

2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces



The Alaskan ecosystem contains vegetation that is sensitive to trampling. We must keep in mind that we are not only visitors in the wildlands, but also stewards.

- Damage to soils and vegetation occurs quickly and can be severe and long term.
- By concentrating use on durable surfaces – those surfaces minimally affected by human use -- we can enjoy an area and leave it as we found it.
- Examples of durable surfaces are: established trails and campsites; bare rock; beaches; gravel bars; dry grasses, unvegetated forest duff and snow.

We can serve as better stewards of coastal Alaska by learning which surfaces are durable and which plants are vulnerable.

- When planning your trip, inquire with local USFS staff to determine the best durable surfaces and to learn which plant communities are most sensitive to trampling and which can endure or quickly recover from use.
- Beaches are the most widespread durable surface along coastal Alaska: they require an awareness of tidal ranges and navigational hazards to be safely used.

- Game trails provide durable traveling surfaces, but should not be used when there are recent salmon kills, carcasses or other fresh signs that indicate animals might be surprised or disturbed.
- Camps should be as far from game trails as possible.

Upon arrival at a new site, take time to explicitly discuss the camp layout that will best preserve the natural integrity of the area.

- Before establishing camp, discuss the appropriate places for unloading gear and setting up tents, the kitchen, the food cache and the latrine, and what routes will be used to transit between these areas.
- Recognize that the kitchen area generally receives the greatest amount of use.

In general, it is best to protect riparian areas by camping at least 200 feet from lakes and streams. In Alaska, it may be acceptable to travel/camp along some river/lake corridors to take advantage of the durable surfaces of beach sand and gravel bars.

- Waterways count as durable surfaces for travel.
- In areas where salmon are running, care must be exercised not to displace the 22 species of forest-dwelling birds and mammals that feed directly on the carcasses of spawned-out salmon, and not to disturb the salmon redds (egg beds).
- Beaches along river/lake corridors are often popular spots and might be more crowded and impacted.
- Rivers may rise and fall rapidly from rain swell, snow and glacier melt, flash floods and glacial outburst floods.
- Discuss with local USFS staff the above concerns to plan your trip.



Many of the significant impacts we find are from people carving out their own Alaskan campsites: limbing trees, clearing rocks/vegetation, leveling the ground, building benches and constructing large fire rings.

- Remember: good campsites are found, not made. Altering a site is not necessary.
- Use camp stoves, sleeping pads, camp chairs and head lamps to provide comfort without site modification.
- Make sure your campsite is clean and natural looking when you leave.

In popular areas durable surfaces include trails, established campsites and other developed sites.

- Prior to setting out, ensure that your party has the proper footwear – rubber boots, gaiters, hip-waders – and the proper appreciation of staying on existing trails, even through deep mud and water.
- Using established routes, trails and campsites is always preferable to pioneering new ones.
- Keep campsites small.
- Focus activity in areas where vegetation is absent.
- Walk single file in the middle of trails to avoid widening them.



Even in pristine areas where visitor use has remained relatively stable, campsites are sprouting up in traditionally low-use areas. In these remote areas, it becomes yet more essential to seek out durable surfaces.

- Visit remote or pristine areas only if you are committed to practicing Leave No Trace principles and discuss them in detail with your party.
- Avoid places where impacts are just beginning so they may recover and remain wild.
- Spread out when hiking over vegetation: when no single plant receives multiple footfalls a trail is less likely to form.
- Walking single file is acceptable where there is little chance of trampling plants, such as along a game trail or gravel bar.
- Beaches, gravel bars, unvegetated forest duff and snow are common durable surfaces in remote Alaska.
- Vary routes around camp to avoid forming trails. Use a collapsible container to bring water to camp rather than making multiple trips to the water source.
- Move camp each day to avoid prolonged impact to any site.
- Dedicate time to naturalize your campsite when you leave so others do not use the same area and it can recover.

