

Winthrop Valley Life: Do Not Rock On

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I spent last week on a river trip, which was mostly pretty wonderful: a wild, scenic river; excellent company; and decent, if not spectacular, weather. One annoyance, however, pervaded and then escalated the farther downriver we traveled.



The source of my irritation was painted rocks, which I discovered at our campsite the second night out. These were not pictographs and other such signs of the Indigenous people whose homeland includes the river; these were palm-sized stones on which other river travelers painted pictures, emojis, and quasi-inspirational quotes and left in various campsites en route.

On other Western river trips I've been consistently pleased by how relatively pristine the campsites are, despite the amount of use the rivers see in a typical float season. You will see footprints in the sand or rocks that were used to weigh down ground sheets, but there is generally very little, if any, trash, and few other indicators that tell you another party slept at a site last night. River parties both commercial and private seem fairly committed to leaving nothing behind in the camps.

That's why the painted rocks were so surprising. They were curated in clusters around tree trunks, displayed up against a cliff, and stacked in tiny cairns atop larger boulders. They were not forgotten—they were placed, presumably for the enjoyment of others.

I groused a bit each time we encountered a rock exhibit, then threw the stones in the river as a courtesy to those behind us. I don't have an aversion to painted rocks in general—I've created quite a few myself over the years and have even been known to buy some particularly clever and intricate specimens at Confluence Gallery and goodness knows how many hours I kept my kids entertained with a paint set and some pebbles—but I don't think they belong out in the wilds.

When we got home, I decided to Google "painted rocks in the wilderness" and guess what? It's an actual thing. The Kindness Rock Project (KRP) was started 10 years ago for the purpose of spreading kindness. The idea was you would paint a rock with a picture or a message that might brighten someone's day, then hide it somewhere that someone might find it.

As with anything that ignites a global movement and ends up on the Today Show, the KRP took on a viral life of its own, with adorably motivating rocks appearing all over the place, not just in city parks or along sidewalks but out in forests and national parks and other backcountry areas, many of which have now banned painted rocks, as they spoil the aesthetic of the natural areas. Disneyland apparently banned painted rocks as well, for a similar reason—they sully the park's intended visual experience. (The KRP website has a disclaimer about following Leave No Trace principles and urges painters to "place rocks respectfully" and only with permission.)

The irony is, if the river party ahead of us was painting rocks for the purpose of inspiring kindness, their gestures had the opposite effect. They instead inspired aggravation, exasperation, and, eventually, the use of profanity.

Each time I found them, I pitched the pebbles into the river then took a few moments to contemplate the many untarnished stones of the canyon: shiny black volcanic chunks, vesicular baseball-sized lumps pitted like sponges, sedimentary boulders worn smooth from their tumbles across the river bottom, and layered basalt columns. They needed no Hallmark quotations or rainbows. Just as they were, they inspired if not kindness, then at least a feeling of charity toward the painters ahead of me, who naively thought that the wilderness could be improved upon by human hands.