

Writers on the Range: Live rough and know the real world

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Guides in the outdoor industry inevitably come up with collective nicknames for customers. On horseback they're "dudes," on the river they're "mers" — short for customers — and they're "sticks" if you're trying to trick a trout. Sometimes the terms trend a little negative — "flatlander" comes to mind, and there's another name I've come to use but need to explain it.

It comes out of what I do: For the last decade, I've guided multi-day whitewater fly-fishing trips through western Colorado's Gunnison Gorge during the summer. Then I spend the fall guiding horseback hunting outfits in wilderness. It adds up to around 100 nights a year sleeping rough.

I've met a lot of people from all over the country, and, sad to say, too many seem oblivious to how scarce clean water is in the outback and also how much work it takes to make water safe for drinking. That's why I sometimes call them "water poopers."

Spill a big batch of filtered water, treat a horse like a car rather than a living being, or behave in some other entitled way, and you might get saddled with this moniker. If a client takes offense, I explain that a water-poooper assumes that a flush toilet is necessary to life, and they usually agree: “Yep, that’s me. Never thought about it that way.”

On the river, and in hunting camp, water is precious: We filter every drop of water that we drink. We haul the water from the river or the creek to camp and then let gravity filters purify it, one drop at a time.

On overnight river trips we use a portable toilet setup with a great view, but some clients never get over their distaste of having to use it. At trip’s end, our portable toilet gets packed out, leaving nothing behind.

On the mountain every fall, we usually have to dig two 5-foot-deep outhouse holes at least 40 paces from the main tents. After a stalagmite of poop and toilet paper inevitably forms, the “camp-jack” has the unlucky job of knocking over the tower. We fill in the hole when it’s three-quarters full and then dig a new one.

Wilderness guides love saying things like “misery makes memories,” or “embrace the suck.” It’s good for a laugh when rain, mud or a sudden freeze moves in, but it helps make living deep in the wilderness an experience to learn from and remember. It also breaks the water-poooper spell we fall into in the “real world.” Being responsible for our personal needs connects us to the realities of life that modern civilization hides.

Our elk camp is located in an aspen forest licking down into Gambel oak brush, and every year I notice that the land is drier and hotter. Aspens are not doing well. The mature trees are dead or dying and only saplings seem to have any vigor. A little creek used to run cool enough to hold some fingerling trout, but vegetation is moving higher up the mountain and the creek is warm. The elk rut also happens later in the fall each year.

At some point every season after six weeks in the wild, I drive home, and as I crest the ridge and see the lights of Grand Junction, it hits me: Some 150,000-plus people live in the area, and they all defecate in purified water without a second thought.

For those first few days back in civilization, the absurdity is overwhelming. But I also can see the bigger picture of our careless lives. Living in a wild place separates us from what is essential: Shelter. Energy. Food. Clean water. Waste removal. We’re forced to take individual responsibility for all of those things in the backcountry.

Of course, I’m a water-poooper, too. No one is immune. No matter how you wipe it, we all clean ourselves with dead trees, even protestors sitting in old growth forests.

I might just be a river rat and mule skinner, but I know that many of our most pressing environmental and social issues stem from this water-poooper line of thinking.

Stepping out of the system to take responsibility for ourselves, even for a few days in the wild, can be eye-opening. It’s amazing to realize how fragile our luxuries are, from toilets that whisk waste away to having clean water pour out of a tap.

It is unwise to take these luxuries for granted.

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