

Writers on the Range: Too many tourists follow a leader

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A spectacular picture recently appeared on social media of a young lady in Arizona. She was poised on the edge of a cliff emblazoned with sunset colors. Immediately her online followers clamored to know where the picture was taken, so “I can get one just like it.”

Turns out that it was taken on an off-trail route at the end of a potholed dirt road on the Navajo Nation, and required a permit to even enter the area. Also, I bet she did not climb to that precarious perch on that cliff wearing those fancy shoes.

A local guide lamented that the area would now be getting a slew of “Instagram” tourists. These people would be seeking to replicate the pose with themselves perched on the very same edge, probably wearing those same shoes.

This kind of thing has led to some decrying the unsavory habits of Instagram influencers. These are the folks who trample fields of wildflowers in order to get a shot of themselves displaying a sponsored product. Or who photograph their colorful paintings on wilderness rock faces.

Instagram photos taken on private land have had owners locking their gates because of the hordes of people wandering through looking for the exact location of that idealized post. A perfect shot, however, does not show the queue of people waiting impatiently for their turn at glory.

Even blatant scofflaws get into the act. Some men filmed themselves swimming illegally with endangered pupfish in Nevada —and then they posted the video. Do they truly believe that only iconoclastic souls who disagree with “petty” federal regulations will view said video? Or that park rangers and police don’t own smartphones? Whatever they were thinking, it did make law enforcement easier.

What has happened to old-fashioned spontaneity? Imitation is a form of flattery, but is the only picture worth having one that’s copied from someone else’s? There’s even a website which apparently allows one to paste family pictures into vacation spots without bothering to visit them. A great time saver.

One day while riding my bike, I passed a couple setting up for their flawless picture. When I came back an hour later, they were still working on getting the hair, clothing and attitude just right. The scenery was an afterthought.

People are also falling into copycat mode because apparently just standing on a rim isn’t sexy enough . One has to jump or pretend to fall, which unfortunately may segue into the real thing. Search and Rescue groups decry the glut of visitors who just want the “perfect” picture. There is even a word for them: Killfies.

I’m reminded of the old “mom” adage where wayward children are asked: “if all your friends jumped off a cliff, would you?”

Then I discovered an entire genre of Instagram posts dedicated to ladies who hike and climb in high heels. I assumed that they hiked in real shoes and then changed for the shot, but no, some of them climb mountains in heels. What could possibly go wrong?

Back in the day, we visited the backcountry to get away from other people. Now we invite them digitally to follow and give us “likes.” If a person climbs a mountain and does not post it online, did the hike really happen?

Perhaps I could start a trend: Down-and-dirty influencing. Sweaty, beyond tired, what it really looks like to have hiked up to that cliff.

Think it would catch on?

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