Footstep Ethic
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Leave nothing but careful footprints on established trails.

During the last decade of the 20th century, there was a gradual change in traditional caving ethics. In the past, when we found footprints going into pristine territory, it was okay to put our boots right inside those imprints and follow the footprints to retrace the path.

But, as more people followed, too many feet quickly expanded the footstep routes into broad trails. The footstep ethic had to change. Footsteps should not be left to invite others to follow. Today, rather than retrace steps, we gently erase them. An off-trail footprint signals the need for restoration.

Erasing Footprints

- Remove individual muddy boot prints from flowstone with a sponge and spray bottle.

- Remove broadly impacting tracks with more aggressive flowstone restoration techniques. (See pressurized water, page 397; also see flowstone techniques, page 401.)

- Black scuff marks can sometimes be removed from smooth flowstone with the extremely soft scrubbing side of a restaurant grade sponge. (See scuff marks in flowstone tips, page 406.)

- On softer cave surfaces and cave soils, lightly comb away individual imprints with a small, nylon-bristled whisk broom. Take care not to stir up dust. (See trail maintenance, page 183.)
Figure 3. Two sets of boots created these scuff marks in a narrow passage covered with cave velvet. Two pairs of feet did this irreparable damage in what was virgin passage only minutes before. This photo was made in 1993. Today, ethics have changed and cavers typically use nonmarring flowstone shoes to survey and explore delicate virgin chambers.