

Water While Backpacking

by Joe Vockley

On the survival hierarchy, water ranks second in importance. A person can live for weeks or months without food, for days without water and only for hours without shelter (depending on the weather). We assume that our clothes, sleeping bags and tents eliminate the need to worry about shelter from the elements. Therefore, we should spend some time talking about water.

You should drink a lot of water. You can drink as much water as you want as long as it doesn't harm the group. I will explain this. The weakest member of the group determines the limitations of the group. In the world of water, if a person drinks or otherwise uses all of his water within 30 minutes of getting on the trail and there is no place to get more for 10 hours, that person becomes a liability to the group, requiring others to share their water with the person who foolishly drank all of their water up front. That, in turn, results in others not having their full share of water. Under these circumstances, a backpacking trip then becomes a quest for water with all other goals forgotten. In hot weather people die because they don't use their water wisely. In the past, we've had several close calls because of water. Each has turned out ok because of teamwork and sharing of water.

While on the trail, you should drink water before you become dehydrated. You should know if and where additional fresh water is available on the trail. Knowing how much water you have and when you will be able to get more will help you to ration water wisely in order to not get dehydrated. This is particularly important when it comes to hiking in hot weather. On the trail, water is filter from streams, rivers, lakes, puddles, melted snow or whatever source is available. The more desperate you are, the more willing you are to use alternative sources of water. The hotter it is, the more often we stop to filter water. The troop owns filters that produce very clean water. The filter removes bacteria, viruses and protozoans from the water. Never drink unfiltered water while backpacking. *Giardia lamblia* is a very common organism that comes from animal waste. You should assume that every water source on the trail is contaminated with *Giardia*. It will make you sick. Our water filters do not filter out significant amounts of chemicals from streams. A little common sense is required in choosing a water source. Don't filter water downstream of a seeping coalmine, don't filter water from a stream or lake with dead fish or animals in it and don't filter water that has an odd color or odor. Sometimes I take along some pH indicator strips which give a great deal of information about the quality of water based on the acidity or alkalinity of the water.

While water is a critical concern, it is unreasonable to think that you can carry enough water to last through an entire trip. It just weighs too much. Two liters is a reasonable compromise between weight, need and availability for East Coast summer/fall backpacking. In hotter and/or drier climates you should increase you water to carrying three liters. You should never carry less than two liters. When carrying water, you need to be careful about what you are carrying the water in. A metal or heavy plastic bottle adds too much weight. I've found that the best water bottles are those that come from the grocery store and have a squirt style lid on it. With that type of lid, you never have to touch the water bottle. This is important when you realize that water is community property. We share water on the trail when need dictates. We share water at meal times for cooking. Many people use Nalgene bottles for carrying water. These are light-weight bottles without a squirt lid. They are ok for weight but you do contaminate the water by drinking directly from the bottle.

A lot of backpackers and cyclist use a device called a "Camel". This is a bag that is placed in the backpack or on your back with a long tube running from it, to your mouth. You suck on it when you want a drink and you don't have to stop to get out your water bottle. There are three disadvantages to this system that I can see. First, you can't see your water supply so you don't know how much you've consumed. As a result you can't ration your water. The second problem is that you contaminate you water by drinking from the tube making it less usable as a shared resource. Third, it makes it difficult to handle the water in terms of refilling, measuring, pouring, etc. This mostly has to do with sharing water. To my way of thinking, a "Camel" is a selfish and foolish way of carrying water and I strongly discourage its use.