 ## The Backpacking Beginners' Top 4 Do's and Don'ts #### All you need to know to protect yourself and the environment on your next trip

My first time backpacking I was 17. I dreamed of hiking the Appalachian Trail post-graduation so I took a 3 day trip through the Smoky Mountains as preparation. My father (boy-scout leader and hiking expert) and I mapped out a route, packed our bags, hopped in his VW camper and headed south towards Cocke County Tennessee. Our adventure began with a trek through a warm, July- evening rain. At our camp, my father noted many tips and tricks key to the set-up up of our campsite. That evening and throughout the rest of the 3 day hike, I continued to be surprised at the many preparations I hadn't considered beforehand. Later, when I began hiking solo, these small tips helped me hike safely, responsibly, and sustainably. In this post, I’ll share what I consider to be some of the most useful tips he shared with me to help fellow hikers get off on the right foot (literally and figuratively)

1. DO bring a small shovel and baggie > You might think that being out in the woods means you can pretty much “go” wherever you want. While anywhere around 25 meters away from the trail/campsites is fine drop trow- it’s essential that you dig a hole and cover it afterwards. Many day hikers and backpackers bring their dogs- these and other animals will often get into human waste making for an unpleasant encounter for hikers if its dragged out onto the trail or on a pets fur. Small light trowels can be purchased for relatively cheap on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com/TheTentLab-Improved-Ultralight-Backpacking-Trowel/dp/B07BFH1Y3J?creativeASIN=B07BFH1Y3J&linkCode=w61&imprToken=wKTvubsK8bSSpxjjf6dabw&slotNum=6&tag=gearsignal5-20) or your local hiking outfitter. While toilet paper may seem as if it is biodegradable, the bleach and other chemicals it contains can still harm wildlife. Bring small baggies to contain toilet paper waste, and dispose them later in trash cans located along the trail and at camp sites.



Stream we passed in the Smokys

1. DONT pollute the river while bathing >When coming across a river or lake on the trail, its tempting to strip down right there and suds up without a second thought- but there’s a few precautions that are key to bathing responsibly in the wilderness. Use a biodegradable soap (my personal favorite is [Campsuds](https://www.amazon.com/Campsuds-Biodegradable-Environmentally-Backpacking-Multipurpose/dp/B07FXZHX41/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=biodegradable+hiking+soap&qid=1553722426&s=sporting-goods&sr=1-1)), or unscented [Dr. Bronner’s](https://www.amazon.com/Dr-Bronners-Pure-Castile-Liquid-Soap/dp/B000HJXQ9G/ref=asc_df_B000HJXQ9G/?tag=hyprod-20&linkCode=df0&hvadid=309820087163&hvpos=1o1&hvnetw=g&hvrand=10266158126516147646&hvpone=&hvptwo=&hvqmt=&hvdev=c&hvdvcmdl=&hvlocint=&hvlocphy=9008359&hvtargid=pla-338034733894&psc=1) (Also one of my favorites because it is gentle enough to be used as facewash). For women with longer hair, try to bring an unscented oil (baby oil works for this) or leave in conditioner. Too much soap of any kind can be harmful for the rivers so soap up and rinse off about 15 meters from the river to avoid pollution. Once you’re all rinsed then you can hop in and enjoy the fresh water!
2. DO bear-proof your campsite >It is important to bear-proof ALL your gear at night, not just food. Lotions, bug sprays, etc contain smells that can attract bears and other animals. Store food in [bear proof bags](https://www.rei.com/product/895691/ursack-major-bear-bag?CAWELAID=120217890001112362&CAGPSPN=pla&CAAGID=15877490680&CATCI=pla-447612904525&cm_mmc=PLA_Google%7C404_1050542215%7C8956910001%7Cnone%7C4bcaf4c2-5155-4e60-b91b-b033a5043494%7Cpla-447612904525&lsft=cm_mmc:PLA_Google_Showcase%7C404_1050542215%7C8956910001%7Cnone%7C4bcaf4c2-5155-4e60-b91b-b033a5043494&kclid=4bcaf4c2-5155-4e60-b91b-b033a5043494&gclid=EAIaIQobChMI2v3Fv7Cj4QIVxVYNCh3GkQkLEAQYASABEgJ-aPD_BwE). Don’t risk losing or damaging your gear by leaving it accessible to wildlife. Many campsites (especially along the Appalachian Trail) have bear-proof containers or clothesline-like contraptions across the tops of trees to hang your food. Often they are not well marked and do not have instructions. The lines are usually pulley operated, and require a carabiner. Attach your pack to a hanging pulley and use the appropriate line to hoist it up.



Our Campsite

1. DONT set up camp just anywhere along the trail > Try your best to make it to designated camping area or shelter. Be honest with how much ground you can cover when you start walking so you can make it to a site before the sun sets. It is not only advantageous for your comfort- it’s also a rule in [National Parks](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/home/explore-the-trail/thru-hiking/camping) that backpackers must camp in marked areas. If you cannot reach a site make sure to camp far enough off the trail and avoid gaps- the weather at the base of two mountains is often cold and rainy, and potentially dangerous if it penetrates your tent and gear.