

Stone-stacking: cool or cruel?

adapted from an article by Patrick Barkham



- 1 On a trip to visit his father in Orkney, John Hourston, the founder of marine campaigners the *Blue Planet Society*, was dismayed to find wild beaches dotted with stacks of stones. His tweets have triggered an unexpectedly heated debate during which he's been belittled as a killjoy, a pedant, and even a misanthropist. "If stone stacks infuriate you, just knock them down. Plenty of people do. Besides, what next? Ban sandcastles? Let's focus on plastic in the oceans, people!"
- 2 Of course, stone-stacking is an ancient and sometimes religious impulse. A cairn in Scotland is a memorial to someone lost, but also a pile of stones that marks a way through wild country: invaluable when the cloud comes down. Cairns keep us safe. More recently, stone-stacking has become an art form and a competitive sport. Artists say the absorbing process of handling and balancing cool stones is meditative and good for our mental health. Children love it.
- 3 But what Hourston's critics don't seem to grasp is the almost industrial scale of this new age of stone-stacking. Adventure tourism and social media have created a perfect storm of stones. Cruise ships decant visitors on to once remote islands such as Orkney, the Faroes or Iceland, each passenger burning with a creative desire to memorialise their sightseeing on Instagram.

"Where do you draw the line?" wonders Hourston. "Orkney, Shetland, Iceland, Svalbard, or the Antarctic peninsula? We should start drawing the line now."

- 4 Our personal monuments turn empty landscapes into peopled places. When we reach a remote summit or deserted beach, we know people have stepped there before, but for a moment we can enjoy a place where humans do not predominate. No longer. Stacks are an intrusion, an offence against the first and most important rule of wild adventuring: leave no trace.
- 5 Stone-stacking can also harm wildlife. Birds such as oystercatchers make their nests on stony shores. These superbly camouflaged scrapes are almost impossible to see, and stone-stackers can unwittingly destroy a nest in the breeding season. On other sites the moving of stones exposes soil and exacerbates erosion, destroying the cool undersides of stones that are sanctuaries for millions of invertebrates.
- 6 Hourston was particularly struck by stacked stones on Skail beach, immediately below the neolithic village of Skara Brae. It's not fanciful to fear that ancient ruins may be disturbed. Historic England last year warned that stone-stacking was putting at risk historic monuments such as neolithic Stowe's Pound in Cornwall. We can be prosecuted for stone-stacking — destroying an ancient monument — in the wrong place.
- 7 Is there ever a right place? I'd say yes. A stack of stones below the high-tide line on a well-visited beach is as harmless and ephemeral as a sandcastle. Just as there are graffiti walls, we could designate certain beaches or moors as permitted places for stone-stacking. Stone-stacking contests are obviously fun too.
- 8 Some will rail against more rules, or more self-restraint; 17, particularly when there are more than 7 billion of us. Sheer quantities of people turn inconsequential behaviour into acts with consequences. If we want to enjoy what's left of our wild world, we have to be more aware than ever of our impact upon this Earth.

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