

Winthrop Valley Life: Aargh

Appeared in Methow Valley News 9.30.25

Well, my goodness, y'all sure have strong opinions on both sides of the aisle about painted rocks! I've never heard from so many of you after the publication of a column—at least, not since I wrote about the time when Jenna Kokes evacuated half a dozen horses from the Cub Creek Fire riding bareback in a bikini.

Like me, many of you believe that there is a place for painted rocks, like windowsills and landscaping (email me for more ideas), not the wilderness. Others find me a killjoy for deeming inspirational quotations on painted rocks a blight on the backcountry experience.

Given the intensity of the range of opinions, I decided to seek common ground in what one reader referred to as my “first world problem.” (I completely agree, by the way. But the purpose of Valley Life columns is not to address global problems. If it were, rest assured topics like “climate change,” “public education,” and “access to health care” would usurp painted rocks and Christmas tree hunts gone awry.)

To take an open-minded exploration into the painted rocks controversy, I took a specimen with me on a recent hike into the wilderness. My only painted rocks with words on them are the small, smooth oval stones we painted names on years ago, to use as place cards at a big Thanksgiving dinner, but those didn't quite fit the inspirational vibe. In the absence of a “Look in the mirror, that's your competition” rock, I selected one of my favorites: a pirate rock painted by my cousin.

Accompanied by a friend who was unaware of my weighty cargo, the pirate and I headed to the hills. At a scenic tarn with many unoccupied campsites, we took a break and I pulled out the rock, wondering if its presence would enhance my feeling of contentment with my role as a tiny speck in a vast universe, or my enjoyment of the sandwich I brought for lunch.

It was then that the magic of the mountains began to work their miracles. Shiver me timbers! No sooner had the pirate rock been exposed than a signature talisman of buccaneer life revealed itself.

Can you guess what it was? I'll give you a hint: what do pirates like more than swashbuckling or sailing the high seas under a black flag?

Some of you have surely figured it out by now. And yo ho ho, you are right! What I saw perched in an impressive sconce created from slabs of North Cascades granite was half a liter of Bahía de Largo Isla Rica Silver Rum—Minnesota's finest, in a plastic bottle—as if the pirate rock itself had manifested it.

The rum was not forgotten; it was clearly left quite visibly and strategically as an offering to future campers, much in the same way that people place painted rocks in backcountry spots for others to discover and, presumably, lead more inspired lives thereafter.



No matter the generous motives of the rum donors, still, it was a large chunk of plastic at an alpine lake that was otherwise unmarred by detritus. I debated a course of action. Aargh, what a dilemma! Leave the rum for someone who might be craving a swig after a long hike, or carry out what was, when all is said and done, ultimately a piece of trash that would need to be removed.

In the end I carried out the bottle. Like the painted rocks, the pirate booty seemed extraneous in a wilderness full of so many other treasures.

