

NOLS: Bringing Sustainability Education to the Front-Country

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Abstract: Minimum impact camping is a focus of most wilderness programs, but what example are we setting for our students before we get to the backcountry? In the past eight years NOLS has increased its focus on leading and teaching front-country sustainability by example, in addition to Leave No Trace practices taught in wilderness classrooms. This article explores some of the strategies, challenges, and successes in bringing sustainability to NOLS' front-country operations.

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While our formal initiative is relatively recent, environmental sustainability is not new to the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). The school was defining the concept of backcountry sustainability—minimum-impact camping and setting the standard for sustainable backcountry travel—when we first started sending students into the Wind River Mountains in 1965. Through more than 45 years of leading wilderness expeditions in nearly every type of ecosystem, we have refined and perfected the concept, learning through experience and hundreds of thousands of nights slept on the ground around the world. In the early '90s, in collaboration with federal land management agencies, these practices were formalized into Leave No Trace (LNT), which has become the unparalleled ethic and practice for minimum-impact travel in the outdoors.

As a leadership school, walking our talk, and leading by example is an important part of the culture at NOLS. In the backcountry we do this by faithfully practicing our LNT ethic with our students. In the past eight years, however, NOLS has expanded this focus on sustainable practices from its backcountry roots to our front-country facilities and operations. While our environmentally minded faculty and staff have always engaged in low-impact practices for our front-country operations, in 2006 we formalized and centralized environmental sustainability at NOLS. We established a school-wide Sustainability Initiative, including the creation of long-term carbon reduction goals, and began to teach our students about front-country sustainability concepts and their practice at NOLS.

As a nonprofit, we certainly have our challenges in funding capital-intensive projects such as solar arrays and extensive efficiency retrofitting. We have been fortunate to receive extensive grant funding for these types of projects. At the same time, we have completed numerous smaller projects that demand less financial investment. Our recent facility efficiency audit process is aimed specifically at identifying the remaining “low-hanging fruit” at NOLS facilities, focusing on cost-efficient energy savings. We have found that though big projects are necessary to illustrate our sustainability commitment to our students, often our smaller acts of sustainability speak louder.

For example, a big part of teaching and learning environmental ethics at NOLS is practicing what we preach. In the backcountry, students and instructors routinely reclaim fire rings and pack trash for weeks to clean up the wilderness. In the front-country, we haul buckets of food scraps to composting sites (or pigpens) and have a culture that makes reusable coffee mugs and water bottles the norm. While these small things may at first glance seem inconsequential and almost trite when compared to larger carbon reduction efforts, they are likely the most impactful part of the sustainability program at NOLS because they speak to a culture of sustainability in which students can participate.

Raising student awareness about other, less obvious sustainability efforts is also part of our larger effort to increase the educational impact of the initiative. NOLS Curriculum Manager John Gookin aptly noted in his 2010 contribution to *The Journal of Sustainability Education*, “Organic Gardening: Education From Within,” it would be a, “*faux pas* ... to merely add a layer of lectures on sustainability education” to a NOLS course. Instead, instructors are enlisted to start conversations about sustainability with their students that fit into the course experience. A typical

example would be examining how NOLS students are transported. Once in the field they are typically almost carbon neutral, hiking or otherwise self-propelling themselves around the backcountry. But what about before they got to the roadhead? NOLS is actively investigating alternative fuels for transporting students from in-town facilities to roadheads. There is a good chance students utilized a non-petroleum based fuel without realizing it. To continue the conversation, instructors may ask about their mode of transportation before they got to the NOLS facility. There's an even better chance they flew thousands of miles on more than one airplane just to get to a NOLS location. Both are environmentally significant, and both are easy to overlook because they blend seamlessly into our typical way of life. The goal of our conversations with our students is to bring these efforts to the surface and give fodder to their intellectual and analytical processes surrounding this crucial topic.

Reducing our environmental footprint is critical but really only a small part of the education our students gain during their time in the wilderness. Our greatest contribution to the environment lies not in renewable energy projects, but in what students and graduates take away from their NOLS experience. They take in and value our planet's power and beauty, and they understand its fragility. They are more aware of both the contributions and impacts they have, and can have, on our planet. They become skilled, positive leaders with acute environmental awareness and a strong ethical foundation that enhances their contribution to wild places and to the world.



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