

Think Before You Stack



Stone stacking is being studied for its potentially detrimental impact on wildlife and the environment.
Photo by Angela McLaughlin

Angela McLaughlin ~ The Journal • **27 days ago**

As you gaze across the landscape, admiring the natural beauty surrounding you, a small mound of rocks catches your eye. Built from natural material yet unnaturally arranged, it seems out of place in an otherwise unaltered terrain.

You spot a second one and then a third, wondering what they could mean or where they came from.

The hobby of stacking stones has grown in popularity, driven by social media, as a rising wave of Instagram photos of balanced rocks sweeps across the internet. These stacks of stones are also called "cairns," which derives from a Gaelic word roughly meaning "heap of stones."

Cairns were originally used as landmarks and, later, as burial

monuments around the world.

Today, they are often used as directional landmarks. However, the growing trend of building them as an art form or photo opportunity is having a large-scale impact on the delicate environments in which they are found.

Each rock used for stacking is teeming with life from the microorganisms attached to them, and moving the rocks can interrupt the lifecycles of these organisms.

Jessica Geiszler, San Diego County Department of Parks and Recreation marketing and public outreach manager, says, "Removing rocks from their original locations disturbs local habitat, and is potentially unsafe, as insects, scorpions, snakes and other wildlife could be using those rocks for shelter."

It can also disturb foraging and nesting areas, and can potentially incite or expedite erosion by exposing the soil to water and wind. This damage can have a significant impact in fragile riparian habitats, such as Oakoasis County Preserve in Lakeside, as well as other popular hiking areas with a similar environment.

The scale of this activity has been documented in places like Acadia National Park, where volunteers mitigated nearly 3,500 rock stacks on two mountains alone in 2016 and 2017.

For some outdoor enthusiasts, seeing nature in its original state — unaltered by humans — is what draws them to the wild. When obvious signs of human influences are seen, it can detract from an area's natural beauty.

Does this mean you should knock over every cairn you see? Definitely not.

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The use of cairns is still an effective way for staff in parks to mark trails and landmarks for backcountry hikers. Rock cairns are used at national parks such as El Malpais National Monument in New Mexico, Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park and Acadia National Park in Maine, but under the supervision and consideration of professionals who understand how to have as minimal an impact as possible.

"While cairns might be found in parks that do not have clear trail signage, county parks and preserves are well-marked — and following cairns could lead hikers off-trail, to potentially dangerous situations and in areas with sensitive and protected habitat," says Geiszler, adding that San Diego County adheres to the principles of Leave No Trace.

As rules may vary from park to park, it is important to check in before you hit the trail.

The National Park Service says, "Every park has a different way it maintains trails and cairns; however, they all have the same rules: If you come across a cairn, do not disturb it. Don't knock it down or add to it. Follow the guidelines from the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics to ensure future hikers can navigate the trail and prevent damage to the landscape."

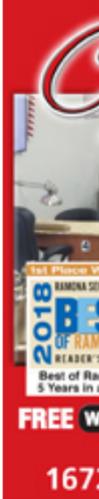
"If you see a cairn in a county park or preserve, please report it to the ranger on duty or by calling the phone number listed in the park kiosk," says Geiszler. "Do not remove or topple it, as that could further disrupt the surrounding environment."

While stone stacking may have been harmless in isolation, or on private property, the scale in which it now exists in preserved spaces has transformed the action into something that has a substantial impact.

As American 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."





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