

Unintended impacts: Leaving less in the wilderness



By **Jack Haskel**, PCTA Trail Information Specialist

Dedicated Carsonora Crew trail maintainer **Hank “The Owl” Magnuski** is in his 10th year of providing trail magic to hikers at Sonora Pass. His “Sonora Pass Cafe,” a pop-up operation at the picnic tables, runs for a few days every year as thru-hikers pass by. Hank’s cafe comes complete with recent newspapers, real china, outrageous amounts of food and his famous chocolate chip cookies smothered in whip cream and fruit.

Hank is motivated because he enjoys making someone’s day. He declines donations and personally supports PCTA instead. “It’s a communal meeting spot. People swap stories and check the register for updates.”

It can also be a difficult stretch heading north to Sonora Pass: swift creeks, generous mosquitoes and steep snow are a part of the experience. “There is nothing at the pass, and I decided to do something nice.”

That’s the spirit of the Pacific Crest Trail and our wonderfully generous community. As the PCT grows in popularity, more and more people are connecting with the experience and the community through kind and generous acts of trail magic. It has many forms: a ride into town, a cold soda at the trailhead, a shower and a bunk.

However, a certain form of trail magic is inadvertently affecting the PCT and our community. When left unattended, food and beverages stashed at trailheads and road crossings are creating a litter problem. And while well intentioned, it’s introducing wildlife to human food. Moreover, these caches often become eyesores as trash collects and is strewn about by animals, wind and people. They are often illegal on public land, and limited resources are wasted removing them.

We’ve seen an explosion in unattended trail magic in recent years. It’s understandable. People want to be involved. They want to do something nice. Stashing a bag of snickers and some sodas along the trail can sure make a thru-hiker’s day. I’ve been there and appreciated it. As new trail angels learn about the PCT, few of them will know the problems associated with leaving stashes in the wilderness.

What we can offer is this: trail magic, given in person, is even more generous. Give it in person, and both sides will share happiness more deeply. It’s not simply the food that hikers appreciate; it’s the human connection. Take the lead from Hank Magnuski and share our most precious resource: time.



Left: Trail magic left at Oregon's Santiam Pass last summer may have been a welcome respite for hikers, but it wound up being left as trash. (Photo by Mark Larabee) Above, left: Hank Magnuski (left) and his Sonora Pass trail magic. (Photo from Bears in These Woods blog, courtesy of Thyra Bessette) Above, right: One of the cruelest unintended impacts – this food could cause this bear's demise. (Photo courtesy National Park Service)

"I can't tell you how good it feels to get a little thank-you postcard from someone who finished the trail," Hank says.

We share a narrow space – often two feet wide. Tens of thousands will follow us. If we're going to continue to have a healthy trail, our actions matter. It's up to us to pass along techniques of responsible backcountry travel. Unfortunately, some of the best practices don't always get carried between generations. At PCTA, we're working on building intergenerational knowledge so that we can better protect the experience we all love.

Look for new PCT-specific Leave No Trace guidelines on our website.

Here are some hot issues that we often hear about from rangers, hikers and equestrians:

- Fresh, crystal-clear water is precious to backcountry hikers and the wildlife that lives where we play. Protect water quality by scooping out what you need and washing dishes and bodies far away from the source. Even small amounts of food, sunscreen, bug spray and soap can destroy a desert creek or mountain lake.
- The forests, meadows and deserts we pass through are no match for the power of fire. Fire can be healthy for ecosystems. You still can help protect the trail from unnecessary destruction by treating fire with extreme caution. Only have a campfire when there is ample wood, an existing fire ring, the forests are wet and regulations allow it. Be sure that the fire is completely out by dousing it thoroughly with water before you go to sleep or leave it unattended. Be cautious with your stoves. During periods of extreme danger, alcohol and twig stoves that lack positive shut-off valves and a contained fuel source may be restricted in order to prevent wildfires.

- Wildlife sightings can be one of the most thrilling moments out on the crest. The Pacific Crest corridor is ideal conservation habitat for animals large and small. When animals get into your food, it's a clear recipe for their demise. You are required to properly protect your food and scented items from animals. Use approved canisters in the backcountry for food and all scented items, and use proper food storage techniques in camp.
- Large groups equal large impact. To protect plants and habitat, avoid perpetuating heavily built and impacted camps along the Pacific Crest Trail. Embrace the opportunity for solitary reflection by avoiding congregating in large groups. Group size limits vary along the trail. Generally congregations of 12 or fewer are allowed; sometimes the number allowed at a camp is as few as 6. Use campsites that are out of sight (at least 100 feet from the trail and water).
- Keep the PCT graffiti-free. Don't vandalize signs, structures or anything else. Keep the experience wild by refraining from leaving temporary traces in the form of notes, trash, cairns or signs.
- No one wants to find human waste. Properly bury it and pack out your toilet paper. Trail crews regularly pick up rocks to use in structures. People take lunch breaks just off the trail. When you have to go, go far away from campsites, water and trails.

Whether you're a trail angel or a hiker, you choose how to act on the trail. Our members are some of the most informed and conscientious trail lovers around. We're influencers. It is our shared passion that will keep the Pacific Crest Trail the high-quality experience that it is.

Thanks for choosing the harder, more generous and more intentional path. 🍄

Read our full statement about unattended trail magic on our website at: <http://www.pcta.org/discover-the-trail/faq/#trail-magic>