It was cold, threatening to snow, and they were lost. Four students—Spencer, Jay, Alex and Bobby—got a late start for their day of backpacking in Wyoming’s Wind River Range in the United States, but the move that day was short and fairly straightforward. Yet somewhere in that tangle of nondescript lodgepole pine and granite, they got off track. They were lost and they knew it. So they did the right thing. They stopped and made camp.

A NOLS Lesson
The group of three men and one woman were on their 17th day of a fall semester in the Rockies with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). For 17 days, they had been learning how to live in the mountains. They had learned how to dress for the capricious autumn weather. They knew how to pack their packs, ignite camp stoves, set up tents, cook good meals, use a compass, and read a map. They had learned how to lead in tough situations, how to get along with others, how to communicate, and how to “deal.” They had been taught first aid and instructed on what to do if they should ever become lost.

At 5:30 P.M., they decided to stop again and talk it over. They combed over the maps hoping to match the terrain they saw before them—a small stream and a meadow—to the maps. “We could keep moving,” someone said. “No, everyone is tired and hungry. We need to camp and wait out the storm.” So they pitched their tent, cooked a meal, and went to bed. They could feel the impending snow in the air when they turned in that night.

By dawn, more than a foot of fresh snow had fallen on their camp and more was drifting down through the sky. To move was out of the question. The snow was too deep and their visibility too poor. They spent the rest of the day looking at maps, laughing a lot, cooking, and watching the snow filter through the trees. By 7 P.M., they were in bed.

The next day brought more scouting. They knew the rest of the course participants—three instructors and eight students—would be out looking for them by now. They were okay. They had food and clothing and a good mountain tent. By 9 A.M., they found a knoll and were able to identify a distinctive mountain, putting them significantly west and south of their original location. That night, they went to bed with a plan to move in the morning.

The morning dawned clear and bright. It was great traveling weather, so they broke camp and moved north. “Okay,” they breathed, “we now know exactly where we are. We know where we need to be and how to get there.” They hiked until dark, set up camp again, and laughed. It was challenging, but it was almost fun. They had learned a great deal and were putting it to use.

Early on October 6, 1998, as the sun barely began to lighten the sky, they were on their way. They each wrote a
Team work is a vital component of learning leadership on NOLS courses. Photo courtesy of NOLS.

short goal: find camp. They moved confidently through the timber, following the map and reading the land. They found a trail that looked like a virtual highway, and they hiked up it into the Dad's Creek drainage, their original destination. By 10:30 a.m., they caught sight of their course mates and their shouts of jubilation filled the mountain air. They were home, safe, healthy happy—four NOLS students who had put their training into action.

This anecdote illustrates what NOLS is all about—giving students the training and tools to travel safely in a wilderness setting, learning and leading along the way. Founded in 1965 by legendary mountaineer Paul Petzoldt, the mission of the school is “to be the leading source and teacher of wilderness skills and leadership that serve people and the environment.” NOLS accomplishes its mission in many ways. The most obvious is the “on-the-ground” lessons taught to the school’s students in every course. But there are other ways the school extends its mission, from scholarships for some students to partnerships with government agencies, corporations, and others. In more than 30 years of existence, NOLS has taught 40,000 wilderness travelers such things as leadership and teamwork, safety and judgment, outdoor skills, and environmental studies.

Petzoldt had a dream when he started NOLS: to train leaders. He wanted to help people learn to care about and protect the wilderness, and he wanted to give people the tools to travel safely through wild places. “I’ve always been somewhat of a missionary,” he said in a 1996 interview, “but I saw that if I really wanted to do something for the youth of this country and if I really wanted to do something to protect the outdoors, then to develop a leadership program to train people... was the way I could accomplish the most for the youth of America.”

To accomplish his dream, Petzoldt and his cadre of instructors, individuals such as Tap Tapley and Rob Hellyer, took students out into the mountains for 30 days. They had no base camp, no shower, no chef on the trips. The students learned to cook, camp, hike, climb, and fish on their own. The expedition culminated with a five-day “survival” where small groups of students hiked out of the mountains without instructors.

From the start, NOLS has been a place of creativity and ingenuity. If the staff couldn’t find the gear they needed, they made it. If they couldn’t afford supplies, they bartered for or borrowed them. They bought and broke wild horses to resupply courses. They drove groups to and from the mountains in cattle trucks. They made up camping practices to minimize their impacts. They dressed in army surplus and cooked in old coffee (“billy”) cans over fires. The resulting experience proved powerful. Young women and men rose to the challenge. After a few years of operation, “Thirty Days to Survival,” a documentary about NOLS, was broadcast on television, and the school’s popularity exploded. Overnight, demand outpaced supply.

Growth was not without pain. For years, NOLS operated at a deficit, and existence was hand-to-mouth. But the school weathered the hard times. Today, the tales of cattle trucks, “billy” cans, and army surplus wool trousers are fond memories. Yet the legacy of the early days remains, as does the creativity and ingenuity of those days. Extended wilderness expeditions still form the basis of the NOLS curriculum, and our goal still is to train competent outdoor leaders.

With the changing times, NOLS has also changed. The nonprofit school
now has an aggressive fundraising department and is working to complete a U.S.$8 million endowment. Nearly U.S.$600,000 is awarded for scholarships every year in an effort to expand and diversify. The school also has outreach programs and public policy and research efforts, operates eight branches, and leads courses on five continents. Yet much has stayed the same. NOLS still does real education with real results in a very real place—the wilderness. And the base of international operations is still the same place that Petzoldt handpicked: Lander, Wyoming, a gateway to Wyoming’s Wind River Range. But no matter where one takes a NOLS course, from the Arctic to Australia, students are assured of a quality education that combines excellent instruction, top-notch practical leadership training, the best in skills development, and an outstanding wilderness classroom.

Excellent Instruction
The NOLS instructor course, which every instructor must pass, sets a unique industry standard in outdoor educator training. NOLS offers three types of instructor courses: mountain, whitewater, and sea kayak. Most people apply for the mountain instructor course, held either in Wyoming or Arizona. Instruction is intensive and covers a wide range of topics over its 35-day duration. Only the very best applicants are admitted. This highly selective course and subsequent apprenticeships assure that students will have outstanding qualified teachers.

Practical Leadership
“Leadership training” has become a buzz-phrase, but it’s nothing new for NOLS. Ever since Petzoldt led his first group of students into the Wyoming wilderness, the school has been training leaders. Skills and qualities, including team building, problem solving, judgment, communication, self-confidence, conflict resolution, responsibility, and motivating others, are things that last long after one leaves the school. Students use these skills in the classroom, on the playing field, or in the boardroom. This leadership is practical: students make decisions and learn by doing.

Proven Skills
Providing instruction, tools, and the freedom to practice are the roots of a NOLS education. NOLS students don’t have a guided experience where others take over, or a superficial one that lasts only a few days with no time to practice. Early in the course, they learn the fundamentals of outdoor leading; then they get a lot of opportunity to practice what they’ve learned. Sea kayaking, mountaineering, whitewater boating, sailing, rock climbing, backpacking, outdoor risk management, minimum-impact camping, horsepacking—the list of things NOLS teaches is impressive.

Wilderness on Five Continents
NOLS operates eight branch schools around the world. These include the granite isolation of the Bighorn Range in Wyoming, the jagged peaks of Patagonia, the vast oceans of Mexico, the sweeping grassy steppes of Kenya, the rugged deserts of Australia, and many places in-between. NOLS courses explore some of the wildest reaches of five continents. Nothing is contrived out there. The wilderness teaches lessons that students learn well. But NOLS doesn’t just use the wilderness to teach other lessons, the school teaches students about the wilderness. Through service and guided education, participants gain an appreciation of their surroundings, which stays with them long after they leave.

Training Leaders
The wilderness has a powerful way of bringing people together. When students come to NOLS, they meet people with interests very similar to their own. NOLS students come from all walks of life, from all 50 states, and from 42 countries, drawn to the school for similar reasons. NOLS teaches people to thrive and have a good time in the outdoors. Besides training people to be leaders, as an institution NOLS has been a leader. Nowhere is this more evident than in the national Leave No Trace (LNT) program. Back when Petzoldt started going on camping trips in the 1920s and 1930s, “leave no trace” meant throwing tin cans behind a tree and eventually dousing the embers of last night’s bonfire. In those days one chugged cold water.
A big step in developing these backcountry ethics is the national educational program called LNT. Launched in the early 1970s by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), the LNT program languished for a number of years without coordination and resources. Because of NOLS’s success with the book and video called Soft Paths in the late 1980s, land managers knew NOLS could help with the fledgling LNT program. After all, outdoor conservation techniques and wilderness ethics had been part of NOLS course size is restricted to enhance education quality and decrease impacts in the wilderness. Photo courtesy of NOLS. right out of the stream, trenched the tent site, and headed off for a new campsite the next day.

Today, of course, no serious backpacker carries cans, much less leaves them behind. Campfires, even small ones, are illegal in many places, and one doesn’t dare drink the water unless it has been treated or filtered. Simply stated, there are more people on this planet now than when Petzoldt was guiding clients in the Tetons. Yet while being visited by thousands of people each year, many wild places remain pristine. How is this happening? The answer is simple: People, most people, care about wild lands and treat them accordingly.

NOLS from its start. In 1991, NOLS became a founding partner of LNT program. By supplying financial, technical, and curriculum support and collaborating with four prominent federal land management agencies (the USFS, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service) and numerous other partners, NOLS established LNT as an important national program.

NOLS launched LNT into a new era in a number of different ways. Wilderness rangers, information specialists, and educators have benefited from a special course designed specifically to spread the LNT message. After five days of training, graduates are ready to teach others about building a fire that doesn’t leave an ugly black ring, or how to go to the bathroom outdoors without polluting the streams. Participants become familiar with pertinent ecological, pedagogical, and social research.

The LNT program also has been embraced by the outdoor retail industry. For instance, you might see a patch sewn inside a new Osprey pack just purchased, or you might read about the LNT principles in a North Face advertisement in your favorite magazine. If you travel in a country like Mexico, you might even run into a Mexican land manager who is adept at training others in the principles of No Deje Rastro (Leave No Trace). Call 800-332-4100, for information on the program, pamphlets, booklets to distribute, or a bumper sticker. The beauty of the LNT program is that it’s for everybody. The principles of the program:

- Plan ahead and prepare.
- Camp and travel on durable surfaces.
- Pack it in, pack it out.
- Properly dispose of what you cannot pack out.
- Leave what you find.
- Minimize use and impact of fires.

Components of NOLS Leadership

LNT is just one of the ways that sets NOLS head and shoulders above other wildland users. A central theme of the NOLS mission over the many years has been overall leadership in the outdoor education field. Since NOLS’s inception in 1965, the aspects of maintaining that leadership have changed...
significantly, but central to this mission are three important components: curriculum development, outreach, and research.

Curriculum development is central to the continued success of field courses and is essential in this era of growth in outdoor visitation. Key principles are maintenance of the highest standards for training outdoor leaders in the industry, constant re-evaluation of current field practices, development of new practices where appropriate, and ongoing feedback from students.

Outreach takes on many diverse forms at NOLS and runs across many programs and initiatives. Leadership in the field requires making information available to other organizations, land managers, and the general outdoor public. NOLS has been a primary motivating force in the success of the LNT program, which is an excellent example of a public-private partnership that has contributed greatly to preservation. We regularly host an annual risk management conference that has become an important event for outdoor programs nationwide, and we publish books such as NOLS Wilderness First Aid.

Finally, research remains as the foundation of the NOLS program, whether it’s investigating the best field practices, learning more about our students’ educational experiences, or monitoring important ecological conditions in our wilderness classrooms. Research allows us to maintain our “cutting edge” approach to our profession and to meet new challenges. The research department studies wildland impacts and makes recommendations that NOLS instructors can bring to the students in the classroom. Beyond the students, NOLS helps bring data to land managers through the school’s ongoing research on various projects.

**International Outreach**

NOLS also reaches out to the countries and communities where we operate. An example of this is the NOLS Outdoor Education Program for East Africans (NOEP). NOEP was started in 1991 when the school saw a significant increase in the interest and enthusiasm that East Africans were showing for outdoor education. East Africans are deeply concerned with the conservation of their wilderness areas, but a resource for learning outdoor skills and leadership was lacking. Thus, a cornerstone of the NOEP program’s philosophy is that if more East Africans can visit their parks and reserves and gain an understanding of their value, they will take greater interest in the wise management of these areas for the future. A NOEP course is two to three weeks in duration, with full scholarships available. Some 600 to 800 students have successfully completed NOEP courses since 1991.

In Mexico, NOLS has formed a partnership with the National Institute of Ecology to provide LNT training to land managers. The training takes place in reserves throughout the country and has focused on various climates, including temperate forests, arid lands, and coastal deserts. NOLS also helps run training programs for students at the University of La Paz; teaches group management, leadership, and risk management in the field; and instructs in minimum-impact camping. Additionally, NOLS sponsors an LNT course for land managers.

In Chile, the school has partnered with Chilean forest managers to do LNT training and is helping managers of Torres del Paine National Park plan for recreational use and monitor the impacts of recreation in Chile’s most often-visited national park. What’s more, the school is collaborating with the University of Virginia to monitor impacts in the park. NOLS also runs a mountaineering course each year for Chilean students and has a scholarship for one Chilean student on every semester in Patagonia that the school runs-seven this year. NOLS has also partnered with nonprofit Chilean organizations to provide outdoor educator training in the country’s wildlands.

As the school moves into the next century, plans are underway for more innovations and changes to help students, land managers, and others become better stewards of the Earth’s remaining wildlands. Given the training and tools, NOLS students and trainees learn how to take care of themselves and the wilderness. NOLS makes a difference in its students’ lives, and the students make a difference in the world. IJW

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