their own transportation to Montana and a one night hotel stay the day before. But once the program begins, BCHA pays for all expenses for every student until the end of the course, including materials, meals, and related staff costs.

The Leave No Trace Principles

Back Country Horsemen of America follows the seven Leave No Trace fundamental principles in their effort to minimize human impact on our wilderness and back country. This code of outdoor ethics can be applied to any land user, including equestrians, whether they ride out of their back yard, travel to trailheads for day rides, or take extended pack trips into a wilderness.

The first LNT principle, “plan ahead and prepare,” should be the mantra of anyone heading out into the landscape. Horse users in particular need to know what trails are open to horse use and which ones are not. We should plan to visit in small groups to limit stress on the land and be sure we have the appropriate equipment with us for when we stop to rest our horses or camp overnight.

The second principle, “travel and camp on durable surfaces,” requires that we stay on the trail to avoid damaging trailside plants and seek out already established campsites. Try to tie your stock on gravel or dry grasses to avoid damage to the land.

Leave No Trace and BCHA recommend that land users “dispose of waste properly.” If you pack it in, pack it out, including trash and spilled foods. Horse users should take the

time to spread manure so it will decompose quickly in the weather. Also don't let your horse leave a "deposit" within 200 feet of streams or lakes.

"Leave what you find" may not seem to apply to horsemen specifically, but we can leave things as we found them by repairing any damage our horses left behind, such as a hole pawed in the ground.

"Minimize campfire impacts" is a principle that applies to anyone staying overnight. Use only established camping spots, keep fires small, put campfires out completely, and then scatter the cool ashes.

The principle "respect wildlife" is appropriate to campers and also those out for a day ride. Don't offer food to wildlife, and if you see any wild animals, don't follow or approach them. If you have dogs with you, keep them under control so they don't harass wildlife.

"Be considerate of other visitors" is a code of conduct every one of us should follow in every part of life, not just when riding out in the back country. Be courteous to other land users, moving your horse to the uphill side of the trail so they can pass comfortably. Avoid leaving manure on the trail or at trailheads, and try to park your rig in a way that doesn't take up more room than necessary in cramped parking areas.

About Back Country Horsemen of America

BCHA is a non-profit corporation made up of state organizations, affiliates, and at large members. Their efforts have brought about positive changes in regards to the use of horses and stock in the wilderness and public lands.

If you want to know more about Back Country Horsemen of America or become a member, visit their website: www.backcountryhorse.com, call 888-893-5161, or write PO Box 1367, Graham, WA 98338-1367. The future of horse use on public lands is in our hands!

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