

Snake River BASE Academy

Higher Education for Lower Freefall

Understanding BASE Ethics

By Tom Aiello

BASE jumping has its own peculiar set of ethical guidelines. These ethics have evolved (and continue to do so) over time. The underlying motivation for BASE ethics is our shared desire to jump, and to do so while avoiding arrest or injury. The bottom line aim of BASE ethics is to allow us all to continue making as many jumps as possible in the long run. It follows then, that actions which make it harder for others to jump are generally viewed as unethical, to some (varying) degree.

The nuances of BASE ethics vary from place to place, and especially vary depending on the legal status of a site. If there are established guidelines for a site (true at an increasing number of popular legal sites), always find out what they are, and follow them. The guidelines have been established for good reasons, and often in conjunction with local authorities. Jumpers breaking these rules (through ignorance or otherwise) undermine the legalization efforts of the entire BASE community.

The guiding principle of BASE ethics is **respect**.

Respect: Show respect for the **sport**, the **sites**, and other **people** (both jumpers and non-jumpers).

Failing to respect the serious nature of BASE will quickly alienate many experienced jumpers, who have learned to respect BASE through hard personal experiences. Lack of respect for the sport can be shown in many ways. Dismissing the inherent dangers of the sport is one. Putting unprepared people off for a "BASE thrill ride" is another. Instructing students who lack appropriate preparation is a third. The bottom line is that BASE can be a fun game--but it can also turn deadly serious in a heartbeat. Remembering this is one of the keys to a long, healthy life, and also to a long, healthy jumping career.

Failing to respect sites, and the guidelines for jumping them (formal or otherwise) will almost certainly anger the other jumpers who established, and continue to jump, those sites. Site guidelines and procedures vary from simple ("don't land by the farmhouse"), to Byzantine ("drive up the left side of the dirt road, park behind the loading dock, and keep your lights on until you reach the third door"), to downright bizarre.

Respecting other people is a basic guideline of human interaction we all learned in kindergarten. This nicety of human interaction is even more important in BASE. You depend on the jumpers around you for instruction, assistance and mutual aid. While this is most obvious in simple things, like carpooling to a jump site, it also applies to opening and maintaining site access, avoiding arrest, and providing medical assistance to injured jumpers. In the most extreme, we rely on each other for emotional support when tragedy occurs. While we sometimes like to think of ourselves as rugged individualists, in the end, BASE is a team sport.

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Jumpers must also respect the non-jumping people who live or work around BASE sites. Many jumpers travel to jump, and it is important to understand and respect the culture (and wishes) of the local people. There are some popular cliffs in Europe, for example, where jumpers are asked to land in specific areas so as not to disrupt local agriculture. The popular legal span in the western US is located in a small, conservative, rural community, which has little tolerance for public nudity or profanity. Understanding and respecting the culture of local residents helps protect site access, as well as conveying a positive image of BASE jumpers to the general public.

Two principles which act as good guidelines for BASE Ethics are "**Leave No Trace**" and "**Contact the Locals**."

Leave No Trace: The old backpackers credo, "Leave only footprints, take only pictures" is even more true in BASE (except that in our case, it's more often "take only video"). Leaving evidence that you have been jumping an object is not only poor behavior from an environmental standpoint. It also lets the authorities know that BASE jumpers lack respect for the area, or (on less than legal sites) that they have been there at all. Things as small as being seen by a drunk at 3am have been used to arrest and prosecute BASE jumpers. To avoid drawing unwanted attention to yourself, other jumpers, or the objects we share, try to make jumps with no witnesses, and without leaving physical evidence. While this ethic obviously evolved in the context of illegal jumps, with land managers examining BASE in wilderness areas today, minimizing our impact there is equally important.

Leave no trace applies to video, photographs, or other evidence of our jumps as well. Video of easily identifiable locations can find it's way back to site managers. This can lead to access problems with both legal and illegal sites. Obviously, video and photos of some legal sites, jumped in a respectful manner, won't create too many problems. But evidence of questionable jumps, disrespect of local rules, or illegal jumps can create problems for all of us.

Contact the Locals: Whether you are a new jumper just getting into the sport in your area, or a more experienced jumper who is traveling, the original rule of BASE ethics still applies. Always make genuine efforts to locate jumpers local to any object you want to jump from. Not only will this help you to meet some wonderful, interesting people, but it will help to show respect for the hard work of those who opened (and maintain) site access. Further, the locals may have worked out ways to make jumps that you would have to spend years to duplicate. Local jumpers often have contacts, access, and schedules that allow jumps to be made with minimum risk or trouble.

There is a flip side to the "Contact the Locals" rule. If you are the local, you have a responsibility to provide guidance, help, and access to other jumpers, especially new jumpers in your area. While protecting site access and keeping your guests (or new jumpers) uninjured can be a valid reason to keep them off of some sites for a time, many experienced jumpers appear to restrict access for no good reason. If a visitor (or new jumper) is qualified for a site, and has shown themselves to be responsible with their site

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knowledge, it is the duty of local (or more experienced) jumpers to guide them. When this duty is neglected, the system begins to break down. Note that this does not mean that locals ought to be expected to come out on a moment's notice to show you around. Nor does it mean that you are expected to take every new jumper out whenever they want. Few experienced jumpers have the energy to keep up with the seemingly insatiable thirst of a beginner to make numerous jumps off the "same old boring tower." We all have lives, and BASE has to fit into the framework of those lives.

There is a balance here, between the local guides and visitors, or the experienced jumpers and students. Maintaining it requires effort and understanding from both sides. Visitors and new jumpers must be patient and understanding. Locals must be willing to help visitors and new jumpers. When either side fails to live up to this tacit understanding, the system begins to break down, leading to political divisions, community bickering, and, eventually, less jumps for all of us.

Site Burning: In the lexicon of BASE, "Site Burning" is the most common, and to some the worst, of the deadly sins. The meaning of this term is not always clear, however. What do we BASE jumpers mean by "Site Burning," anyway?

Site Burning is any action that makes it harder for other people to make jumps from a site.

Site Burning comes in various degrees. You'll hear people talking about "heating up" a site, "torching" a site, and a variety of other colorful metaphors related to fire. In general, the more damage someone, or something, has done to site access, the more violent the fire parallel.

At an illegal site, burning, of one degree or another, can come from something as simple as being seen by random bystanders. It can also be the result of press coverage, injury (or fatality) accidents, or arrest. Any of these things can filter back to authorities, and that can result in increased police scrutiny of the object.

At a legal site, burning usually also consists of things that draw undesirable attention to jumping, disrupt non-jumpers around the site, or result in authorities regulating (or even banning) jumping of the object. These things can range from disrupting traffic across a bridge to public nudity, profanity or intoxication in view of non-jumpers, to putting local kids off for static line thrill rides. Note that some of these things may be technically legal--but if they result in impaired access for other jumpers, they are still a form of site burning (this is one of many areas where BASE ethics do not move in step with public notions of legality--but this time on the stricter side). Obviously at legal sites, other actions, such as lawsuits, lobbying of public officials, or ignoring guidelines created by local authorities, can restrict site access, as well.

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The very worst Site Burning offense is one that causes a legal object to be closed to jumping by the authorities. Our legal sites are few, and precious. The loss of jumping privileges at any one of them is a major blow for the entire BASE community.

Legality: BASE ethics are not necessarily related to legality. It is obviously possible to make an illegal jump, which is, by BASE standards, perfectly ethical. It is also possible to make a legal jump that is not, by BASE standards, ethical. The two systems (ethics and legality) operate independently. In some cases, ethical standards are stricter on illegal jumps (for example, leaving no evidence). In others, particularly access sensitive sites, higher ethical standards must be maintained on legal jumps (for example, respecting local culture in areas where local authorities might consider banning jumping).

Remember, the underlying goal of BASE ethics is to make it easier for everyone to make more jumps. A simple personal guide to the ethics of a jump can be had by asking yourself "am I making it harder for others to jump here?" on any particular jump. If your actions can harm other jumpers' ability to jump, ask yourself what you can do to reduce that impact. Being respectful of others will make your BASE career simpler, easier, and more fulfilling in the long run.

*This article was written entirely by Tom Aiello, BASE 579. Tom has made more than 1000 BASE jumps from over 200 objects, and is the head instructor at the Snake River BASE Academy (www.SnakeRiverBASE.com), in Twin Falls, Idaho, United States. All opinions are those of the author only. By making any fixed object parachute jump, you are taking your life in your own hands, and accepting responsibility for any possible outcome. Copyright 2005. Permission to reproduce and distribute in this **exact form only** is hereby granted.*

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