
Guest Column: Hands off the rocks

July 30, 2021



Hikers are flooding our public lands, so I ask the question: Why can't people just leave the poor rocks alone?

They stack them into monoliths, paint them, write rude words on them. Who looks at a magnificent 350-million-year-old rock and thinks: "That rock needs a makeover!"

First point: graffiti is deplorable. I do not want to see your name, your significant other's name, an ode to your deceased wife (not making this up), or drawings of male genitalia.

As for rock stacks, rock cairns were designed to guide the hiker along a sketchy trail. Unofficial cairns, or "ego stacks," as I like to call them, are allegedly an art form. But they confuse the traveler who thinks they actually mark a trail. Instead, they are a huge flashing sign that means merely, "I was here! Regard my works with wonder!"

I kick them over wherever I find them.

They also clone. One may walk by a single stack, and find that a few days later the area is teeming with teetering piles. One of the principles of Leave No Trace is to stay on trails. Leaving the path to rearrange the rocks contributes to erosion, "user trails" and destruction of delicate plants.

Repositioning rocks also disturbs the wildlife. Growing up in the desert, one of the first lessons I learned is “Never turn over rocks with your bare hands.” Unfriendly things live under them. Any time a rock is removed from its native habitat it can affect insects, fish, microinvertebrates, vegetation and animals. Indeed, wildlife biologists plead with hikers not to build rock stacks.

As do anthropologists. In the Southwest, some of the best rocks for stacking have been removed from archeological sites. Trying to reposition those lovely flat rocks may damage an archaic village.

Rocks that have snuggled into their preferred places help the landscape resist erosion. Move enough rocks, and the soil washes away with the next storm.

I have friends who spend a great deal of their outdoor time deconstructing illegal rock stacks. They often are harassed for doing so, but being on the right side of history is not for sissies.

Another issue is painted rocks, which became popular during the pandemic. A Google search for “painted rocks” leads to screeds about a fun family activity fostering kindness, inspiration, positivity and possibly world peace. One is encouraged to paint inspirational messages on rocks, hide them and post a challenge online.

The paints and sealants used can contaminate the area. If rocks are carefully concealed as part of a scavenger hunt, the hidiers and the hunters go off-trail and trample delicate ecosystems.

Staffers at national parks and state parks ask that people not leave painted rocks or construct rock stacks. It is considered vandalism, is disrespectful, and is certainly illegal. National parks have a “leave it as you found it” ethic, and fiddling with the rocks doesn’t fit.

Painted rocks and stacked rocks introduce a human element to a wild area. Certainly while hiking a popular trail one cannot really believe that they’re the first visitor ever. But it is the first time for that person. Isn’t it intrusive to find a rock painted in bright colors and encouraging one to “enjoy”?

We enter the wilderness to refresh our souls. We do not need to be reminded by graffiti, by rock stacks, or by paintings that the world can follow us anywhere.

I have been accused of being a spoilsport, particularly in the area of repurposing rocks. How dare I question an innocent enjoyment of the outdoors? We are just having fun!

Odd, but this is the same excuse I hear when people justify building illegal campfires. Or blasting out music on weatherproof speakers. I suppose to the entitled, anything goes so long as we are “just having fun.”

Nature unadorned is pretty awesome. I recall being pulled over to a road cut by a geologist friend. Geologists never met a road cut they did not like. He pointed out a riverbed at eye level, showing me how the alignment of the embedded rocks revealed the direction of stream flow.

“Some of these rocks are from the ancestral Appalachians, thousands of miles away,” he said. “How did they even get here?”

That question will always be more remarkable than pulling a rock out of the ground , painting unicorns on it, and demanding: “ Have a nice day.”

Marjorie “Slim” Woodruff is a contributor to Writers on the Range, writersontherange.org, a nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. She works as an educator at the bottom of the Grand Canyon.