

Backpack Survival

By Duncan Long

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There's a lot of confusion about what survival means. To some, it's getting through the aftermath of an airplane wreck in a desolate area. It can mean knowing when to avoid walking in radioactive wastes. Or, it can mean knowing how to barter with troops in the aftermath of riots, war, and looting. To others, survival has to do with avoiding danger and knowing how to deal with it when it breaks into your home in the dead of night.

Survival ideas abound and there are as many definitions and strategies as there are survivalists. Some have good ideas for survival and some have unsound tactics. Bad ideas can mean extra work or trouble in everyday life; bad ideas during a survival situation get you killed. On-the-job training doesn't work when you're dealing with poison and gunfights. Or survival.

One of the most dangerous ideas--as far as I'm concerned--is that of "backpack survival."

A "back-pack survivalist" is a survivalist that plans on leaving his home ahead of a disaster and taking to the woods with only what he can carry out with him. He plans to survive through a strategy that is a sort of cross between the Boy-Scout-in-the-woods and Robinson Crusoe. The backpack survivalist plans on outrunning danger with a four-wheel drive or a motorcycle and hopes to travel light with a survival kit of everything he might need to cope with the unexpected. He hasn't cached anything in the area he's headed for because, chances are, he doesn't know where he's headed. Somehow, he hopes to overcome all odds with a minimum of supplies and a maximum of smarts. Certainly it is a noble cause; but it seems like one destined to failure. And that's not survival.

(Let's back up a minute. Backpack fever--or bug-outosis--does make sense when you're facing a localized disaster like a derailed train with overturned poisonous gas cars. A potential nuclear meltdown, an impending hurricane, or similar disasters where there is a safe place to run to. During such a time, it makes perfect sense to retreat and come back when things settle down. Likewise, some people have to work in dangerous areas. For them, donning a backpack and heading for a retreat that they've prepared before hand is a viable survival strategy. These people aren't backpack survivalists.)

Let me make a confession. Yes, I once was a closet backpack survivalist. I had an ALICE pack and had it packed with all I could carry. As I learned more about how to survive, I realized I needed to carry more. Soon I discovered that, just for my family to survive for a very few days, I'd need a pack mule and/or a hernia operation... Something was very wrong.

Probably most beginner survivalists start out the same way. Things are bad so let's bug out. Backpack survivalism is an effort to deal with the possibility of a major disaster. As backpack survivalists, we make elaborate plans centered around the idea of "bugging out" of the area we live in. We hope to travel to an area that is safer than the one we're in and plan on living off the land or on some survival supplies we've hidden in the area. On the home front, we carefully prepare a stock of supplies that we can quickly cart off in a car or van when things start to look bad.

As more and more plans are made and as ever more survival gear is purchased, the survivalist realizes just how much he needs to cope with in order to survive. If he is any sort of realist, he soon amasses enough gear to warrant a truck or--more likely--a moving van just for carrying the survival equipment. (And don't laugh, there are survivalists who have large trucks for just such use.)

Some brave souls continue to make more elaborate plans and some of these survivalists may be able to pull off their plans. Those who have really thought things out and have spared no expenses may manage to survive with a bug-out strategy. But I think there are more logical--and less expensive--ways to survive a large crisis.

Forget all your preconceived notions for a minute.

Imagine that there is a national emergency and you are an outside observer? What happens if a nuclear attack is eminent, an economic collapse has occurred, or a dictator has taken over and is ready to round up all malcontents (with survivalists at the top of the list)?

Situations change with time. The survivalist movement--and backpack fever--first started up when gas guzzler cars were about all that anyone drove. That meant that a survivalist with some spare gasoline could outdistance his unprepared peers and get to a retreat that was far from the maddening crowd, as it were. (Read some of Mel Tappan's early writing on survival retreats. His ideas are good but many have been undone with the new, fuel-efficient cars.)

With cars getting 30 or even 40 miles per gallon, it isn't rare for a car to be able to travel half way across a state on less than a tank of gasoline. The exodus from cities or trouble spots will be more limited by traffic snarls than lack of gasoline even if the gas stations are completely devoid of their liquid fuel.

Too, there are a lot of people thinking about what to do if the time for fleeing comes. A lot of people will be headed for the same spots. (Don't laugh that off, either. In my area, every eighth person has confided his secret retreat spot to me. And about half of them are all headed for the same spot: an old missile silo devoid of water and food. I suspect that the battle at the gates of the old missile base will rival the Little Big Horn.)

No matter how out-of-the-way their destination, most survivalists are kidding themselves if they think others won't be headed for their hideaway spot along with them. There are few places in the US which aren't accessible to anyone with a little driving skill and a good map.

Too, there are few places which aren't in grave danger during a nuclear war, Pandemic, or national social unrest.

Though most nuclear war survival books can give you a nice little map showing likely targets, they don't tell you some essential information. Like what the purpose of the attack will be. The enemy may not be aiming for military targets that day; a blackmail threat might begin by hitting the heart of the farmland or a number of cities before demanding the surrender of the country being attacked. The target areas on the maps might be quite safe.

And the maps show where the missiles land IF they all enjoy 100 percent accuracy and reliability. Anyone know of such conditions in war? With Soviet machinery!? Targets may be relatively safe places to be in.

Added to this is the fact that some areas can be heavily contaminated or completely free of contamination depending on the wind directions in the upper atmosphere. Crystal ball in your survival gear?

But let's ignore all the facts thus far for a few moments and assume that a backpack survivalist has found an ideal retreat and is planning to go there in the event of a national disaster... What next?

His first concern should be that he'll have a hard time taking the supplies he needs with him. A nuclear war might mean that it will be impossible to grow food for at least a year and foraging is out as well since animals and plants may be contaminated extensively.

An economic collapse wouldn't be much better. It might discourage the raising of crops; no money, no sales except for the barter to keep a small farm family going. With large corporations doing much of our farming these days, it is not unreasonable to expect a major famine coming on the heels of an economic collapse. Raising food would be a good way to attract starving looters from miles around.

Ever try to pack a year's supply of food for a family into a small van or car? There isn't much room left over. But the backpack survivalist needs more than just food.

If he lives in a cold climate (or thinks there might be something to the nuclear winter theory) then he'll need some heavy clothing.

Rifles, medicine, ammunition, tools, and other supplies will also increase what he'll need to be taking or which he'll have to hide away at his retreat site.

Shelter? Building a place to live (in any style other than early-American caveman) takes time. If he builds a cabin beforehand, he may find it vandalized or occupied when he gets to his retreat; if he doesn't build it beforehand, he may have to live in his vehicle or a primitive shelter of some sort.

Thus, a major problem is to get a large enough vehicle to carry everything he needs as well as to live in.

History has shown that cities empty themselves without official evacuation orders when things look bad. It happened in WW II and has even happened in the US during approaching hurricanes, large urban fires, and nuclear reactor problems.

So there's a major problem of timing which the backpack survivalist must contend with. He has to be packed and ready to go with all members of his family at the precise moment he learns of the disaster! The warning he gets that warrants evacuating an area will have to be acted on quickly if he's to get out ahead of the major traffic snarls that will quickly develop. A spouse at work or shopping or kids across town at school means he'll either have to leave them behind or be trapped in the area he's in. A choice not worth having to make.

Unless he's got a hot-line from the White House, the backpack survivalist will not hear the bad news much ahead of everyone else. If he doesn't act immediately, he'll be trapped out on the road and get a first-hand idea of what grid-lock is like if he's in an urban area. Even out on the open road, far away from a city, an interstate can become hectic following a ballgame... Imagine what it would be like if everyone were driving for their lives, some cars were running out of fuel (and the occupants trying to stop someone for a ride), and the traffic laws were being totally ignored while the highway patrol tried to escape along with everyone else. Just trying to get off or on major highways might become impossible. If things bog down, how long can the backpack survivalist keep those around from helping to unload his truck-load of supplies that they'll be in bad need of?

Telling them they should have prepared ahead of time won't get many sympathetic words.

Even on lightly-traveled roadways, how safe would it be to drive around in a vehicle loaded with supplies? Our backpack survivalist will need to defend himself.

But let's suppose that he's thought all this out. He has a large van, had the supplies loaded in it, managed to round every member of his family up beforehand, somehow got out of his area ahead of the mob, is armed to the teeth, and doesn't need to take an interstate route.

When he reaches his destination, his troubles are far from over.

The gridlock and traffic snarls won't stop everyone. People will slowly be coming out of heavily populated areas and most of them will have few supplies. They will have weapons (guns are one of the first things people grab in a crisis according to civil defense studies) and the evacuees will be desperate. How many pitched battles will the survivalist's family be able to endure? How much work--or even sleep--can he get when he's constantly on the lookout to repel those who may be trying to get a share of his supplies?

This assumes that he gets to where he's going ahead of everyone else. He might not though. If he has to travel for long, he may discover squatters on his land or find that some local person has staked out his retreat area for their own. There won't be any law to help out; what happens next?

Since (according to military strategists) our backpack survivalist needs about three times as many people to take an area as to defend it, he will need to have some numbers with him and expect to suffer some casualties. Does that sound like a good way to survive?

What about the local people that don't try to take over his retreat before he gets there? Will they be glad to see another stranger move into the area to tax their limited supplies? Or will they be setting up roadblocks to turn people like the backpack survivalist away?

But let's just imagine that somehow he's discovered a place that doesn't have a local population and where those fleeing cities aren't able to get to. What happens when he gets to his retreat? How good does he need to be at hunting and fishing? One reason mankind went into farming was that hunting and fishing don't supply enough food for a very large population nor do they work during times of drought or climatic disruption. What does he do when he runs out of ammunition or game? What happens if the streams become so contaminated that he can't safely eat what he catches? Can he stake out a large enough area to guarantee that he won't deplete it of game so that the next year is not barren of animals?

Farming? Unless he finds some unclaimed farm machinery and a handy storage tank of gasoline at his retreat, he'll hardly get off first base. Even primitive crop production requires a plow and work animals (or a lot of manpower) to pull the blade. No plow, no food for him or domestic animals.

And domestic animals don't grow on trees. Again, unless he just happens to find some cows waiting for him at his retreat, he'll be out of luck. (No one has packaged freeze-dried cows or chickens--at least, not in a form you can reconstitute into living things).

Intensive gardening? Maybe. But even that takes a lot of special tools, seeds, know-how, and good weather. Can he carry what he needs and have all the skills that can be developed only through experience?

Even if he did, he might not have any food to eat. Pestilence goes hand in hand with disasters. Our modern age has forgotten this. But during a time when chemical factories aren't churning out the insecticides and pest poisons we've come to rely on, our backpack survivalist should be prepared for waves of insects flooding into any garden he may create. How good is he at making insecticides? Even if he carries out a large quantity of chemicals to his retreat, how many growing seasons will they last?

Did he truck out a lot of gasoline and an electrical generator with him? No? Do you REALLY think he can create an alcohol still from scratch in the middle of no-where without tools or grain? Then he'd better write off communications, lighting, and all the niceties of the 20th Century after his year's supply of batteries wear out and his vehicle's supply of gasoline conks out.

I'm afraid we've only scratched the surface though. Thus far things have been going pretty well. What happens when things get really bad? How good is he at removing his spouse's appendix--without electric lights, pain killers, or antiseptic conditions? Campfire dental work, anyone?

How good is he at making ammunition? Clothing? Shoes?

I think you'll have to agree that this hardly seems like survival in style. Even if our backpack survivalist is able to live in the most spartan of conditions and has the know-how to create plenty out of the few scraps around him, he'll never have much of a life ahead of him.

Camping out is fun for a few days. Living in rags like a hunted animal doesn't sound like an existence to be aimed for.

The bottom line with backpack fever is that, with any major disaster that isn't extremely localized, running is a panic reaction not a survival strategy. Running scared is seldom a good survival technique and backpack fever during any but a localized disaster (like a flood or chemical spill) looks like it would be a terminal disease with few, rare exceptions.

So what's the alternative?

A number of writers, from Kurt Saxon to Howard Ruff to Mel Tappan, have already suggested it but I think that it bears a retelling.

What they've said is this: **get yourself situated in a small community that could get by without outside help if things came unglued nationally or internationally. Find a spot that allows you to live in the life-style you've grown accustomed to (and a community that allows you to carry on your livelihood)** but which has the ability to grow its own food and protect its people from the unprepared (or looters) that might drift in from surrounding cities during a crisis. This spot has the ability to carry on trade within its borders and has a number of people who can supply specialized products or professional skills.

An area with two thousand to five thousand people in it along with a surrounding farm community would be ideal but sizes can vary a lot according to the climate and city. Ideally such a town would have its own power plant with a few small industries along with the usual smattering of doctors, dentists, and other professionals.

This type of community isn't rare in the US. It's quite common in almost every state. You could probably even take a little risk and commute into a city if you must keep your current job. (In such a case a reverse backpack survival strategy just might work--you'd be bugging out to your home.)

Western civilization stepped out of the dark ages when small communities started allowing people to specialize in various jobs. Rather than each man being his own artisan, farmer, doctor, carpenter, etc., men started learning to master one job they enjoyed doing. Each man became more efficient at doing a job and--through the magic of capitalism--western culture finally started upward again.

A small modern community like the one suggested above, when faced with a national economic collapse or the aftermath of a nuclear war, would eventually lift itself up the same way. It would give those who lived in it the same chance for specialization of work and the ability to carry on

mutual trade, support, and protection. Such small communities will be the few light spots in a Neo-Dark Age.

Which place would you rather be: in a cave, wondering where the food for tomorrow would come from, or with a group of people living in their homes, working together to overcome their problems? Even the most individualistic of survivalists shouldn't find the choice too hard to make.