

Opinion: Calling for an end to cairns

By Robyn Martin, High Country News

Stones: We've built pyramids and castles with them and painstakingly cleared them out of farm fields, using them to build low walls for fencing. We marvel at the rocks in the Grand Canyon, Arches and Grand Teton national parks. Yet a perplexing practice has been gaining ground in our wild spaces: People have begun stacking rocks on top of one another, balancing them carefully and doing this for unknown reasons, though probably as some kind of personal or "spiritual" statement.

These piles aren't true cairns, the official term for deliberately stacked rocks. From middle Gaelic, the word means "mound of stones built as a memorial or landmark." There are plenty of those in Celtic territories, that's for sure, as well as in other cultures; indigenous peoples in the United States often used cairns to cover and bury their dead. Those of us who like to hike through wilderness areas are glad to see the occasional cairn, as long as it's indicating the right way to go at critical junctions in the backcountry.

Stone piles have their uses, but the many rock stacks that I'm seeing on our public lands are increasingly problematic. First, if they're set in a random place, they can lead an unsuspecting hiker into trouble, away from the trail and into a potentially dangerous place. Second, we go to wilderness to remove ourselves from the human saturation of our lives, not to see mementoes from other people's lives.

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