

Tennessee Conservation

Leave Stones Untouched: Why You Shouldn't Stack Rocks in the Wild

Katie Wisniewski

5 Minutes



Only when used properly, cairns guide visitors along trails. Public Domain »

How many times have you walked along a trail, in a stream or up a riverbed and seen a stack of rocks that you know was not formed naturally? There are a few different reasons why people stack rocks, including making art or "cairns" or to meditate, but the most recent motivation seems to be to take pictures for social media. The practice of stacking rocks has become more prevalent with the rise in social media, but it's not as harmless as an Instagram post might suggest.



It is important to educate future generations on the importance of protecting fragile environments. David Withers »

One of the most fundamental problems with stacking rocks is how disruptive it can be to surrounding environments. In a mountainous area, removing rocks from the ground can cause significant erosion. Rocks of all sizes keep soil from washing away. An increase in erosion can lead to increased pollution, a decrease in soil fertility and runoff into waterways. When waterways get obstructed, it causes further destruction of habitat for a variety of species.

In fact, some of the most common places people stack rocks are in and around rivers, creeks, and other waterways. [Tennessee State Parks](#) Park Interpretive Specialist Emily Welker said that she has seen rock stacks in several state parks across Tennessee. "I do see more rock stacks along the rivers, especially at the base of waterfalls." Emily travels across the state for her job and has been to a plethora of parks. "It also seems like I always see multiple rock stacks in one area. Like, once one person does it, other people see it as permission to do the same thing."



Streamside salamander with its eggs laid under a rock. David Pineros »

It seems like such a small act, to pull some rocks out of a river, stack them, and take a picture, but it can have a detrimental impact. David Piñeros, a biologist with the [Tennessee Division of Natural Areas](#), works on projects to help preserve and protect endangered and endemic species within Tennessee. "The bottoms of rivers and streams are full of aquatic species. Fish, salamanders and aquatic invertebrates use these rocks for shelter, laying eggs and just living in general." Every single rock in a river or stream can be a possible home for larval stages of insects, salamanders, fish, and amphibians. Simply by moving rocks, people are destroying the habitats of very fragile creatures.

Leigh Gardner, a park ranger on the [Cumberland Trail](#) and a graduate student in biology at [Middle Tennessee State University](#), has spent a lot of her time trying to educate park visitors on why rock stacking is bad in our parks. "This affects all types of species within waterways in our park system, but one of the most harmful places to stack rocks would be along the Hiwassee and Ocoee rivers." [Hiwassee Ocoee State Park](#) is home to a large endemic species of salamander called the [hellbender](#) (*Cryptobranchus alleganiensis*). Once abundant in Tennessee waters, the [Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency](#) has it now listed as "In Need of Management" due to a severe decline in populations due to stream pollution.



Salamanders and other amphibians will lay their eggs directly under rocks. When you pull rocks from a stream to make a cairn, you are disturbing these species David Pineros >

"All salamanders are picky, but the hellbender is especially picky when choosing a habitat to lay their eggs. This means when people take rocks out of the water to build cairns, they are minimizing the opportunities for hellbenders and other salamander species to reproduce. Stacking of rocks can lead *directly* to the decline of several species."

Now, cairns can be helpful when utilized properly. In rocky areas and along trails without trees, they can be used as guides. In fact, cairns were utilized in the [National Parks System](#) as early as 1896, when a man named Waldron Bates created a specific type of cairn for [Acadia National Park](#). These cairns were built specifically to show hikers the way. Many parks still rely on large cairns to guide people along trails that would be nearly invisible otherwise. So when people build cairns in areas that aren't on a trail or that do not mark a trail, they can unintentionally lead people astray. Should you come across stacked rocks that don't seem like they should be there, do not follow them. They could have been randomly assembled with no navigational purpose whatsoever.

Some people think that stacked rocks are beautiful, but they are an eyesore for other visitors. Though it may feel like a connection to nature for the builder, what happens most often is that people stack rocks, snap a picture, and then leave. Rock stacks then interrupt that very connection with nature for others, as they intrude upon an otherwise natural landscape. If every Tennessee State Park visitor built a rock stack somewhere, our parks wouldn't be nearly as beautiful as they are, naturally.

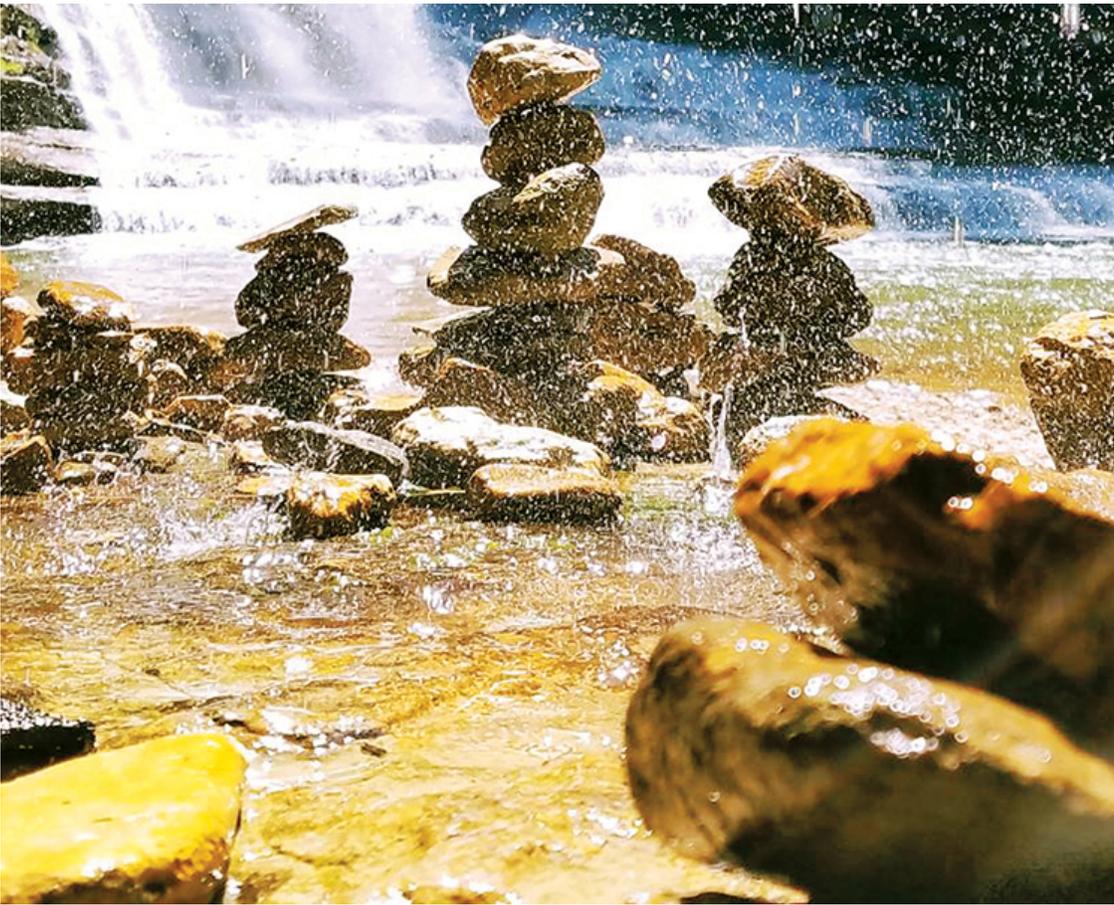
"All too often I come across a beautiful photo of a cairn built in a creek or on the side of a trail at one of our parks," says Brenna Sharpe, the digital marketing manager for Tennessee State Parks. Brenna oversees the majority of the Tennessee State Parks social media sites including [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#), which are popular sites for photos of stacked rocks. "While the photos may be beautiful, they're causing a domino effect on social media. People who see them think it's harmless to recreate what they have seen others doing online."



When visitors participate in Leave No Trace principles, they help preserve parks for the ecosystem and for future park visitors. Cummins Falls is shown here. Anthony Ladd »

"I've been there myself" Brenna says, as an active user of Tennessee's state park system prior to joining the marketing team. "That's why I believe it's important to educate followers on the principles of Leave No Trace, and provide resources that guide park visitors toward responsible recreation."

So what can be done to combat this problem? As Brenna says, it is important for visitors to follow [Leave No Trace](#) principles when they visit any natural space, including one of our 56 Tennessee State Parks. Leave No Trace is a touchstone for outdoor ethics, and provides guidance for people to safely recreate in outdoor spaces without leaving too much of an impact on the natural environment. There are seven Leave No Trace principles that people are suggested to follow, one of the main ones being "leave what you find." By leaving the area how you found it, you are contributing to the preservation of the land not only for future generations, but for the flora and fauna that make this area home.



Multiple rock stacks at Cummins Falls State Park. Rock stacking can disturb the habitats of fragile creatures. Anthony Ladd »

The mission of Tennessee State Parks is "To preserve and protect, in perpetuity, unique examples of natural, cultural, and scenic areas and provide a variety of safe, quality, outdoor experiences through a well-planned and professionally managed system of state parks." It is possible for people to enjoy the outdoors while also protecting it. Instead of building rock stacks to take a picture of, try looking for the beauty and natural art that is already around you. You might be surprised at what you find!

Read more about Tennessee State Parks at tnstateparks.com.

(Katie Wisniewski is Tennessee State Parks regional interpretive specialist for Middle Tennessee.)