

Frequently Asked River Questions

Revised Feb 2012

This compilation of river information about river etiquette began because of confusion about "doing the right thing". Depending on the river ecosystem, rules change concerning the disposal of dishwater, human waste, etc.... I have outlined the most frequently asked questions (FAQ's) that river runners have about river etiquette. The information has been gathered from Idaho, Grand Canyon, Westwater, and Arkansas river running regulatory agencies. If you follow these guidelines you will be "doing the right thing" on your river and protecting your canyon for future river runners.

Green, Yampa, Westwater, San Juan, Rio Grande, Rio Chama, the Arkansas, and Grand Canyon rivers fall under the category of desert ecosystems. Idaho rivers fall under the category of mountain ecosystems. If in doubt as to which type of river you are running check the [permit regulations for specific guidelines](#), ask the river manager/ranger or make an educated guess based on the type of vegetation and rainfall along the river corridor.

Pre-Launch:

How many dry bags do I need?

See our Personal [Dry Bag Packing list](#) for advice.

Launch:

Do I need my photo ID at the put-in?

- YES. Better safe than sorry. Don't forget it in the shuttle car. Many river rangers require a photo ID at the put-in and will not let you on the river without showing proof of identification.

What boating equipment do I need to bring on the river?

- Pump, first aid kit, spare oarlock and stand (nicer to have 2), one spare oar minimum (2 spares for the Grand Canyon- good idea on most rivers), repair kit, and spare valve(s). Firepans and throwbags too. Idaho requires a shovel and the Grand Canyon requires an Air Force Signal mirror and two plastic panels of International Orange (dimensions 3 feet x 10 feet). Firepan blankets are a newer requirement on some rivers.

Do I need to bring a repair kit?

- Yes, most rafts have different material and glue requirements. Make sure that glue and activator is unopened and the date is NOT expired. Some rafts have different types of valves (i.e. floor valves on self-bailers). Make sure you have a spare valve type and know how to replace it. Don't forget a spare pressure relief floor valve if you have an inflatable floor.

How many lifejackets do I need and what type?

- One per person and one extra per boat. Type III or V with minimum 15.5 lbs to 22 lbs buoyancy. In addition, the Grand Canyon requires a throwable cushion (Type IV) for any boat 16 feet or longer.

How often should I wash my hands before handling/preparing food?

- Every time and set up a hand wash system as described in the "How do I set up a toilet" section. Always make the hand wash soap available at lunch. Intestinal troubles are no fun on the river and germs can spread quickly. Do not use the same hand wash system equipment that was set up for the toilet for the kitchen or at lunch stops. If you become sick- tell the trip leader – and do not prepare food!

Typical woman's question: What if I get my period?

- Helicopter out! Just kidding. This is a very easy issue. Bring plenty of tampons, many small Ziplocs, small roll of tp and liquid soap and make sure they are accessible during the day in your personal day drybag. Place used tampons in Ziplocs and dispose in trash. Don't rely on the trip leader to bring hand soap (bring your own), HE may have overlooked this essential item. NEVER put sanitary napkins or tampons in the Groover (river toilet)!

How do you do laundry on the river?

- Bring a small collapsible bucket and Ivory dish soap. Wet and soak your dirty clothes (one day's worth) in the bucket with a small amount of Ivory soap. Rinse either in the river or above high water line depending which river you are on. Hang to dry.

How do I deal with the trash?

- Purchase plastic contractor clean-up bags (Home Depot) and burlap bags are nice to protect the plastic bags. When the burlap gets filled with full plastic bags, duct tape the top closed by twirling the top shut and wrapping the duct tape around it. Keeping the burlap wet with river water during your trip as this helps reduce the odor.
- Set up a bucket ½ full with river water and drain waste liquid from tuna cans, fruit juice, etc... into the bucket. Empty the bucket into the river main current at the end of each meal.
- Crush soda or beer cans below the high water mark in the wet sand. The sticky soda syrup drops and/or beer sips at the bottom of cans attracts insects to camp if you throw them in a pile or crush them near the kitchen.
- Never put glass in the trash because it could puncture a raft or injure those who don't know glass is in the trash. Glass goes back in a securely closed cooler or dry box. The best plan is to avoid bringing glass all together.

Where do I urinate?

- Directly in the river.

Does the group always need a toilet?

- YES, even on Westwater day trips. The ranger will check and it needs to be accessible during the day. Cheating behind a bush or rock is not allowed and is not ethical.

What is Tolio & how do I avoid getting it?

- This is a complicated question. Frankly I have been unable to get a definitive answer from either NPS or the Grand Canyon Clinic and think most boaters are embarrassed to report it to any medical folks until they get off the river and then it begins to cure itself. The several podiatrists I have asked about it have never heard about it. It acts like "Athlete's Foot Gone Wild" in between your toes and on the bottoms of your feet. It can happen overnight and can be painfully crippling and once you have it on your feet you are stuck with it for the remainder of the trip. No fun hiking or even walking about camp.

Even the two links below were conflicting when I looked them up online at web md type sites. Especially concerning steroid use as a potential treatment.

- <http://www.tinyurl.com/3jzsco3>
- http://www.rfw.org/RaftingGrandCanyon/Hygiene_and_Personal_Care
- So... how to avoid it? Do not walk barefoot in camp, wash your feet nightly with antibiotic soap, slather with lotion (see links below), spray with Athlete's Foot Spray (you'll need 2 cans for 2 week trip) and wear clean white socks (you'll need 2 cheap pkgs of socks from Walmart) at night (in that order). I go as far as protecting my feet from blisters with those same socks the next day on the river. By the end of the trip, my feet act as though they have had a lovely 2-week pedicure. Other treatments I have heard of include buying [Vagisil](#) cream (don't freak out men, just put it on your feet) and begin pre-treating your feet a good week before and during the trip. I just heard about the Vagisil twist this winter from Grand Canyon boatmen (which really seems helpful since they run so many back to back trips) so plan to try it in 2012. Others swear by using [Mom's Stuff](#) or [Dr Naylor's Udder Balm](#), or [Original Udder Balm](#) or [Bag Balm](#) or [Udderly Smooth Cream](#) or Tinactin cream or rinsing in very diluted bleach solution and betadine or lemon juice (bleach and betadine or lemon juice sound too radical for me) or keep feet dry as possible when off river or using lots of sunscreen. One podiatrist told me that steroid cr me would make the situation worse (but then she didn't know what Tolio was- she meant in relation to athlete's foot). In other words, lots of people are trying lots of preventative remedies. I suspect this fungus (just a guess on my part) is in the sand and spread by so many of us camping at the same beaches every night. We have had people get it on Day 2 others go all the way to Day 10 and some never get it. I have heard of boatmen getting it on the Arkansas River but it seems to have become chronic in the Grand- maybe some people are more susceptible? Glen Canyon dam sewage was re-routed to Page several years back but this does not preclude what gets washed down Little Colorado River and Havasu Creek drainages (do not open your mouth in these "heavenly" pools). NPS sent out bio-sampling kits to commercial companies in 2011. Not a single sample was returned- there could be a lot of reasons for 0 response rate- in my mind- commercial companies do not want it broadcast (again the embarrassment or the potential negative public relations factor) because I know their boatmen preventative treat for and do get Tolio. I would believe that their guests are just as susceptible. I guess the point of this advice is do something, do not let Tolio happen to you, nip it in the bud and do all that you can to prevent it. If you get it despite all preventative measures, keep actively treating with the same regimen to keep symptoms to a minimum. Once it has spread all over your feet (which can happen within 48 hours)- your hiking plans turn into hobbling to and from the groover and that is about it. It can really put a damper on fun. Note the little ringworm shaped raw blisters exposing the red flesh on these feet pictured below. These were not the worst cases I have seen but still very painful for those on our trips. I continue to encourage the NPS to design a study to find out what Tolio is and how to prevent it. In the meantime, take care of your feet!



Camp:

How do I set up the toilet (Groover)?

- Set up the toilet as close to the river as possible. Always set up the toilet as part of making camp. The toilet team should not be the cook team on that same day. Urinate in the river or better yet, set up a pee bucket. Solid waste (and toilet paper only) goes in the toilet system. Set up a hand wash system with liquid antibacterial soap. Do not use bar soap (culture tests have shown bar soap can be easily contaminated with bacteria). On desert rivers, use the river directly to wash hands or set up a handwash station with bucket underneath. In Idaho, wash hands with soap above the high water line. An easy home-made hand-wash setup is to use an empty can with a long string handle and puncture a small nail hole on the bottom side that functions as a spout. Dip the empty can in a bucket of clean river water, hang (can) using string on a tree branch, and wash your hands under your homemade faucet. Don't let dirty handwash water go back in the clean water bucket. Do not assume that everyone in your group knows how to use the toilet or handwashing system. Give a lesson because most boaters need help with the specifics of different toilet and handwash systems for the first time use.

What type of toilet should I bring?

- Personal preference is the choice. Minimum requirements: No plastic bags!! Leak proof container, bail buckets with lids do not pass the leak test. Porta-potti's can be easy to use (use RV toilet paper and holding tank RV chemical) but don't have a lot of capacity. A rocket box with a good lid, seal, and seat also works but can be a mess to clean up. Partner toilets are great systems but pricey.

Drinking water disinfection guidelines:

- Both the NPS in Grand Canyon and EPA issue drinking water disinfection guidelines. I noticed that NPS references treating water to 2 drops of bleach per gallon- however EPA references 2 drops bleach per quart. That is equal to 8 drops bleach per gallon or 24 drops bleach per 3 gallons of water and 48 drops of bleach per 6 gallons of water. I am sure it depends on the initial water quality. The easiest solution is to bring drinking water from home and fill up at safe sources along your river trip (ex. Phantom Ranch in the Grand). Do not count on drinking water availability or good quality at most river put-ins. For example, early season at Boundary Creek on the Middle Fork in Idaho will not have the water spigots turned on or tested yet.

How do I set up the kitchen?

- Arrange tables however you want but place the propane bottle for the stove under the table out of the way. Tie the garbage bag to a leg of a table. Bag up the garbage before retiring for the night because rodents can scatter it and make a mess for you to clean up the next morning. Insects love open garbage. The best place for the garbage is closed up tightly and placed in the boat for the night. Don't forget to set up a new empty bag before you go to bed for late-night garbage additions. Avoid leaving food accessible to rodents overnight. They will try to chew through Tupperware to get to sugar, etc.... Ziploc the dishsoap and bleach closed in case they get knocked over and/or leak. If you recycle aluminum cans, start a separate bag just for crushed cans. Place a kitchen floor (tarp or mesh floor) placed under the tables to catch the cooking crumbs and debris. When breaking camp in the morning, gather up the tarp and shake it into the trash and then rinse in the river.

What utensils should I bring?

- Don't rely on the trip leader to bring your personal dishes. Bring your own plate, silverware, cup and bowl. Expect to wash and store your own dishes (morning and night). Do not bring disposable paper plates, plastic cups, or plastic utensils. These generate excessive trash (burning paper just blows ash around the camp), plastic does not burn, and plastic forks and knives pierce the trash bags and possibly the rafts. Personal dishes get amazingly clean when you know you will be eating on your specific plate

the next day as opposed to a stack of group dishes where people pick out the cleanest dish to use the next morning.

Do I need to bring a firepan?

- Yes, if you plan to grill food or use a fire for warmth. The firepan needs to have a minimum 3 inch lip and legs to keep it up off the ground. Don't forget the metal ash can. Charcoal can still be hot the next morning and dumping it into the river is not allowed. All fires need to be in the firepan. Wastewater requires firepans for day trips even if you don't plan to use one. Don't forget to bring a firepan blanket to catch the popping embers. A collapsible metal shovel helps make cleanup the next day so much easier.

If I have a firepan, do I have to bring a stove?

- Yes, all other cooking is to be done on the stove. Dishwater buckets do not get hot enough on an open fire plus they get black soot everywhere. Blasters are great dishwater heaters.

Do all rivers allow fire building w/firewood even if I have a firepan?

- NO! Firewood gathering and burning is okay in Idaho and Yampa rivers, sort of depends on the times of year and river section. Firewood (driftwood) is becoming a premium resource, check the permit regs for your specific river. Charcoal firepan use is okay on all rivers unless a local fireban has been called.

What do I need to make a 3-bucket dishwashing system?

- Any dishwashing soap (all biodegradable now), bleach, rubber gloves, sponge and scrubber, strainer, two metal buckets and one plastic bail bucket. Fill all buckets approximately two thirds full with river water. Heat the two metal buckets on the stove to a rolling boil. Add small amount of dishsoap to one metal bucket. Second metal bucket is hot rinse bucket (no soap). Add 1 capful of bleach to all buckets. Place buckets below or above the high water line depending on river environment. Place the buckets in order of use with the soap bucket upstream (for consistency). Allow the soap washed and hot water rinsed dishes to soak in the plastic bleach bucket for 60 seconds and then air dry.
- TIPS: Put pot lids on dish water buckets full of cold river water to make it heat faster and keep heat in after the rolling boil. Use XL rubber gloves (so men with large hands have no excuse not to do dishes in your superhot dishwater). Make everyone bring and wash their own personal dishes. It is amazing how clean you can get your personal dish (when you know you'll be the next person eating off of it) and you never have "orphan" dishes or get stuck with a dirty dish the next day. Don't forget to strain/empty the dish buckets at night to avoid accidents and rodent drowning. Prepare dishwater at breakfast and dinner meals. Start the dishwater heating 45 minutes (only about 15-20 min on a blaster) before you want to use the stoves because it takes that long to heat the dishwater to a near-boil. Why? The cooks want the stove clear for cooking. Heating the dishwater after the meal prolongs the cleanup and people lose enthusiasm for cleaning their dish. Blasters are great for heating dishwater quickly but are very loud and can use a lot of propane. Bring one propane tank dedicated to the blaster and you'll be fine (two extra propane tanks for the Grand). We typically bring 4-5 propane tanks in the Grand (two for blaster use, two for regular Partner stove use, one spare in case any of the tanks leak- we had this happen on one trip.

Where do I dump the dirty dishwater?

- Through a mesh strainer with holes fine enough to strain coffee grounds. In Idaho, dump the dishwater above high water by broadcasting through the strainer into the bushes well away from camp. Fine metal mesh strainers from the grocery store work great.

- (Do not dig a hole). In desert rivers, strain directly into the river main current. Place the strained material in the trash.

Can I use my SunShower to take a river bath?

- Of course, but different rivers require different ways of using it. In Idaho, wash 100 feet above the high water line. If you don't have a SunShower in Idaho, just take an old fashioned river bucket bath by dunking yourself in the river, fill a bail bucket, hike above the high water line, soap up, rinse off, and get dry. In the desert, the wash water has to go below the high water line and it is best if it goes directly into the river. This can be tricky because it is usually difficult to find a place to hang the SunShower and privacy is an issue. Oar tripods and a tarp can solve those problems. Desert environments have such low rainfall that soap above the river's edge accumulates and is rarely washed away. If you don't have a SunShower in the desert, just dunk in the river, soap up in the river and dip (rinse) in the river. Never wash in the side streams. Personal bathing is similar to the dirty dishwasher concept. Be careful about using campstoves to heat up water for baths because this wastes fuel.