

COMMENTARY

# Leave No Trace Starts at Home: A Response to Critics and Vision for the Future

PETER ALAGONA<sup>1,\*</sup> & GREGORY SIMON<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of History and Environmental Studies Program, University of California, California, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, University of Colorado, Denver, Colorado, USA

In the March 2009 issue of this journal, we published an essay entitled ‘Beyond Leave No Trace’ (Simon & Alagona, 2009). Our paper investigated the development of Leave No Trace (LNT) in the United States, explored the historical and geographical assumptions that underpin LNT as an environmental ethic, described its strengths and accomplishments, explained its logical and normative weaknesses, and identified opportunities to expand this already successful approach beyond its artificial and self-imposed limitations. We were not the first authors to explore the history of LNT (Turner, 2002), and we joined a growing chorus of researchers who have called for a more effective integration of critical humanistic scholarship into land management and environmental education (Cachelin, Rose, Dustin, & Shooter, 2011; Havlick, 2006; Lockhart, 2006).

Yet our essay touched a nerve. It became the subject of a vigorous debate among the staff and sponsors of the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Education (LNTCOE), the leading non-governmental organization that promotes LNT programs, practices, and principles. It generated a controversy at LNTCOE’s annual board meeting (Personal communication with LNT staff). And it elicited a critical response paper, entitled ‘Revisiting “Beyond Leave No Trace”’ (Marion, Lawhon, Vagias, & Newman, 2011).

Our objectives in the current essay are threefold. In the first section, we address critiques from the Marion *et al.* (2010) response paper. In the second section, we rearticulate the argument from our original paper, including the major shortcomings

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*Correspondence Address:* Peter Alagona, Department of History and Environmental Studies Program, University of California, California, USA. Email: palagona@gmail.com

we see with the current LNT approach. In the third section, we clarify our vision for moving beyond LNT without abandoning its considerable accomplishments.

Throughout this essay, as in our original article, we remain steadfast in our endorsement of LNT's value and potential. We, too, are outdoor enthusiasts, wilderness travelers, and city park picnickers who believe in leaving places as good—or better—than we found them. But this simple ethic is not enough in a world of global capital circulation where the goods we produce and consume in order to enjoy the outdoors can have long-term and far-reaching social and environmental ramifications. Our original article sought to push LNT further by making it more honest and inclusive regarding the full range of impacts associated with modern outdoor recreation. We resume that effort here, and we will continue to do so in future research and writing.

### Responding to the Response

Marion *et al.* (2011) make several important points in their response paper regarding the objectives and activities of LNTCOE and its partners. They also offer evidence that LNT programs have already begun to tackle some of the problems we discussed in our original article, such as the need for more active engagement in park and wilderness conservation by a broader and more diverse constituency. These are valuable contributions that add richness and complexity to the story of Leave No Trace. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the Marion *et al.* response paper is more of a rhetorical exercise than a substantive rebuttal. In this section, we identify and discuss the paper's main rhetorical devices, each of which seek to delegitimize our claims without directly challenging any of our key arguments or conclusions.

First, the authors present their essay as a series of corrections meant to address factual inaccuracies, not an intellectual challenge based on a different perspective. By claiming to take the empirical high ground, the responders offer themselves as more credible sources even before they present any evidence. This is a common form of diversionary argumentation. In our work, we explored LNT's historical and geographical context, and we discovered important social, economic, and environmental linkages that we felt deserved reflection and theorization. In taking this more expansive perspective we made an analytical choice. We did so precisely because we came to believe that traditional framings of LNT had ignored these broader connections. By failing to engage with or even acknowledge the legitimacy of such contextual, big-picture reasoning, Marion *et al.* replicate the very same myopic framing of LNT that we sought to challenge in our original essay.

Second, Marion *et al.* contend that our paper lacks methodological rigor, adequate citations, and empirical evidence to support its arguments. It fails to meet their scientific standards, and as such our conclusions are automatically suspect. 'We invite discourse and critique of the LNT program,' they write, 'but scientific literature requires supporting evidence for such statements' (Marion *et al.*, 2011). We agree that scholarly arguments should be based on sound evidence, but once again we sense a rhetorical maneuver. The responders demand scientific evidence to support arguments developed for publication in an ethics and policy journal. In our paper, we employed standard research methods—the identification of primary

source documents, empirical analysis of texts, qualitative interpretation, and narrative argumentation—that historians, cultural geographers, philosophers, and other humanistic scholars have used for as long as their fields have existed. Readers are welcome to evaluate our work based on the sophistication of our argument or how effectively we apply these methods. Dismissing our essay for its lack of scientific evidence, however, is an unmerited critique.

Third, although Marion *et al.* appear to cast doubt on our substantive claims, they target only the peripheries of our argument without directly challenging any of our core insights or conclusions. For example, the responders argue that our paper misrepresents LNT because it focuses on wilderness areas whereas LNT programs now include frontcountry spaces, such as urban parks. In our paper, we note that the recent expansion of LNT beyond wilderness areas is part of the historical evolution of the program, and related efforts are now underway on a wide range of public lands. We could have emphasized this evolution further, but we chose not to do so because it is relatively minor point in our larger argument.

Marion *et al.* also take issue with our account of LNT's role in the larger context of American consumerism. The authors write that LNT does not force its adherents to purchase new gear, and those who consume outdoor products make their choices for many reasons. This is true. Yet, to deny the central role of the outdoor industry in contemporary American experiences of nature is to disregard an abundance of evidence to the contrary. High-technology consumer goods increasingly mediate human relations with nature, and scholars in a wide variety of fields are currently engaged in studies of this phenomenon (Szasz, 2007). Our goal was to show how LNT programs, practices, and principles are shaped by—and inextricable from—the larger consumer culture of which they are a part.

Another apparently substantive critique from Marion *et al.* (2011) involves the kinds of impacts that LNT seeks to alleviate. The responders read our essay, in part, as a statement of concern about the externalities associated with the production and distribution of gear and clothing sold for use in outdoor recreation. They do not dispute that such externalities exist, but they think that this issue should remain outside the purview of LNT because addressing such concerns could dilute the program's strong focus and clear message.

There are two problems with this critique. It is an 'appeal to outcomes' argument, in which one party in a debate invokes the potential implications of a claim as a way to attack that claim's intellectual merit. This is a logical fallacy because it conflates content with consequences. The other problem is that it oversimplifies our argument. In our essay, we attempted to move beyond the problematic notion of externalities to the concept of displacement, which refers to the processes by which environmental impacts get shifted from one place to another. We agree that LNT's endorsement of energy intensive, high-technology gear and clothing is appropriate in many cases. Yet we also believe it is important to acknowledge that adopting such products often involves the shifting of environmental impacts from sites of consumption in developed countries, to sites of production in less developed countries with lower pollution and labor standards. When LNT educators avoid talking about the costs and benefits of such displacements, they miss an ideal opportunity to engage in a broader conversation about the global dimensions of environmental ethics.

### **Our Argument**

During its short history, LNTCOE's programs have made significant positive contributions to conservation and education (Boyers, Fincher, & van Wagendonk, 2000). Like thousands of other outdoor enthusiasts, we adhere to LNT principles in our recreational endeavors. We have spent years teaching college-level field courses in which we encourage our students to follow the principles of LNT, and we wholeheartedly support the continued development and expansion of LNTCOE's educational programs. Our problem with LNT is not what it does but what it fails to do. We argue that LNT, in its traditional form, disguises the larger social and environmental consequences of outdoor recreation in countries with consumer-oriented economies such as the United States. We can summarize this argument in three key points.

First, LNT could not exist in its current form without a plethora of consumer products. It emerged at a time in history when Americans were embracing high-technology, mass consumption, and energy-intensive lifestyles. Today's outdoor products, from technical garments to ultra-light gear, are marvels of research, development, and marketing. These products enable outdoor enthusiasts to avoid local environmental impacts in ways that were unimaginable to previous generations. They also allow recreationists to entertain the illusion of self-sufficiency, even though they require a vast infrastructure to enable their experiences. Materials that comprise most outdoor clothing and equipment reach markets in developed countries only after passing through global commodity chains. LNT encourages the consumption of these products through its product endorsements, and because its principles are often difficult to follow without the appropriate gear.

A second point of our argument is that the use of such products does not erase environmental impacts—it only displaces them from the sites of consumption to sites of production, distribution, and disposal. We have already discussed the concept of displacement above and we will not elaborate further here. Instead, we defer to the outdoor retailer Recreational Equipment Incorporated (REI), which says on its website that the 'environmental impact associated with the creation of products is probably larger than all other impacts we have as a company' (Recreational Equipment Incorporated, 2011).

A third point of our argument is that LNT systematically obscures these impacts, displacements, and connections by encouraging the false belief that it is possible to 'leave no trace.' The seven principles of LNT cannot erase the myriad impacts that result from contemporary outdoor recreation. When LNT advocates avoid discussing this issue, it becomes even more difficult for recreationists to make educated consumer choices. They also discourage a more radical form of public engagement, which recognizes that the consequences of outdoor recreation extend far beyond picnic benches and trailheads to mines, ports, factories, shipping lanes, highways, and shopping malls. We believe that broaching these issues has the potential to boost LNTCOE's status as a respected educational institution—not diminish it.

For those who prefer simpler messages with broad public appeal, we can distill our analysis into one essential insight and one key lesson. The insight is that it is

impossible to leave no trace. To do so would be to escape culture, to escape society, to escape economy, to escape geography, even to escape history itself. But this essential insight is perhaps less important, for the LNT community, than the key lesson we hope to leave behind. For people who want to do their best to practice a sustainable lifestyle, then leave no trace starts not at the boundaries of some park or wilderness area, but at home. We suggest that LNTCOE adopt this phrase—‘Leave No Trace starts at home’—as its eighth principle of Leave No Trace.

### The Trail Ahead

In our original essay, ‘Beyond Leave No Trace,’ we attempted to mobilize the critical scholarship on parks and wilderness areas, from the 1990s and 2000s (for example Cronon, 1995), for application to a practical environmental ethic. Since we wrote our original essay we have witnessed many encouraging developments, including progress from some outdoor industry firms that have increased their corporate transparency, responsibility, and sustainability programs. Trends such as these long predate our work, and we cannot claim any credit based on our small contribution. But one recent episode suggests that our paper has made a tangible influence.

On November 10, 2010, about a year and a half after the publication of our original essay, the lead author, Gregory Simon, attended a sustainability fair with his students on the campus of the University of Colorado, Denver. Two LNTCOE traveling trainers were hosting a booth at the event. (Three of the four authors of the Marion *et al.* response paper are current LNTCOE staff or board members.) Simon approached the booth, and without introducing himself he initiated a discussion with the LNTCOE employees. He mentioned that he thought it was a bit odd that LNT did not consider the importance of technology and consumption or the global impacts associated with contemporary outdoor recreation. The trainer, who we only later discovered had read our paper along with many other LNTCOE staff, looked at him, smiled, and replied: ‘Well, actually, we now like to think of ourselves as going beyond leave no trace.’

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