

Hiking With Meth

by Lindsay Matt

It is a gorgeous fall day on the campus of James Madison University. I decided to spend the day hiking and enjoying the sun along my favorite trail in the Blue Ridge Mountains. After an hour drive, I lace up my hiking boots, taking in the fresh mountain air and the view from my favorite spot on the trail. Coming across a clandestine methamphetamine lab did not even cross my mind. However, meth labs have become one of the largest problems in state and national parks in the United States, ruining the environment and posing huge threats to park rangers and park visitors.

Meth, also known as crank, shabu, shi-shi, zip, spoosh, geep, fuel, boo, lemon drop and load of laundry, is a highly toxic and dangerous drug (Ellet). The Office of National Drug Control Policy describes meth as “a derivative of amphetamine, [which] is a powerful stimulant that affects the central nervous system” (Executive Office of the President). It can be snorted, smoked, injected, or orally ingested. It takes about five to twenty minutes for the user to feel the rush or high from meth (Executive Office of the President). Meth causes its users to be highly energetic and paranoid. They tend to scratch at “bugs” they feel under their skin and take things apart to keep busy. In an article in *Blue Ridge Outdoors*, which focuses on the problem of meth makers in the mountains, a recovering addict says: “You have to keep busy when you’re tweaking [using meth]. You clean your house for hours. You take apart your stereo and you put it back together again. Otherwise, you will scratch and pick at your body. Your whole body is exploding pore by pore” (Averill). Imagine running into a meth addict, who is “tweaking,” on your mid-afternoon hike. These meth users are not your average mid-afternoon hikers, toting a North Face back pack and Nalgene bottle; they are individuals who find it to be pleasurable to inject gasoline and battery acid into their veins. If you stumble across one of these labs, you will be facing a drug addict who most likely has been awake for a couple days and thinks it is fun to carry a gun in his back pocket.

Labs are very harmful to hikers who come across them. The people who run the camps, called “cookers,” are usually avid users themselves and are not “grounded mentally...they can go off at any second” (“Drug Makers Move Deep into Forests”). These makers have guns ready to protect what they believe is their territory. Agent Young stated, “Meth addicts are always heavily armed. I am not talking about a .22 in their trunk of their car. I mean there’s always a gun in their hand” (qtd. in Averill). You could be hiking along, come across what you think is just a normal campsite and it actually is a meth lab filled with toxic chemicals and armed addicts who have not slept in weeks. Scary thought. Not only are these sleep-deprived, gun-bearing addicts a threat to themselves and anyone who stumbles upon their make-shift labs, but they are an even greater danger to the public when we consider the toxic chemicals that are used in the manufacture of methamphetamines.

The ingredients used to manufacture meth are highly toxic and flammable. They include drain cleaner, pseudo ephedrine, ether, battery acid, acetone, brake cleaner, gasoline additive, lithium strips, and anhydrous ammonia (“Meth Labs”). All these toxins are incredibly flammable and “extremely volatile, and the amateur chemists running makeshift laboratories . . . cause deadly explosions and fires” (“Methamphetamine”). An explosion of anhydrous ammonia could, in the words of an Ashford Fire Chief Jim Gregory, “take your eyeball and shrink it down to the size of a

raisin” (“Drug Makers Move Deep into Forests”). All this waste, most of the time, is left out in the open.

The chemical waste found at meth lab sites is also very dangerous. There are no warning signs that you could be approaching a meth lab. No “Beware: Dangerous Chemicals Ahead” signs posted. In one incident, a hiker “was exposed to stored chemicals. His eyes, nose and lungs began to burn” (Averill). Meth labs are made up of a propane stove or grill top with a huge pot full of chemicals, making it easy for hikers to stumble across them, unaware of danger. Investigators in Tahoma State Forests “found open containers of solution with a pH of 14 – corrosive enough to burn flesh off bones” (“Drug Makers Move Deep into Forests”). These chemicals can burn flesh off bones and melt hikers’ boots, but perhaps a more imminent danger is the havoc meth labs silently wreak on the environment.

“Cookers,” or those who maintain these Meth labs, are very apathetic towards anything but their drug, so the environment is the last thing they worry about when they discard the lab waste. An interview conducted by the National Institute of Justice revealed that meth cookers “showed little regard for the environment; most take little care when disposing of the residue from the meth cooking and tend to pour it down a drain or dump it into the dirt” (qtd. in Ellet). Just pouring one bottle of “Drain-o” on your front yard is harmful and even against the law, but meth cookers are routinely dumping five to six pounds of chemical waste on the ground after cooking one pound of meth (Department of Justice). A federal official told a Tacoma reporter: “We’re seeing chemicals dumped behind waterways, abandoned wells and septic tanks, which are polluting the water tables” (“Meth – Environmental Concerns”). Agent Young, a member of the U.S. Forest Service, once watched a “tweaker dump toxic waste straight into Lake Santeelah” (Averill). Remember that when you next take a drink from a stream.

Toxic waste kills everything it touches. This waste contains “lye, red phosphorus, hydriodic acid, and iodine that contaminate land, streams and rivers, and public sewer systems” (Guevara). It seeps into the water table, which eventually makes its way to humans and other animals. Meth labs kill the land they operate on, “locations in which meth cookers have operated must be stripped and fumigated before future habitation occurs” (Ellet). Once a meth lab is found a troop of men in moon suits trek out to the area and rope “off sickly brown ‘dead zones’ where people dumped the poisonous byproducts of meth making” (“Drug Makers Move Deep into Forests”). The waste from the labs is so toxic that it costs \$27,000 dollars to clean up one site (Averill). However, the cost of cleanup does not mean a thing to meth cookers, especially when they do not care about the environment and are not scared of being caught.

Meth makers moved into state and national forests because “police are cracking down on methamphetamine labs in cities and towns” (“Meth Makers Messing up Forests”). Police can easily smell meth cooking when they are on patrol in suburban areas--it smells like burning cat urine or ammonia. Ergo, the makers retreat to the forests, which are lightly patrolled. There simply aren’t enough forest rangers to patrol all areas of the parks. In the Southern Regional Forests, there are only 160 law enforcements agents to patrol 12,500,000 acres of land (Averill). Special Agent Jenny Davis, who works for the U.S. Forest Service states, “Meth-makers pick national forests because they’re so remote and it’s easy to dispose of toxic chemicals there. There are some parts of our

forests that people do not set foot in. It's perfect if you're looking for a place to cook meth" (Averill). Also, if the makers are caught in the forest, their homes will not be taken away and condemned because of the toxic chemicals in them.

As meth continues to wreak havoc on the state and national forests, hikers and nature enthusiasts should be aware of the dangers and keep an eye out for meth labs. Unlike your stumbling across a crop of marijuana plants, which can be easily pulled up and destroyed, you would be stumbling across a biochemical waste site, not an event the average hiker is prepared for. However, hikers or those disgusted with the idea of meth ruining the precious land can take action. They can write letters to their local politicians asking for larger funds for national and state parks. If this does not work, hikers can bring the issue to the public's attention. This may create a stir and get the media involved. The Drug Enforcement Agency and the U.S. Forest Service are aware of the problem of meth labs in forests, but they need greater support. The more people involved, the larger and stronger the voice. If there were more rangers to patrol parks, this would not be such a large problem. So, the next time you put on your backpack and roll up that sleeping bag to hit the camping trail, be aware of the big bad meth lab that could be lurking around the bend.

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