

# PHONING IT IN



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*As technology encroaches on the outdoors, the debate heats up over whether cell phones help or hinder the hiking experience.*

By Kim A. O'Connell

**O**N THE MORNING of May 10, 2005, Laura Goforth was hiking alone on the Three Sisters Trail at Lava Beds National Monument in California, a backcountry route that winds past caves and cinder cones. As an interpreter from Yellowstone National Park, Goforth

felt comfortable in the wilderness—that is, until she heard a thump behind her. Spinning around, she discovered a mountain lion less than ten feet away. Positioning her jacket and day-pack to appear larger, Goforth slowly backed away from the animal and used her cell phone to call for help. The lion continued to follow her down the path. As rangers approached, yelling her name, she began to scream. Finally, the lion darted into the brush, and the group hiked safely back to the trailhead.

Federal and state land management agencies have received countless cellular phone calls from hikers in need of assistance. In the last year alone, cell phones have helped to direct rescuers to a lost and injured hiker in the Nu'uau Valley in Honolulu, a rock climber who fell in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and two cross-country skiers caught in white-out conditions in the Grand Tetons. To many people, a cell phone is as essential to one's backpack as a map, compass, and bottles of water.

Nearly as common, however, are the hikers who use their cell phones to offer commentary on their experience to friends and family back home. "It drives me nuts when I get to the top of a mountain, such as Mount Whitney, and there are three people on cell phones," says Kelsey Jordahl, a former board member of the Ventana Wilderness Alliance. "My personal feeling is that it is never appropriate to use a cell phone in wilderness for non-emergency purposes. I don't have anything against carrying one just in case, but turn it off." Jangling ring tones, coupled with loud one-sided conversations, can be highly disruptive to the natural quiet and solitude that are treasured parts of the hiking experience.

For years now, the placement of cell towers in sensitive environments, especially on public lands, has raised

concerns in the conservation community. But the prevalence of the technology has also spurred the related issue of how and when cell phones should be used when hiking.

### Wired in the Woods

As society becomes ever more wired, people are becoming increasingly reliant on cell phones as a primary mode of communication. A recent University of Michigan study found that 83 percent of cell phone users believe the devices have made their lives easier. Sixty percent, however, responded that public use of cell phones had disturbed or irritated them.

Not surprisingly, the debate has spilled into the outdoors. In 1996, a *Backpacker* magazine survey indicated that, while 45 percent of hikers found cell phones useful, 55 percent said that they would not pack them in at all. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those numbers might be reversed today. As Laura Goforth's experience illustrates, cell phones can be useful—or even critical—in an outdoor emergency.

In recent years, *Backpacker* has published point-counterpoints in which outfitters and park rangers have vouched for the usefulness of cell phones (the magazine also profiles satellite phones and other gear in its "Backcountry Tech" department). "Initially, I was totally against taking a cell phone on trips, but I've been on enough rescues where lives have been saved to change my mind on the technology," Chris Carr, co-owner of Shasta Mountain Guides, told the magazine in 2003. "The guides who work for me on Mt. Shasta are required to carry cell phones."

The National Park Service, which has come under fire for allowing cell towers to be built within view of Old Faithful and other treasured sites, has admitted that cell phones make



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**Cell phones have proven helpful in countless rescues and emergencies—and many hikers now consider the devices to be essential for safety.**

rangers' jobs easier. The agency has not issued a national policy statement on cell phone use, leaving it to individual parks to decide how to advise visitors.

"Every individual is in a position to determine what is appropriate for

areas and that technology in the parks is not new. "Although certainly not as prevalent, ham radio operators have been able to gather radio signals just about anywhere," Nash says.

But the ubiquity of cell phones may hinder hikers' ability to discern what

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constitutes a true emergency, leading rescuers on wild goose chases. "Cell phones foster a curious dependency," Christine Rosen, who has studied the social effects of technology, told *The New York Times* last year. "The cell phone erodes something that is being obliterated in American society: self-reliance."

them in those circumstances [where they might feel unsafe]," says Al Nash, an NPS spokesman. "It's hard for us to tell them what is or isn't appropriate. Personally, I recognize the safety factor that a cell phone can offer, but if I go into any public space, one thought I have is, 'Is it appropriate for me to have something that rings loudly here?' I have certainly not heard anyone in the Park Service talk about whether we should regulate whether a phone is allowed."

Nash notes that cell phone coverage remains spotty in remote backcountry

### An Electronic Intrusion

Although Al Nash is correct that cellular companies have not yet been able to provide coverage in the most remote areas, conservationists are concerned that current trends are heading in that direction. When the Telecommunications Act of 1996 opened federal lands to cell towers, federal agencies were charged with developing regulations preventing the unsightly conglomeration of towers. Since then,



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**Although the Park Service agreed to lower a 100-foot cell tower at Yellowstone (left), the shorter tower (above) still dominates the landscape and threatens the park's scenic vistas (top).**

however, land managers have operated in the absence of national policy, allowing cell towers—such as the 100-footer within view of Old Faithful—to be erected in a vacuum.

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) has

launched a campaign urging the Park Service to develop a national policy on the placement of cell towers and ensure a public process that would allow for widespread comment on tower proposals. Recently, PEER asserts, telecommunications companies have

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played up the safety benefits of cell phones as justification for towers in the backcountry.

“Even as it asks visitors to commune with nature, the Park Service is ensuring that no visitor will be beyond the reach of the ubiquitous chirp of the cell phone,” says PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch. “We are finding that the evidence behind the public safety concerns to be elusive. The telecom companies are not erecting towers to protect public safety, but to make a buck.”

Several recent proposals would erect towers in park areas that are now cellular “dead zones.” Among other proposals, PEER has learned that Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area has eight applications for cell phone towers within its bound-

aries; Yellowstone, which already has five cell towers, is considering up to three more; and Mammoth Cave National Park recently approved an application to construct a 180-foot tower that will extend coverage to the backcountry, including some Wilderness Study Areas.

In addition to concerns about tower placement, the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) has also noted that mobile phones are disruptive to the visitor experience. “We strongly feel that cell towers should not interfere with the scenic integrity of the parks, and they are not essential to park management,” says Laura Loomis, NPCA’s director for the visitor experience. “Especially in settings where other people are around, you have to be mindful of not interfering with their experience, and having a loud, one-sided conversation is jarring. When the phones ring, you don’t want to hear that kind of mechanical or electronic intrusion in the backcountry.”

Cell phones may also be more of a security blanket than a lifeline, Loomis notes. “My big concern with cell phones is that it gives visitors a false sense of security,” she says. “People think, ‘I don’t need to be prepared to take care of a situation myself.’”

The issue has raised the ire of hikers nationwide. A recent posting on a hiking message board questioned, “Who the hell gave SBC or Cingular or Verizon the ‘right’ to steal every last horizon view from the public domain? ...There is NO clear horizon left, for all practical purposes. Must they take everything?”

### Possible Solutions

The proliferation of cellular technology raises the question of whether federal or state agencies

and even hiking clubs should issue policy statements regarding cell phone use, especially in the backcountry and in designated wilderness areas. In one example, Wild Earth Adventures has a simple policy barring cell phone use on guided hikes and urges participants to keep their phones off or leave them in the car. But many clubs have no official policy on cell phones and allow hike leaders to deal with their use on a trip-by-trip basis.

### Technology on the Trail

The fight over cellular phones is just one corner of a larger debate over the extent to which technology belongs in natural areas. At campgrounds, shelters, and overlooks, it is increasingly common to see hikers pulling out their laptops, GPS units, iPods, digital cameras, and other electronic devices. Although these items might not be as disruptive as a hiker shrieking “Guess where I am?” into a mobile phone, they do raise questions about whether land management agencies will be pressured to provide the technology to keep visitors connected.

Signaling the prevalence of the technology, *Backpacker* magazine recently posted an on-line poll on which high-tech devices readers were most anxious to have. Digital cameras and GPS units topped the list, followed by mp3 players and satellite phones. In March, the magazine also profiled an all-in-one field communications system—complete with satellite phone, personal digital assistant, and digital camera—that could allow “the folks back home” to participate in one’s outdoor experience “in real time—without leaving their desks.”

Laura Loomis, NPCA’s director for the visitor experience, notes that today’s kids are growing up with the technology and wonders whether this will increase their expectations of being wired in the wilderness—or whether they will work even harder to preserve places where they can escape from technology. Conservationists, understandably, are hoping that more people fall into the latter category.

What do you think? Which high-tech items, if any, do you include in your pack? *American Hiker* wants to hear from you. Write us at [info@AmericanHiking.org](mailto:info@AmericanHiking.org).

“We do not encourage cell phone use on the trail,” notes Gregory Miller, American Hiking Society president. “But should hikers choose to do so, American Hiking urges them to be considerate of others and sensitive to the potential impacts of increased demands for phone coverage—do we really want transmission towers throughout wild, natural areas?” American Hiking has worked with like-minded organizations over the years to monitor and comment on tower placement in or near natural areas or nationally significant trails.

“I can’t imagine how any agency would try to enforce a ban on carrying or use of cell phones,” says Kelsey Jordahl. “I think the best we could hope for is a note on the etiquette of not using cell phones in wilderness—or, I would think, other undeveloped areas within national parks and other public lands—to be posted at the trailhead or visitor’s center, or maybe on wilderness permits.”

Just as Leave No Trace guidelines have become widely accepted, the development of a “Turn it Off” technology ethic could also have far-reaching implications for the hiking community. “By putting those advisories in brochures, at trailheads, and on message boards, it reminds people that the entire world is not wired for cell phones,” Laura Loomis says. “You go hiking to enter a different world, and when you bring cell phones into that environment, that experience is compromised.”

*Kim O’Connell is co-editor of American Hiker and has written about conservation and preservation issues for National Geographic News, National Parks, Preservation, and other publications.*