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DENVER & THE WEST CACHE OR TRASH?

GPS HOBBY PACKS ISSUES

[By Electa Draper,](#)
[Denver Post Staff Writer](#)

Durango - With the surging popularity of a high-tech treasure hunt called geocaching, public land managers are watching the old outdoor ethic of "take only pictures; leave only footprints" morph into "take some stuff; leave some stuff."

Geocachers (pronounced "geo-cashers") use hand-held Global Positioning System devices to locate hidden stashes at sites identified by coordinates posted on the Internet.

There are only three rules to the game: You take something from the cache. You leave something in its place. You record the visit in the enclosed log book.

From urban landscapes to national forests, the proliferation of these caches, which usually consist of low-priced trinkets sealed inside containers including mayonnaise jars and ammo boxes, is provoking discussion about whether or not "cache is trash."

That's how San Juan National Forest recreation program leader David Baker sees it.

"The thing that's startling to me is that the actual physical caches on the ground are close to being litter," he says.

The Forest Service has no official policy on geocaching yet, except that no caches of any kind are allowed in wilderness areas.

Baker admits being torn.

"Getting people in the woods, especially getting young people in the woods - that I like about geocaching," Baker says. "But people want to hide and find geocaches everywhere, even if it disrupts wildlife, leaves tire tracks, makes new trails and damages vegetation."

Other foresters are equally unenthusiastic. The Arapaho and Roosevelt national forests and Pawnee National Grassland have stated that there are no regulations on geocaching but add that "the Forest Service encourages visitors to pack it in and pack it out, and geocaching does not support these practices."

The Medicine Bow and Routt national forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland have issued a terse reminder that they have regulations prohibiting leaving any property on the land for more than 14 days.

The Bureau of Land Management allows geocaching in many places, but permission must be granted before a cache is left. Geocaching is not allowed in wildlife refuges or in national parks, unless special permission is obtained.

Many cities and counties have prohibited or sharply restricted geocaching in their parks.

Denver Parks and Recreation spokeswoman Kathy Maloney says the city doesn't allow geocaching in city parks. In Colorado Springs, geocaches are limited to small or see-through containers, and the city sometimes allows one-day, highly controlled events.

"It was more of a security issue for us," city spokesman Scott Thompson says. "Police officers got calls about packages being left in the parks. There was some concern about liability in case something was booby-trapped."

Boulder County requires registration of caches and has a long list of geocaching guidelines.

The San Juan's Baker says geocachers could save everyone a great deal of angst if they would turn to finding natural caches - a good fishing hole, a wild strawberry patch or an interesting rock formation.

"What's the fun in that?" asks a laughing Bill Clifton, a geocacher of three years' experience from Colorado Springs. "It's like a treasure hunt. It's a family thing. The kids really love it. You get pointed to a destination where you wouldn't normally go, and you find stuff."

Those monitoring the activity don't see its growth slowing anytime soon.

"Geocaching is skyrocketing in popularity. I feel like we have to embrace it and try to educate folks to do it in a way that is responsible," says Ben Lawhon, education director for the Boulder-based Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics. "There is a cultural shift where the younger population has very little interest in the outdoors and much more interest in technology.

"From that perspective, geocaching is great because it combines them."

The ranks of geocachers have swelled to an army that maintains more than 300,000 active caches in 222 countries.

"It's just one way to make the world smaller - to tie different people together," says Tandy Cline of Hesperus.

She and her husband, Brian, and their three children maintain a few caches in southwestern Colorado, including one near the Jersey Jim fire watchtower near Mancos.

She rejects the idea geocachers have more impact on the backcountry than campers, mountain bikers, off-road vehicle owners or horseback riders. She says geocachers typically make good stewards of their hiding spots.

"These places really matter to us," Cline says.

Staff writer Electa Draper can be reached at 970-385-0917 or edraper@denverpost.com

Cache and Carry

The essentials of responsible geocaching, as espoused by Leave No Trace and the Forest Service partner nonprofit Tread Lightly:

Never bury caches.

Never leave food items in a cache.

Avoid sensitive areas such as wetlands, steep slopes or archaeological sites.

Leave caches only on durable surfaces along existing trails.

Keep vehicles on designated roads and trails.

Replace rocks or other natural objects lifted during a search.

Find routes that minimize impact.

Leave places looking as if the seekers had never been there.

Check with local land managers for restrictions before placing or seeking a cache.