

LYLE'S LAWS

Lyle's Law of Hiking

One of the activities I enjoyed in the past—and that I keep telling myself I'm going to do again—is backpacking. From a strictly rational viewpoint, there is probably not much to recommend the sport. It involves expending a significant amount of energy, putting unaccustomed stress on your legs and back, and often developing blisters upon blisters on feet that you really intended to have broken in but didn't get around to. It often takes you into inhospitable territory where poison ivy lurks and bears wait to raid the camp of the unwary. Food is prepared by the hiker and, at least in my case, will never be featured in your newspaper's Sunday supplement. At the end of each day, you tuck your aching muscles into a damp sleeping bag for a few hours of fitful sleep on a thin, leaky air mattress. Other than that....

Well, other than that, you get to see stars that the city-bound never knew existed; you get to see a hen turkey lurch across the trail with a "broken" wing to lure you away from her chicks (poults, they're called); you get to see the forest in the early morning mist and watch as the rising sun turns dew into diamonds; you get to walk through a tunnel of blooming rhododendron that defines the trail along a mountain slope. And when you get back to civilization and have taken the anti-inflammatory and had a good shower and a good night's sleep in a bed made deliciously comfortable by memories of that air mattress, you bask in the knowledge that you have overcome a physical challenge and have experienced nature almost on its own terms.

As in any sport, there are several rules that the prudent backpacker observes: get in condition before you go; keep your pack as light as possible; have good maps and a good compass (today, I suppose, a GPS); carry enough water; plan your hike, then let someone know where you are going and when you will return; and take periodic rest breaks. Each of those rules could be the basis for a good law, but I'm going to wrap them all into one: Lyle's Law of Hiking: **Think like a backpacker.** A good packer will consider each of those rules. Let's do the same.

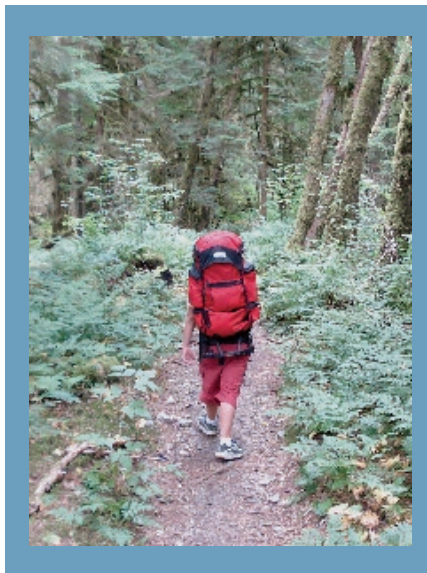
Get in condition before you go. Whether you are considering starting on a hike, a work project, or a career, you need to get in condition. In backpacking, most of your preparation will be physical. In engineering, as in most lines of work, it is generally mental—a matter of education. Get

in shape. If a job requires a bachelor's degree, consider getting a master's. If a project demands an understanding of discrete transforms, learn discrete transforms and the underlying mathematics. I have shared stories with a lot of backpackers over the years, and I have never heard any say they overtrained for a hike. Many have said they should have been in better condition. In the same vein, I have never heard anyone say they had too much knowledge to do a job.

Keep your pack as light as possible. Backpackers say that the best way to determine if something is really necessary is to carry it for ten miles. In our work and in our lives—as in hiking—it is very tempting to try to provide for every possible contingency. We have to recognize, however, that those provisions add to our load and slow us down. Whether it is clutter on our desk, clutter in our brain, or clutter in a project plan, the superfluous can overwhelm the essential. A quest for security and comfort can overwhelm efficiency and effectiveness. Make no

mistake: this is a delicate balance, but searching out and eliminating those things whose weight-to-benefit ratio is too high will be time well spent.

Have good maps and a good compass. I doubt that the Music Man was a backpacker, but he understood this rule when he sang, "You gotta know the territory." Whether you are designing a product, starting an engineering school, or moving into a new community, you have to know your surroundings, your customers, and your competition. What are the features of the countryside that might cause you to fail? What can you use to help you succeed? Exploring such questions will give you a good map of the area you are about to traverse. Then, as your project progresses, you need to continue to take bearings to know where you are

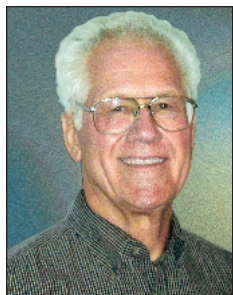


"Just walking with your head down might not get you where you want to go."

and maybe even update your map. Continue to look at your surroundings. Just walking with your head down might not get you where you want to go.

Carry enough water. Once, returning from an overnigher in the Black Hills, I ran out of water a couple of hours from the trailhead. What could be so bad about taking a drink directly from that nice cool stream? Well, the short answer is, “*E. Coli.*” Things were kind of loose for the next couple of days, and I vowed never again to go light on the water. This is the corollary to the light-pack rule. If something is essential, make sure you have plenty of it. What is essential? That depends on the context. In an engineering project, you need personnel, probably computing power, and time. In your life, you need, among other things, friends. Make sure you carry enough.

Plan your hike, and then let someone know where you are going and when you will return. If there is one thing that has contributed most to the failure of hikes, projects,



businesses, and marriages, it is lack of planning. A plan, of course, requires more than specifying a destination. A goal like, “Hike from the Georgia line to Front Royal” may be the start of a plan, but if the time allotted requires hiking 40 miles a day through the mountains, it isn’t going to work. A good plan must have intermediate goals or milestones plus an understanding of what it will take to get to each one.

And it is essential that everyone involved knows the plan and agrees that it is workable.

Take periodic rest breaks. There may be hikers who can hike all day without a break, but why would they want to? Without periodic breathers, the hiker will suffer both mentally and physically and probably won’t be able to enjoy the scenery. The same is true in our work and in our lives. Everyone has had the experience of working through the weekend or pulling an all-nighter, but making a practice of that is a formula for failure, not for success. Take some time to smell the roses ... or the rhododendron. Whatever.

So think like a backpacker. The sport is characterized by physical and mental toughness, high efficiency, and careful and responsible planning—all characteristics that will serve us well. And the more I think about it, the more it sounds like fun. Maybe I’ll see if I can find that old backpack.

—Lyle D. Feisel, Ph.D., P.E., Iowa Alpha '61

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