
Guest Opinion: Let's redefine those bucket lists

October 24, 2021



What did we learn this summer and fall? We learned that people who'd been cooped up, thanks to COVID-19, flocked to our national parks and forests. Once there, many were eager to empty their bucket list of must-do activities in the outdoors.

Consequences ranged from overflowing parking lots, lots of litter and human waste and illegal pets on and off the trails, to campers parking anywhere they wanted, copious graffiti and calls for multiple rescues. At Grand Canyon alone, the summer rescue count exceeded all of last year's. Visitation on public lands increased as much as 50 percent this summer, while at the same time, enforcement budgets had been slashed.

That makes me propose some bucket-list suggestions that might seem like plain old common sense. First, while chasing fulfillment of your list, approach the outdoors like a designated adult and learn what rules apply. Second, make sure you are trackable – and not because you leave a trail of trash or discarded water bottles. Third, do not under any circumstances celebrate your love or anything else by scratching your name on rocks or onto a tree.

Why must I pick up a person's detritus or erase their doodles? One big item on my list is to go hiking without playing housemaid to others.

One young miscreant informed me that she did not know that she was doing anything wrong, everyone else was doing it, and it was a "non-enforceable" law. I suppose if a law enforcement ranger does not observe someone breaking the law it is difficult, though not impossible, to get a conviction. The same can be said for shoplifting, DUIs or even murder. Somehow that does not make any of those things right.

A big problem with bucket lists is that some goals require a certain level of fitness or expertise, and fulfillment becomes problematic if one lacks either of these qualities. The same people who would quail at running a marathon believe that hiking Half Dome — 16 miles round trip, 4,800 feet of elevation — or climbing Long's Peak — 15 miles round trip, 3,825 feet — will be a walk in the park.

Hiking or running rim-to-rim at Grand Canyon is a big goal for lists. This involves starting at one rim or the other and hiking 21 to 24 miles with an elevation change of 11,000 feet. To get the whole "oh wow" reaction from one's peers, the goal is to complete this in one day.

I watched rangers plead with one rim-to-rim woman at the bottom of the Canyon to abort her run. She was disoriented and on the verge of blacking out. They offered her a bed in the clinic so she could finish the next day. But, no, she had to finish that day or it would not be marked off her bucket list. She staggered off and had to be rescued two hours later.

How often do we read of climbers on Everest who vanish into the void because they have to summit or die? I do not think the goal of a bucket list is to kick the bucket while accomplishing it.

Checking off items on a list also seems self-limiting. Done with that, what's next? At Volcanoes National Park in Hawaii, I once drove out at sunset to see the lava fall into the sea. Then we hiked to where we could view the active crater. If we'd had a bucket, it needed to get lots bigger.

Maybe a bucket list could be more of a rabbit hole, with each branch leading to another adventure. One of our rangers tells tourists that visiting the Grand Canyon can change one's vacation plans forever. First they need to see it. Then they need to hike down. Then they need to spend the night. Then they hear about another trail. They become explorers in no time.

Instead of "things to do before I kick the bucket," maybe think of "things to do that dump more things into the bucket."

Meanwhile, whatever we do while enjoying the public lands, and reconnecting with nature, we can show as much respect as we would a friend's backyard — even if our fun is non-enforceable.

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

