



WISDOM

Updated 09/14/2019

Purpose:

WISDOM is a systematic, six-step process for professional and safe wilderness ranger public contacts.

Note: WISDOM is not a substitute for Forest Protection Officer (FPO) training. This six-step process is intended to compliment FPO training. It is a proven step-by-step process to prepare wilderness rangers for their duties in the backcountry.

Background:

After joining me on a 10-day wilderness ranger, my District Ranger asked me to develop a procedure for making public contacts in the wilderness to keep our rangers safe. He authorized me to accompany the Grand County Sheriff and the Colorado Highway Patrol to witness how they handle public contacts and safety. WISDOM is the outgrowth of that research and has been field tested and refined over 25 years of wilderness ranger backcountry work.

Where are you coming from?

W – Understand where you are coming from. Did you have a late night out? Did you have a hurried morning before arriving at the trailhead to begin your tour? Are you ready for that first encounter? Our visitors deserve the best of us. Take a deep breath, collect yourself and be ready to make your first contact without additional “baggage.”

Introduce yourself:

I-Professionally introduce yourself. Begin your introduction from a distance. Do not break the space of the visitor. Their tent is their home. Say hello and receive acknowledgement from the visitor before entering their camp. State your name, the wilderness and your Forest. Establish jurisdiction. Be properly dressed. FS shield is worn over the heart. Your name tag should be visible opposite the FS shield. Do not initiate a hand-shake. Do not make eye contact with just one person in the group. Scan and communicate with your eyes to the whole group.



Size up the Situation:

S- Yes, you have sized up the situation from the beginning, but now you assess your mental notes and “red flags.” Why is there movement in the tent? Is that a rifle leaning against the tree? Situational awareness is vital ranger safety. If you have a partner, let them be “your eyes and ears” while you make the contact. Work as a team.

Decide on a course of action:

D- If the situation is worthy of a violation notice, make the decision to write the ticket and stick with it. Do not waiver. Be deliberate and consistent. State the regulation and why you are writing the person a violation notice. If it is a verbal warning, state that you are only giving a verbal warning at this time but firmly state the regulation.

If situation turns confrontational, immediately raise “palms up” hand gesture and back out. Abort contact. Go down the trail and radio for backup (Sheriff).

Outline and Explain the Regulation:

O – Outline the regulation and explain the intent of the rule. This is a good time to incorporate the “Authority of the Resource” approach (see reference).

Make a positive impression:

M- Make a positive impression. Conduct yourself professionally and you will make a lasting, positive impression.

Things to carry in your pack:

Duct tape – it’s good for repairs

Binoculars – they are good for sizing up the situation before initiating public contact

Digital camera – set in date and time mode. Bring extra batteries. Don’t forget you can take and email a picture if needed.

Sunscreen and other personal items for safe travel, including hat, gloves, etc.

Sunglasses – and use them during public contacts when you need a “stronger” voice

Radio or Sat. phone – you must have contact with dispatch. Know your dead spots.

Write-in-the-rain booklet. Documentation is vital. Pack several pens and pencils.

Map, compass, and GPS unit (bring extra batteries)

Pack an extra uniform so that you can look professional; when making public contacts.

First aid kit with latex gloves



Things to remember:

Always back-out of confrontational contacts. Leave the area and contact the Dispatch/Sheriff.

Always know and plan your escape route. Do not let your escape route be blocked.

Know your height and be able to estimate the other's height. Practice.

Know basic tracking techniques; foot size times (x) 7 for approximate body height.

Understand FPO training – reaction time=21 feet; most contacts are in 3 to 5 feet.

Watch for signs of aggression; wide stance, taking off glasses or wrist watch, etc.

Watch your body language and always pay attention to visitor's body language.

Never give away your campsite location. Travel in pairs, if possible. Always say "we" and not

"I" so that it sounds as if you have a partner in the area. Have a volunteer "shadow" you and

help with trail work. Record trailhead license plates, or take digital pictures – good

documentation. Set your radio on squelch, hit radio button to get repeater sound. It lets the

visitor know you have contact with outside world.

WISDOM – Pocket sized card:

Develop your own WISDOM card with six-step process on the front (for a quick reminder) and add phone contacts or other important information on the back (like CFR numbers for violations). Laminate card and keep it in your uniform pocket.

References:

Authority of the Resource, Dr. George N. Wallace, Colorado State University

WISDOM Author:

Ralph Swain, R2 Wilderness Program Manager, 303-275-5058, ralph.swain@usda.gov