



## Way to Go

A mighty volcano in the Cascade Range, Mount Shasta dominates the landscape, visible for more than 200 miles from parts of Northern California and southern Oregon.

“When I first caught sight of it over the braided folds of the Sacramento Valley,” the naturalist John Muir wrote in 1874, “I was fifty miles away and afoot, alone and weary. Yet all my blood turned to wine, and I have not been weary since.”

Muir visited Mt. Shasta again and again, once escaping death in a fierce spring snowstorm. Generations of hikers and climbers have followed his footsteps—to feel the intoxication that comes with pushing one’s limits and to savor solitude at 14,179 feet.

Every mountain has its legends, big and small. This story, “Way to Go,” started with the whimsical decision by a local filmmaker to document Mt. Shasta’s composting toilet, the highest continuously operating toilet of its kind in North America. Like a nesting doll, the toilet soon led to larger stories: about Shasta’s distinct history, managing human waste in the high country, and the determination of local residents to keep their mountain public and wild.

We begin 150 years ago.

## High hopes and horse camps

As Yellowstone and Yosemite earned national park crowns in the late 1800’s, many, including John Muir, lobbied to add Mt. Shasta to the list. When Mt. Lassen, some 100 miles to the south, erupted in 1912 and turned heads, it stole Shasta’s thunder. It took a century for John Muir’s initial plea to protect Mt. Shasta to become a reality—when President Ronald Reagan signed the California Wilderness Act in 1984, creating the Mt. Shasta Wilderness Area.

By then, climbing the iconic mountain had lured tens of thousands of hikers.

For those looking to summit Shasta, the 720-acre Horse Camp at 7,900 feet was their staging ground, where they tied up their horses and put on their climbing gear.



Within a year of the Sierra Club of California’s purchase of the property, a rest house for climbers rose from the ground, built with volcanic stone quarried on site and by stonemasons from San Francisco. At high noon on July Fourth 1923, a Los Angeles beauty queen arrived to christen the “Shasta Alpine Lodge” and dedicate “thee to all lovers of the great outdoors.” In 1924, the lodge’s first custodian reported that 368 visitors had stayed at the lodge that summer, of which approximately 150 reached the summit.

A pattern emerged that linked the property’s closest supporters. The Sierra Club (later the

Sierra Foundation) paid for the materials to keep up Horse Camp, and the local community volunteered their labor—from repairing chimneys to maintaining the property’s legendary mountain spring fountain.

During the summer, a changing crew of caretakers, provided by the Foundation, welcomed hikers (who set up camp outdoors), answered questions, and provided information.

## Packing out what you bring in

The sign at the Bunny Flat Trailhead, the start of the Shasta ascent, makes it clear: all climbers are required to pack out what they bring in.

“What do you do if you have to poop when you’re hiking?” environmental educator Rebeca Franco asks a group of ten-year-olds catching their breath on their way to Horse Camp.

For 30 years, the Foundation has sponsored an environmental education program that provides staff and instruction for local 5th grade field trips to the property.

“Make sure no one is looking?” says one youngster. “Find a tree to hide behind,” says another. “Hold it in,” answers a third.

It’s a good question. From the Sierras to the Smoky Mountains, from the Continental Divide to the Appalachian Trails, human waste scars the wilderness and the groundwater. Even our most remote areas feel the weight: Glaciologists in Alaska estimate that 215,000 pounds of human downloads fills crevasses in the busiest trail in the Denali Wilderness.

Rebeca Franco pulls out a human waste pack-out bag (available for free at Bunny Flat) and extracts a 11-by-17-inch instruction sheet marked with a bull’s eye on the opposite side. She demonstrates pinning the sheet to the ground with rocks.

“What do you think this is for?” she asks.



The group is silent. Then one boy gasps and says, “Shooting practice!”

After the target is struck, Franco continues, the sheet is rolled like a burrito, stuffed in the first paper bag, placed in the second bag and then deposited in the plastic bag. The bags

are dropped in “human waste” disposal cans at the Bunny Flat Trailhead. Poof (almost).

“I’ve lost my appetite for lunch,” the last student to rejoin the trail says.

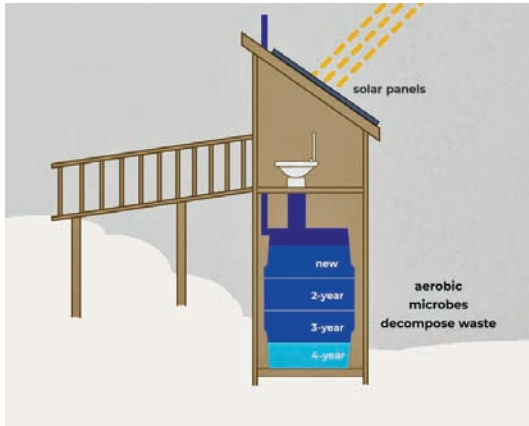
## Composting at 7,900 feet

Long before the rise of the national Leave No Trace campaign, launched in 1990, Mt. Shasta’s volunteer guardians worried about the consequences of human waste on the mountain. Horse Camp, with its concentration of hikers, was clearly an epicenter.

Pit toilets joined the alpine lodge in the 1950s—though some guests undoubtedly preferred the 10-year-olds’ quest for a secluded tree with no flies.

When the land adjacent to Horse Camp finally won status as a Wilderness Area in 1984, the pit toilets were up for “renewal.” Waterless composting toilets had just emerged as a new technology, although locating them in remote places at high altitudes was fresh territory. The Sierra Foundation decided to give the experiment a try.

In 1992, the last bundle of supplies to build a two-seat solar-powered composting toilet arrived at Horse Camp, transported by hikers, carts, and helicopters. Although it opened for business with little fanfare (and no beauty queen), it was an immediate hit. The complexity of maintaining a compost toilet, however, exceeded what Horse Camp’s then college-aged caretakers could provide.



Soon, pooping was allowed on even days only, and on odd days the doors were locked. In 2005, the toilets acquired a guardian angel: Rick Chitwood, a nationally-recognized energy consultant who knew Mt. Shasta like the back of his hand.

“You couldn’t pay me enough to do this job, so I figured I might as well volunteer,” Chitwood quips.

He quickly learned that the reason composting toilets, though conceptually brilliant, earn low marks is because they are a bear to maintain (at whatever altitude).

Every week during the summer and less frequently in the spring and fall, Chitwood dons a respirator and gloves and stirs the compost with a potato rake. He mixes the older compost with the new, breaking up clumps of toilet paper, poop, and the wood shavings folks have been directed to add when they are finished.

In late April, Chitwood and a crew of helpers from town shovel out the toilets (typically buried under 20 feet of snow) and carry the 400 lbs. of resulting compost down the mountain on a rescue sled. Tests for e-coli chloroform always come back zero.

## Preservation

Although the National Wilderness Preservation System has grown to 109 million acres, that’s just 5 percent of the U.S. landmass, and half of

this acreage is in one state, Alaska. We continue to lose more than 6,000 acres of open space a day to development.

Mt. Shasta and Horse Camp are constant proof of Henry Thoreau’s words, “In wildness is the preservation of the world.”

Keeping them wild but open to the broadest public possible is a delicate balancing act. On a good hiking day in the summer, more than a hundred climbers pass through Horse Camp on their way to the summit.

For the community that lives at the foot of this great mountain, the relationship is deep and personal.

“We all have our unique connection to the mountain,” says contractor Chris Marrone, who, like Rick Chitwood, has skied Shasta and hiked its slopes for more than 30 years. “For me, it’s about keeping active and healthy, about being immersed in natural beauty and quiet.” Others describe the connection as spiritual.

Marrone’s dedication to this place, though, is not about him or his use, he explains: “It’s about contributing in ways that allow other people this opportunity. It’s about reducing impacts, including human waste. It’s about safeguarding what makes this mountain special—not just for my kids and grandkids but yours.”

There is a guestbook at Horse Camp that invites comments. There are hundreds.

- “*The Gods are here!*”
- “*80 ½ years old. My last trip to this mystical cabin.*”
- “*On my way to NYC—my brother is among the firefighters missing in the World Trade Center. Coming up here today was for him and his buddies. May peace, compassion, and wisdom prevail. I’m so grateful for all the kindness and caring that has come my way—and for the incredible opportunity to be HERE!*” (Entry date: September 19, 2001)

Public and wild. How do we preserve both, leaving only footprints?

The **Sierra Club Foundation Committee**, which manages the Horse Camp property under the supervision of the Sierra Club Foundation in Oakland, California, includes: Chris Carr, Rick Chitwood, Chris Marrone, William Miesse, Keith Potts, Chuck Schlumberger, and Michael Zanger.

The committee is all volunteers with the exception of the site manager. Linda Chitwood, who in the words of the Sierra Club Foundation, “deserves a special shout-out for all of her hard work coalescing partners to maintain and improve facilities, managing the volunteer and staff caretakers, and, above all, imbuing Horse Camp with the vitality it deserves.”

## ► Way to Go

The short documentary film **Way to Go**, (<https://waytogo.k-roseproductions.com/>), by Ashland, Oregon filmmaker Kathy Roselli, tells the story of Mt. Shasta’s sun-powered composting toilet and the local volunteers who maintain it, keeping poop invisible and sweet at 7,900 feet.

Barbara Cervone, who recently moved to Southern Oregon after 50 years living in the Northeast, produced this brochure.

## RESOURCES

### Sierra Club Foundation

<https://www.sierraclubfoundation.org>  
<https://www.sierraclubfoundation.org/what-we-fund/horse-camp-mt-shasta/visiting-horse-camp>

### Composting Toilets

<https://www.go-gba.org/resources/green-building-methods/composting-toilets/>

### Leave No Trace

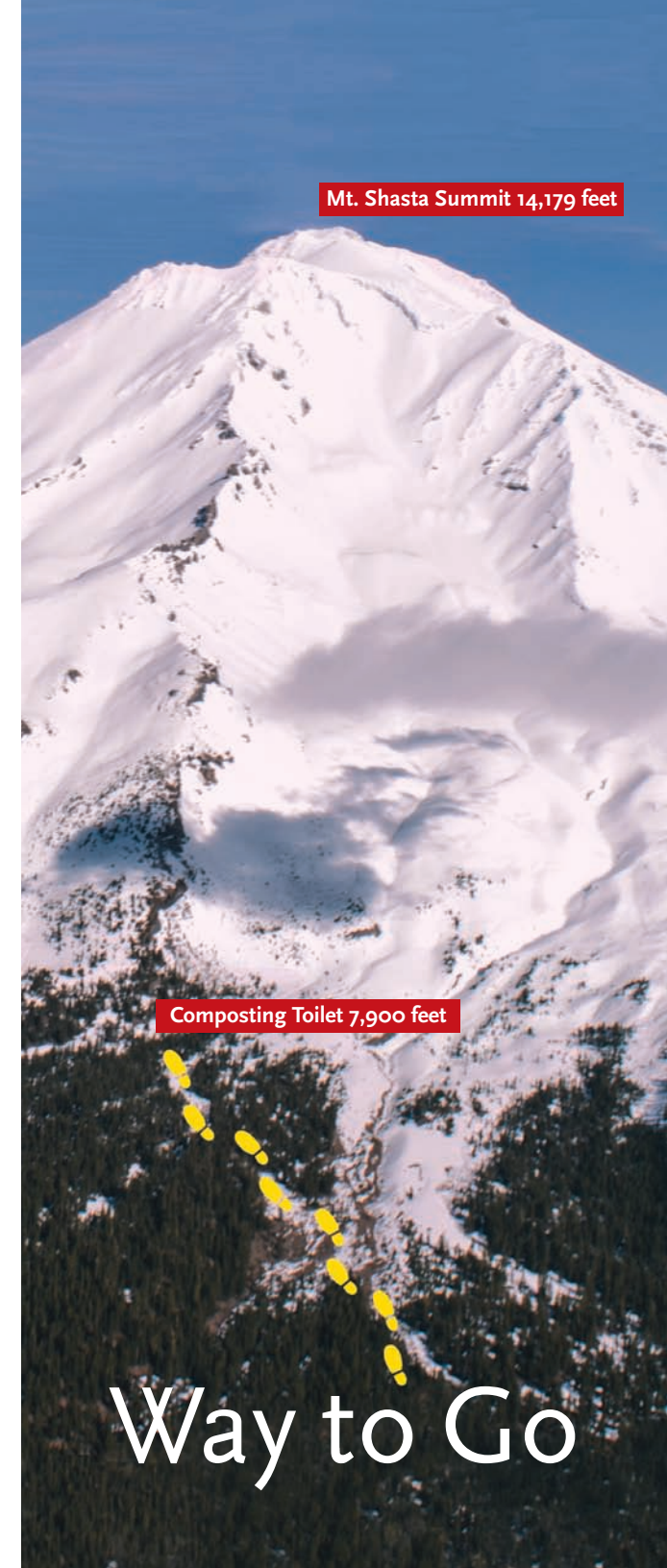
<https://lnt.org>

### Evacuating Ethically in the Wilderness

<https://www.popsoci.com/pooping-guide-hiking-backpacking/>

### John Muir on Mt. Shasta

<https://bit.ly/2CGD9mR>



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