



# Camping Considerations for Clean Water

*by Jessica Aiello*

*Ricketts Glenn State Park, Columbia, Luzerne and Sullivan counties*

*photo-Tasha Ferris*

Lots of activities are perfect companions to fishing, like camping, but there are things to keep in mind when setting up camp to protect the fish and other aquatic resources necessary for a successful fishing trip.

## Keep water quality in mind

“What I witness often with primitive campsites (i.e., those chosen by the camper, not designed specifically for camping by a land-owning entity), especially near waterways, is an area cleared of vegetation next to the water,” said Dale Ronk, a forester at Bald Eagle State Forest. “The sites usually have multiple stone fire rings and almost always have garbage and materials left behind. Ideally, after primitive camping, it should be hard to tell that the area was even used, and people should pack out everything that was packed in,” said Ronk.

While camping right next to the water may provide beautiful views, it can be terrible for water quality. The roots from vegetation in the riparian zone help to hold in the soil, keeping it out of streams and lakes. Otherwise, that loose soil can reduce water clarity and smother the eggs of fish and other aquatic life. In addition, campers tend to have other items with them that can be damaging to the water, like soaps, detergents and toothpaste.

“That these items are harmful to the aquatic environment and easily make their way into the waterway is often overlooked. Proper disposal of these items at least 200 feet away from a water source or packing out ‘gray water’ are best practices,” said Ronk.

*Tread Lightly*, an outdoor recreation website, offers a list of tips for minimizing the impact of camping. The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources supports these recommendations in protecting the resources in Pennsylvania’s 124 state parks and 20 state forests. Recommendations include:

- Use existing campsites when possible, so you don’t disturb new ground. Never remove vegetation to make a new campsite.
- Set up camp at least 200 feet from the water.
- Bring a trash bag with you, packing up anything you brought, as well as any litter left by others.
- Use a portable latrine in places without toilets if possible, and pack out your waste. If you must bury your waste, dispose of it in a hole 6- to 8-inches deep that is at least 200 feet from water sources.

## Places to camp by the water

If you want to enjoy a scenic campsite near the water—but not too near—the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry has partnered with the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission on the Water Trails program, which offers primitive camping on designated islands marked with island locator campsite signs, as well as along many state forest waterways. The North Branch Susquehanna River Water Trail and the Juniata River Water Trail are included. You can find more information on the Water Trails program and other primitive camp tips on the

Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation’s website ([paparksandforests.org](http://paparksandforests.org)). “When camping on the Water Trails’ river islands, use the designated camping area access points (clearly marked with signs) to limit erosion, and plan for a primitive camping experience by packing what you need to carry out,” said Joe Frassetta, a volunteer steward with the Susquehanna River Trail Association.

Keep in mind that anyone primitive camping for more than one night in a state forest will need a camping permit, as does anyone taking part in motorized, roadside camping. Also, camping in state forests offers no modern facilities, water, dump stations or utility hookups—it really is a “primitive” experience.

Camping within Pennsylvania state parks offers greater amenities and has a more formal process. A reservation or day-of-payment is required to secure a site. Find details on these opportunities, other camping requirements, and how to obtain a permit or reserve a site at [dcnr.pa.gov](http://dcnr.pa.gov), then click on the “Reservations” tent icon.

“My husband and I are volunteer campground hosts,” said Marci Mowery, President of the Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation. “We regularly host at Fowlers Hollow State Park (Perry County), a popular fishing destination. In addition to encouraging low-impact camping to protect water quality and the overall environment, we urge all campers to refrain from removing live trees for firewood and to thoroughly extinguish campfires.”

So, get ready for your next adventure. Grab your rod and tackle box, pack your backpack with a tent and other camping gear, and enjoy some of Pennsylvania’s beautiful lakes, rivers and streams. ☐



photo-Erin Ricketts

Promised Land State Park, Pike County