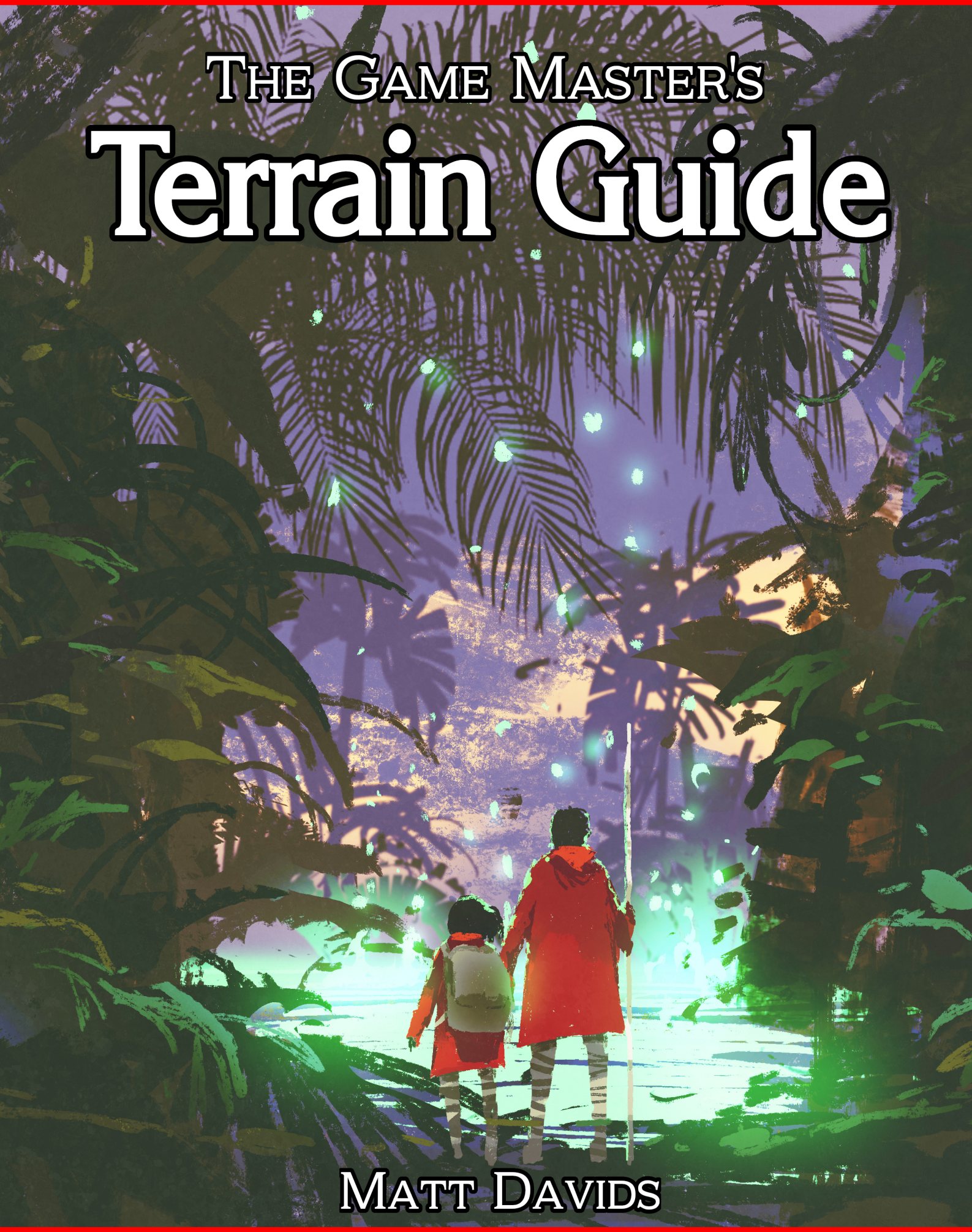
The Game Master's Terrain Guide



Matt Davids

The Game Master's Terrain Guide

How to Use Wetlands, Forests, and Mountains in Fantasy Role-Playing Games

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Introduction

After many years of running role-playing games, I consciously told myself I wanted to up my game. I noticed I was skating through sessions without working on my craft as a game master. No one in my gaming group wanted to GM, so I give them junk.

However, I realized I wanted to improve for my sake. That if I turned into a good performance the game was not only more satisfying for my players but for me as well.

One of the first things I began to think about was terrain. How many times did I simply say you're in a forest or you're in a desert or you climb a mountain without giving any thought to the terrain?

Describing different types of terrain can set the tone for a session and present unique challenges to the players without inventing encounters. Just knowing they will be traveling in mountains, wetlands, or forests will make the players think creatively about how they should prepare and behave.

This book presents my thoughts and ideas on how to use wetlands, forests, and mountains in your sessions. I give scenario ideas, possible non-player characters, and more to help you breathe life into your campaigns.

Matt Davids
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Wetlands

A Touch of Realism

Not many natural terrains are more diverse than wetlands. Wetlands contain a multiplicity of vegetation and wildlife.

These ecosystems team with insects, amphibians, turtles, and birds of all types.

The variety of the flora is astonishing. Mosses, lichens, trees, bushes, shrubs, peat, ferns, reeds, and grasses, just to name a few, are all found in wetlands.

When constructing your campaigns, introducing wetlands creates unique experiences and challenges for characters.

When traveling on an epic quest, an adventuring party will invariably come across wetlands. Or least, they would if they were traveling in the real world.

Use wetlands to diversify the types of terrains in your campaigns. A well-described and presented wetland can create a memory that will last a lifetime.

Of course, not all wetlands are the same. This section explores the different types of wetlands in enough detail to give game masters the tools they need to describe these wonderful places to their players.

There are four main types of wetlands we will explore: swamps, marshes, bogs, and fens.

The four different types of wetlands provide many fascinating adventure opportunities.

Any one of them provides hours of fun and a great backdrop for exploits for new and experienced role-players alike.

Also covered are several other topics like, types of water in wetlands, how to weave in magic, and more.

Swamps

By definition swamps are wetlands with wooded vegetation and trees.

Swamps appear to be ancient things. They look as though they've come from a different time or different age. Like something out the

beginning of time or even the beginning of the world.

They create a dismal and depressing landscape.

Include details like the tree canopy, which creates a dark and eerie color over the entire swamp.

Tree moss hanging from knobby-kneed cypresses nearly touches the scum-covered water.

Mist clouds visibility. Dampness and humidity cling to travelers, turning their clothes into uncomfortable sacks.

The water in a swamp can be shallow or deep. Both are treacherous to any who dare to travel in these parts.

Boats with paddles can maneuver swamps fairly well. However, the boats must have a very narrow draw.

A boat with a deep keel is in danger of running aground at any moment, because the depth of the water can change from 15 feet to 3 inches in a matter of yards.

Paths and channels through the swamp can suddenly turn into dead ends trapping any would-be adventurer.

Dangers lurk everywhere. Snakes are found above in the trees and below in the water. Either poisonous vipers or giant constrictors, menace anyone traveling through the swamp.

Under the water lurk the most terrible foes: crocodiles, alligators, giant snapping turtles with beaks that can crush men's bones. Giant catfish, hunting and prowling, can drag a grown man beneath the water in seconds.

Certain ground gives the illusion of being solid, yet when stepped upon, gives way beneath the slightest weight.

Great herons and other waterfowl pick their way among the shadows and pools of light.

Vines and weeds dangle and entrap. An endless maze of water and leaves and thickets are overshadowed by giant cypresses and other swamp trees.

A melancholy place indeed. Only the greatest need drives travelers here.

Pepper your swamp with encounters fitting the setting: overgrown cottages, boats filled with moss floating aimlessly, ancient graves, shipwrecks, hidden treasure, remnants of strange rituals, bloody clothing, lost people.

Possible NPCs

Hermit who knows several ways out of the swamp.
Lost adventurer who has gone mad.
Elf looking for her lost lover.

Swamp of the Lost

Effects: For every hour spent in the swamp there is a chance a character's mind becomes clouded and confused.

Scenario #1: A wizard hires the party to capture swamp gas. He needs it for experiments that will lead the party to gain knowledge for a larger quest.

Scenario #2: The party wanders into the swamp unknowingly. They can recognize the swamp is having strange effects on them by rolling.

Possible Encounters:

Giant Carnivorous Plants
Ghosts
Lost People
Poisonous Fumes
Swamp Monster

Marshes

Marshes are typified by grasses and contain little or no wooded vegetation or trees. They can stretch for mile upon endless mile.

The grasses form a confounding maze in which visibility becomes difficult. Some of the grass can reach 10 to 12 feet in height above the surface of the water.

The water is seldom deep. Eight feet would be deep with the average being much less. Marshes are sunny places teeming with ducks, geese, swans, and herons all feeding on minnows and other fish.

In the southern latitudes, alligators will make their homes in marshes, and manatees will come up from the sea to graze.

Towns and villages near marshes exploit the variety of flora and fauna. The grasses and reeds are used in construction and the fish and fowl become dietary staples.

Traveling through a marsh is arduous. The travelers are constantly soaked, and a raft or flat-bottomed boat would be a godsend.

Any party journeying near rivers is likely to cross marshes. Use them to their full effect.

A party could collect fresh water after a long trek or go hunting and fishing. A marsh may simply be another obstacle on the way to finish a quest.

If the adventurers want to build a raft, grass will be their main option unless they carry large amounts of wood with them.

The travelers are likely to come across old fishing shacks, sunken boats, ruins of towns that have been reclaimed by the landscape, duck blinds, and much more.

Possible NPCs

Hunter carrying ducks he killed.
Teenage girl fishing.
Refugee family hiding.

Marsh of Sorrows

Effects: Every day spent in the marsh increases the chance of a character being lost in sorrow and hopelessness. Quests are considered impossible, journeys too difficult, etc.

Scenario #1: The party must cross the marshes to complete their quest. However, they receive many warnings about traveling there.

Scenario #2: The party must track down a runaway teenager and bring her home before she takes her own life.

Possible Encounters:

Ghosts
Ruins with Sad Inscriptions
Grass Funeral Rafts

Bogs

In northern latitudes, bogs can be filled with layers upon layers of peat and are sometimes called mires, quagmires, or muskegs.

Peat is decayed plant matter that has accumulated over many hundreds or thousands of years.

Bogs are home to very specific types of mosses, small carnivorous plants, and highly specialized insects.

On cold mornings, thick mists rise from the heat of the decaying plants and peat.

No trees are found in bogs. Only remnants of long-dead forests called "bog wood" appear occasionally.

Bogs are home to cranberries, blueberries, and huckleberries.

Flies and butterflies of very peculiar types live and flourish in these places. Also, a large variety of salamanders are found among the mosses.

Communities near bogs cultivate the berries and use peat for cooking and heating fuel. Bog wood makes excellent and prized furniture.

Societies have also used bogs as graveyards. A body put to rest in a bog is naturally mummified and can be persevered for thousands of years. Bodies buried in bogs and often called, "bog people" or "bog bodies."

Traveling through bogs is grueling and saps the strength from even the mightiest adventurers. Patches of open water mix with mounds of peat. Floating mats of moss can give the illusion of solid ground.

When faced with crossing a bog, the most stouthearted adventurer can feel weakness enter his knees.

Possible NPCs

Man gathering peat.
Woman collecting bog wood.
Workers harvesting cranberries.

The Peat Gatherers

Situation: A group of orcs and goblins have enslaved a human town. They are forcing the townspeople the gather peat from a bog for their infernal furnaces.

Scenario #1: The party wanders into the bog unknowingly. The characters hear tales of sorrow and see abuse of prisoners.

Scenario #2: The party is enslaved and forced to work in the bog.

Possible Encounters:

Guards
Orc Chieftain
Goblin Wizard
Slave Child

The Bog People

Situation: Undead plague a town near a bog. The cause is a necromancer who has taken up residence in the ruins of an ancient castle the bog. The necromancer awakens the bog bodies and his hideous purposes.

Possible Encounters:

Kidnapped townspeople
Mummies
Zombies
Necromancer

Fens

While similar to a bog, a fen has less peat and more small wooded vegetation.

A particular kind of mire, fens are found mainly in northern climates. However, some can exist in tropical climes.

The ground is saturated with water and shrubs and small trees dominate the landscape. Sometimes a fen is overtaken with willow or alder.

The types of vegetation and animal life found in fens are very specific to the ecosystem. Flies and other insects are the main types of animal life.

Standing water comes only in puddles and pools. However a traveler's feet will sink deep into the soft earth.

Traveling through a fen is torturous work.

Possible NPCs

Wizard collecting insects.

Child stuck in mud up to their knees.

Man chopping down a large willow tree.

The Fen Spirit

Situation: The ghost of an ancient elf princess haunts a lonely fen.

Scenario #1: The party needs information from the ghost. They must discover her secret and help her in some way.

Scenario #2: The party needs an ingredient that grows only in the fen. It is needed to make a medicine to the save the life of an NPC close to the party. The ghost must be convinced to allow them to have it.

Possible Encounters:

Quick Sand
Wolves
Poison Thorns
Biting Flies

Water Sources

Palustrine Wetlands

An inland wetland that lacks a source of flowing water and is precipitation fed.

Marine Wetlands

This type of wetland is exposed to the open ocean.

Lacustrine Wetlands

Wetlands connected to the ecosystem of lakes or bodies of freshwater.

Riverine Wetlands

This type of wetland is associated with rivers and flowing water.

Estuarine Wetlands

The mixing of fresh and saltwater sets this type of wetland apart.

Water Types

Freshwater

Wetlands can contain freshwater, which is very helpful to travelers.

Brackish

A mixture of fresh and salt water can tempt a parched wanderer to drink, but he will do so at his peril.

Saltwater

Saltwater provides the added danger of no drinkable water nearby.

Mixing in the Supernatural or Magic

Any reader of fantasy knows Tolkien's Dead Marshes. The dead lying in repose beneath the murky water, haunting any travelers who dare tread its winding paths.

Think of similar ideas for your campaigns. If a bizarre evil awaits the party, as the adventurers get closer to their goal, the landscape should get stranger and stranger. The swamp near the wizard's tower is now filled monstrosities from his twisted experiments.

Two hundred years ago, a warlord used slaves to harvest peat from giant bogs to fuel his war machine. Now the souls or mummies of those slaves haunt the bogs.

A large tract of fens serves as a barrier to an elven stronghold.

A once great city cursed by a wizard has sunk into the mud and become a maze-like marsh.

Mosquitos

Do not forget mosquitoes.

They plague anyone in wetlands. In the north, they do so only in certain seasons. In the south, it is a nearly year-round scourge.

For example in the great bogs of Siberia, for a couple months of the year, millions upon millions of mosquitoes emerge.

They form massive clouds. They plug travelers' noses and fill their ears. The insects are so numerous that the act of blinking will crush some of them.

Something valuable must lie at the end of the journey for an adventurer to endure this trial.

Use mosquitoes to create a fuller environment for your players. Let them know that the journey has a price to be paid.

Also, remember that mosquitoes carry diseases: Malaria, Dengue, Yellow Fever, and West Nile just to name a few. Of course as game master, you can create a variety of fictional diseases.

Mosquito Diseases

Gronk's Fever

The victim suffers from a prolonged high fever. They must rest and can only perform the simplest of tasks. The fever can be eased by medicine skill. However, the fever will last 1D4 days.

Bonebreaker

The victim's body is racked with severe pain from head to toe. They cannot walk or move without causing agony. Nothing can be done to ease the symptoms, but the disease runs it course in 1D6 days.

Lerium's Madness

The victim experiences horrifying hallucinations. Many victims dissolve into gibbering fools. However, there is a 50% chance the victim may attack friends or run away from the party. The symptoms fade after 1D12 hours leaving the person confused and extremely exhausted.

Conclusion

Wetlands in RPG campaigns are usually highly underused. Possibly a swamp pops up here and there in some spooky horror campaign, but not much else.

Many great cities are located at the mouth of rivers where they pour into the sea. These are great places to put a marsh or swamp.

When traveling through great tracts of wilderness in northern lands, where many fantasy RPGs are set, an adventuring party is certain to come across a fen or a bog.

These landscapes create instant challenges based solely upon the terrain.

Part of the fun can be slogging through a wetland only to arrive at the town mud-covered and exhausted.

Or your party reaches the dungeon entrance spent with tattered clothes and disease-ridden bodies knowing more challenges lie ahead.

Forests

Not Just Wander-by Country

Role-playing game adventuring parties often find themselves in a forest.

Their quests take them through or near or beyond great wooded lands on many occasions.

Fill your RPG campaign with mystery and wonder. Don't allow yourself as a GM to simply rely on clichés or to brush past opportunities. Leave a lasting impression on your players.

It is easy to throw a few creatures in here or there. Perhaps a few bandits, or other standard encounters and that's it.

The party breezes through the forest and there are a few episodes of minor combat. Then the party reaches the temple, the dungeon, the castle, or the town.

However, as a serious Game Master you should be looking for ways to give every part of your campaign the chance to live and breathe.

Forests are no exception.

This section gives you some ideas on how to bring forests alive. It will help you seize an opportunity when crafting a new campaign. A forest should be a place of mythology and folklore. A forest can be filled with so much more than simple combat encounters.

A journey through a forest can set the tone of your campaign or adventure. It can provide an atmosphere that will make your world come alive.

Describing Forests

The description is where it all begins. When your players are all gathered around the table and they have put down their phones. All eyes are on you as Game Master.

Even if you only decide to skim over the party's journey through a forest, the description is crucial.

Think about the forest in broad terms at first. There are many types of forests.

Tropical

The tropical forest can be a nice change of pace for players who are used to adventuring in northern lands.

These forests can be either wet or dry and contain vast varieties of tree and other plant life as well as nearly innumerable insect and animal species.

When adventuring in the jungle, keep in mind humidity and visibility.

In a rainforest, a perpetual drizzle will greet the characters on their trek. Even if it is not raining, the humidity will have them dripping in no time.

The party should be tramping through puddles and rivulets.

A dry tropical forest can have the opposite effect, draining the characters and leaving them parched.

Visibility in some jungles is no more than a few feet. The sides of the path or road simply become walls of vegetation.

If there is no path, hacking and slashing one is difficult, backbreaking toil.

Temperate

Temperate forests are the most common, but a little imagination can bring them to life again.

Ferns, mosses, and fungi intermingle with saplings and ancient trees. Think about the season in which your party is travelling.

In temperate deciduous forests, the trees' leaves change to vibrant colors in the fall. This could be an amazing backdrop for an adventuring party.

In winter, the leaves have fallen. Trees rise like skeleton specters.

Spring brings a new leafy green as well as a fresh budding hope. A return journey home in the spring can brighten spirits after months of toil.

The heat of summer can be used to oppress characters and make them yearn for rest.

Boreal

Boreal forests are the true forests of the north. Sometimes called snow forests, they are typified by evergreens and low ground cover. Taiga and tundra become common the farther north one dares. However, larch and pine are more widespread.

Strange Forests

Petrified Forest: A petrified forest can be a strange site indeed. Think of its impression on the characters. It would be like walking through a forest of stone, if the trees still stand. If they have crumbled long ago, surely they would paint a ghostly, apocalyptic picture.

Crystal Forest: A forest of crystal would be a unique experience that could pepper an adventurer's tale with wonder.

Mushroom Forest: Giant mushrooms can make an eerie, unearthly forest. The spores could have a hypnotic or intoxicating effect or even a comical one.

Quiet Forest: A forest with no noticeable animal or insect life, like the Sea of Trees at the foot of Mount Fuji, can be unnerving. A deafening quiet can be maddening.

Use Everything to Your Advantage

Any of these forests can be populated with sacred trees or living trees or any type of encounter.

Being able to describe the type of trees and other vegetation will give more of a sense of immersion to your players.

Describe the path. Is it leaf-covered and damp? Is it dry, hardened earth with bare roots exposed?

Don't forget about rocks and boulders. Moss-covered boulders that lay like a giant's shoulders next to the road, inspiring awe in the characters. Small rocks, strewn about as if by malicious fairies, weary the feet of travelers and create another obstacle for adventurers.

Thorns, thorns, thorns. Always remember to include thorns.

Be sure to describe the sounds of forest. Birds, insects, and the sounds of other creatures bellowing in the distance. Wind awaking the leaves. Creeks babbling or rain softly dripping.

Think about the smell as well. Each plant, flower, and every type of vegetation has its own unique smell.

Use all your tricks to paint a picture your players will never forget.

Types of Magical Forests

Since we are talking about role-playing games, magic certainly can play a large part in the forest you are creating. They are several types of magical forests to consider.

Elder Forest

Some forests are old, ancient beyond ancient. When the elder races first set foot in them, they were old. These are elder forests. In the elder forests, wonders lurk behind every leaf and stem. They are drenched with symbolism.

When creating an elder forest, be sure to include certain characteristics.

The foliage should be dense. Murmurs and whispers play among the trees.

A heavy intelligence, mind, or emotions should weigh upon any visitor. Any party moving through an elder forest should be in awe.

Respect should fall upon them. Talking should be labored. Mirth and laughter suppressed. They're in the presence of their elders.

An elder forest can take upon itself a cosmological significance. The very Tree of Life could stand at the center.

If characters chop or cut any wood, grave consequences should befall them. They should know they are in the very heart of nature herself.

No insolence will be tolerated.

An elder forest can be a nice change of pace from light and breezy forests or from darker cursed forests.

Be creative and evocative in your descriptions. Even if your characters just pass through the edge of an elder forest, it should leave an impression upon them.

They should know that their game master is taking this world seriously. And that you have provided a history and there are consequences for the slightest action.

Enchanted Forest

Another type of forest is the enchanted forest. These are the forests of medieval romances.

Such a forest is filled with melodies and gaiety and a light heartedness.

Enchanted forests hold wonders and mysteries that can enchant player and character alike.

The air should be light, the atmosphere clear and fresh. New wonders and marvels should be around every corner.

Fantastic trees or plants that the characters have never seen should populate the groves and glens.

Fantastic folk, ready to offer weary travelers a fine meal and a taste of ale.

Encounters in an enchanted forest should be mysterious. Combat should be minimal.

More appropriate encounters are riddles, strange folk with information, lost lovers flitting among the trees, tricksters, imps, and nymphs.

Caravans or celebrating bands of wood elves, moving through their homelands without a care in the world could stop to chat briefly with the strangers and give them hints of future hardships.

Enchanted forests also carry romance. The feeling should be around the characters.

Princesses or princes, with their retinue passing along, tempt the party to leave its quest. Enjoy life. Indulge in worldly pleasures.

Cottages and cabins can be stumbled upon. In these homely shacks, the players can be confronted with a respite or an enigma.

Another feature of an enchanted forest could be the great hunt with a mythical stag or boar as the object.

The hunt plays an important role in the status of knights and rulers and should be treated as a sacred duty.

Possible NPCs

Trickster imp plays practical jokes on the party.
Stranger offers a character a golden ring.
Hunter searching for a white stag.

The Elf Wedding

Situation: A Wood Elf wedding party passes by the group and invites them to attend the ceremony.

Scenario #1: The party are honored guests and prophecies are given about their quests and deeds.

Scenario #2: The party has to choose between attending the party or pressing on with their mission. If they are late in completing their quest, there could be dreadful consequences. However, refusing the invitation of elves can also carry dire consequences.

Possible Encounters:

Beauiful elf maiden
Handsome elf lad
Wizard
Fortune Teller

Tree of Life

The tree of life concept has fascinated mankind for millenniums. Only a quick survey of mythology and folklore reveals an array of diverse cultures with similar stories.

In fact, the idea of life being connected and spreading out like a giant tree is nearly universal. The motif of the tree of life can be used in your tabletop RPG campaigns to add weight and infuse mystery.

Here are several ways to use the tree of life motif in your campaigns.

Artwork and Architecture

The simplest way to use the motif in your campaigns is to mention it in the descriptions of artwork and architecture.

When the party enters the throne room, make note of how a depiction of the tree of life is carved on the entire back wall.

Perhaps an old wizard's staff is crafted to resemble the tree of life.

These may be small details, but they will give the game world a sense of realness.

Quest Giver

Using the tree of life as a recurring quest giver will give your campaign gravity. Any quest the tree of life charges the characters with instantly becomes part of the fabric of nature.

The quests should be intertwined with the destiny of the world or even the cosmos. At the very least, whole lands and people groups are at stake.

Quest Object

The party's object may be to find the tree of life to fulfill the requirements of a quest. Usually, a quest like this would be assigned to the heroes as an impossible task.

The miller's son desires to marry the king's daughter. The king says he will grant permission only if the miller's son finds the tree of life. Of course, the king believes he has gotten rid of this poor boy.

The old wizard says in jest he will only teach you magic if you bring him an acorn from the tree of life.

Another possibility is that the tree is dying and party has to save it.

Knowledge Giver

The party may have an entirely unrelated quest. However, they need a piece of information only the tree of life possesses. This knowledge should incredibly special and secret.

The tree of life may also give the characters insights into their own pasts or futures.

Encounter

While traveling in distant lands, the party may happen to discover the tree of life.

It could be a mythical occurrence filling the characters with wonder and awe. They do not get to communicate with it, only impressed by its presence.

Villain

An unorthodox use of the motif is as villain. Indeed, the tree of life would make tremendously powerful opponent.

The tree could be seeking to destroy mankind and other intelligent races for perceived grievances.

It could have been corrupted in some way and the characters have to restore it.

Destruction

Usually, destroying the tree of life is considered an act of ultimate evil. Any characters that harm the tree will be punished by others the gods, even nature itself.

Although, an alternative is to have the destruction of the tree usher in the age of science. The tree needs to be destroyed because evil magic has grown too powerful.

However, the destruction means that all magic will fade from the world and mankind alone will ascend in power and other races will diminish.

Additional Research

Hopefully, these thoughts have sparked your imagination and you will be able to deepen your campaigns with the tree of life motif.

The Great Hunt

Situation: The monarch has called a Great hunt.

Scenario #1: The party is named the champions of the monarch and must slay the beast before their rivals do to preserve the honor of the ruler.

Scenario #2: The party needs an audience with the queen. She has refused to see them. However, when the hunt is called it is announced that those who kill the beast will be granted a audience with her majesty

Possible Encounters:

Rival hunters
Forest spirits
Injured travelers
Hermit

The Cursed Forest

Any fan of Tolkien must remember Mirkwood.

A forest can labor under a foul curse or the influence of evil beings.

Don't ignore these in your games when constructing a campaign.

Has the villain's influence spread even to the forests around his lair? What changes have fallen upon the landscape? Has a once-pleasant forest turned into a den for bandits and thieves or foul creatures?

The trees should be blackish. The ground like dark dried blood. The sun blocked out. The odors foul and reeking.

Players should know they have entered a damned place.

Of course, there should always be a way to rid the forest of the curse.

The hunt could be used here as well. The great boar or the mythical stag has been corrupted and now darkens the forest. Once slain and the skin taken to the king, the curse is lifted.

Perhaps once the evil wizard's tower is overthrown and his staff broken, the polluting influence on the forest is dispelled.

Whenever your party is traveling through a cursed forest, make your descriptions so vivid that they are uncomfortable.

Make resting difficult. Sleep is plagued with nightmares. Strange sounds or a sense of dread causes sleep to flee.

Make eating difficult. The water is foul and the meat of creatures is not fit for carrion-eaters.

Let them know that they travel through an abomination and that something must be done about it.

Possible NPCs

Evil courtier carrying a message.

Lost traveler who asks for directions.

Half-orc bounty hunter looking for a criminal.

The Sacred Grove

Druids are most familiar with these places. The sacred grove is a hallowed place.

It is meeting place for elders and students. A place of worship. It is the place where nature's business is discussed and conducted.

The sacred grove can have a guardian of supernatural power. If disturbed, the characters will feel its wrath. Or, perhaps the guardian is a simple druid.

Either way, character who desecrates anything within the sacred grove will do so on

pain of death.

The sacred grove can contain a mythical being in the center. Perhaps an ancient druid, who holds valuable information for the party. Perhaps an elven maid forever weeping for her lost love.

The grove could have been made sacred through several means.

First, something terrible could have happened on the spot. A grove such as this will be melancholy.

Second, something wonderful happened on the spot. This type of grove should be light and refreshing.

Third, the grove can hold either magical or religious significance. Groves such as these should take on the tenor of the religion or the nmagic they represent.

Groves can also be hiding places. A place where peasants flee if their village is attacked by the villain's fell minions.

Introducing a sacred grove can give your campaign a feeling of mystery, mythology, and folklore.

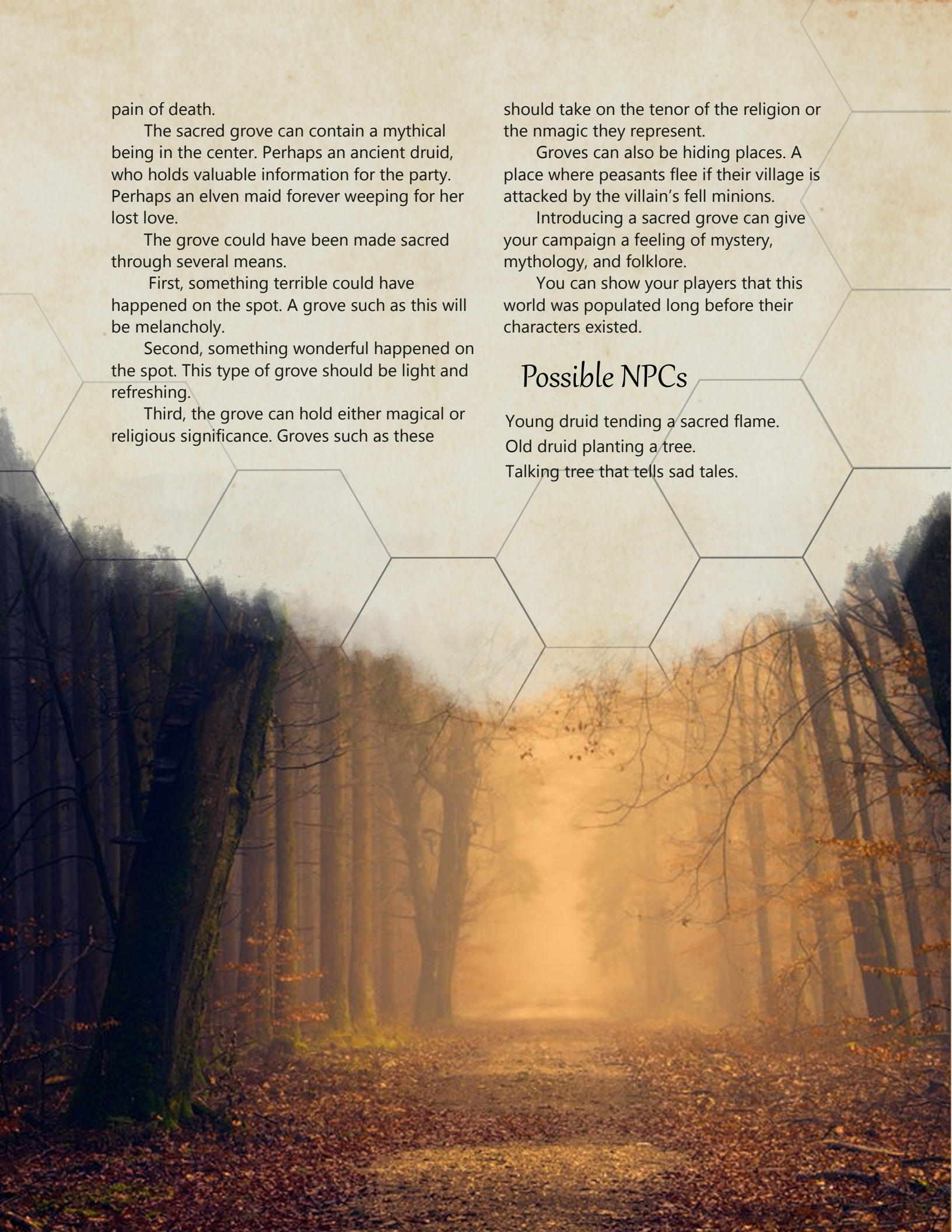
You can show your players that this world was populated long before their characters existed.

Possible NPCs

Young druid tending a sacred flame.

Old druid planting a tree.

Talking tree that tells sad tales.



The Circle

Situation: The party stumbles upon a sacred circle of trees.

Scenario #1: A lone druid weeps within the grove. A troop of goblins stole a pouch of magic seeds. If the party could return the seeds, the druid would reward them.

Scenario #2: A group of druids perform a ritual. The party accidentally interrupts and enrages the druids. There are several ways the party can atone for the mistake. If they refuse atonement, the druids will fight to the death.

Possible Encounters:

Goblins
Orcs
Gnolls
Magical trees

Conclusion

In conclusion, use your imagination. Imbue your forests with life. After all they are living things.

Think of the sounds. The smells of the different types of trees and other vegetation. Describe flowers or mosses and gigantic trees.

Don't let this opportunity go to waste. Give your players something that they'll never forget. Show them that you are a GM that takes your campaigns and adventures seriously.

Take some time. Look up pictures of forests online. Find a soundtrack if you like.

Think about tales or myths or legends involving forests. Roll some of those themes into your campaign.

Lend weight and substance to the world in which you are adventuring. Give your players a sense of wonder.

A forest is not something to be treated lightly. Don't let an opportunity like this go to waste.

Use your creativity. Spend a few minutes giving your forests more character. It will transform your sessions.

Mountains

Far Over...

Mountains not only shape the landscape, they mold the climate and define cultures.

They form pockets of isolation and create barriers to trade and commerce. They create natural borders between countries and even continents.

Mountains teem with unique ecosystems. Mountains live in mythology and folklore. They fill people with terror and awe but also majesty. They are symbols of strength, symbols power, and symbols of protection.

Many people are filled with such wonder that they must climb to the tops of peaks. During great migrations, mountains make travelers and refugees quake with dread.

Mountains help create entire people groups with distinct languages, because of the difficulty of reaching beyond the peaks.

When introducing mountains into your RPG campaign, imbue them with the power they deserve.

No easy road lies before them when mountains cross their path.

No journey through mountains should be simply described as, "You crossed the mountains," or, "There are mountains," or, "You move through the mountains."

Crossing mountains should be an arduous journey.

As a game master, use the terrain to your advantage. Use mountains to create complications in your adventures. Indeed, climbing a mountain is an adventure in itself.

The purpose of this section is to get you thinking how to extract details from mountains. Do not create your campaign or adventure in a vacuum.

Let the terrain give you ideas and complications. Work with it, not against it. Use images and new thoughts to inspire you. Put yourself into the shoes of travelers looking at distant, cloud-shrouded peaks.

Hopefully, you will never present your players with non-descript journeys again.

Naming Mountains

Naming conventions for mountains should be thought of in a number of ways.

1. The name of the home of the gods.

2. Great mythological hero names.

3. The names of kings or queens.

4. Named after the first person believed to have summited it.

5. Appearance or features like the “Barrier Mountains” or “Ship Rock.”

6. The name of nearby people groups or countries.

Mountain Ranges

Mountain ranges can extend for thousands and thousands of miles. They can encircle entire lands. They can cut half a continent off from rain and soak the other half.

They shape societies. Occupations, beliefs, mythologies, traditions, house construction— all are influenced by mountains.

When creating a campaign world, think of mountain ranges as natural borders between nations. Since it is so difficult, especially in fantasy role-playing games, to travel over the mountains, people tend to congregate on either side. In the resulting isolation that the mountains create, cultural divides widen into vast chasms not easily bridged.

Also, on either side of the mountain range, the climate is most likely different. This creates even deeper divides in cultures and societies. The countries separated by mountain ranges may constantly war with one another. Think of European history as a real-world guide.

When a party is traveling and they come upon a mountain range, unique and strenuous challenges should present themselves. The constant climbing pushes the hardiest soul to its limit.

Switchback paths make a mile walk into an eight-mile journey. Rocks and loose stones falling from cliffs or littering the path make every step require forethought.

Sheer cliffs are incredible obstacles. The lack of oxygen at high altitudes tests physical endurance. Pack animals become incredibly cumbersome, unless they have been bred for mountain paths.

Finding food can be difficult. Hunting, camping, and sleeping all become more challenging due to the altitude and the steepness of the slopes.

Work all of these into your campaign or your adventure. Do not let an opportunity like mountains go to waste.

Challenge your players with the simple difficulties of the terrain. Then your story ideas will gain even more power.

Possible NPCs

Goat herder watching a small flock.

Fur trapper with a load of furs.

Family fleeing their homeland on the other side of the mountains.

Mountain Passes

Passes through mountain ranges become the lifeblood of trade and commerce or great migrations. They also create bottlenecks. A small band of warriors can force the starvation of a vast invading horde.

Secret mountain passes become advantages that can win wars and change the course of history. Remember the Battle of Thermopylae.

In winter, a mountain pass can fill with dozens and dozens of feet of snow, trapping would-be travelers at high elevations. With scarce food, it could lead to incidents like the Donner Party.

Possible NPCs

Starving wanderer begging for help.
Small merchant caravan.
Heavily armed man with no sheep who claims to be a shepherd.

The Pass

Situation: There is only one known pass through a large mountain range.

Scenario #1: The party must across the mountain range through the pass. However, the pass is held by bandits.

Scenario #2: The party must prevent and invading army from using the pass. It is highly defensible, if they get into position in time.

Scenario #3: The pass is completely blocked by snow. The party must come up with a solution to get through.

Summitting

In most adventures, characters will be tasked with crossing mountains into new lands. These parties will follow—however treacherous—paths and or somewhat defined roads.

However, in some cases the quest is actually to climb to the summit. Perhaps they have to retrieve an item or honor a deity. Whatever the charge, they are in for a challenge.

Parties climbing to the peak will need climbing gear. They will face sheer cliffs, chasms, loose rock fields, snowdrifts, thin air, and more.

As a GM, remember the characters hands and knees would be covered in bumps, bruises, cuts, and scrapes after only a day or two.

At times, finding handholds and footholds will command a climber's full attention.

Possible NPCs

Dwarf prospector.
Woman weeping near a still pool.
Villager looking for caves.

The Tallest Mountain

The tallest mountain in a region usually takes on a powerful symbolism.

It lives in the imagination of those who live near its great slopes. It enters into stories, myths, and legends.

It stretches so high, it is as if it touches the heavens themselves and becomes the home of the gods. It may be deified itself.

Lonely Mountains

A lone mountain juts up from a plain or other low-lying surrounding land. These mountains often become the focal point of a society that lives near them.

Possible NPCs

A guru.
Lost child that is actually a god in disguise.
Climber who had always wanted to reach the top.

Top of the World

Situation: The party must climb to the summit of a mountain.

Scenario #1: The party needs to retrieve a magic jewel from the nest of a Roc.

Scenario #2: The party must reach the very home of the gods to petition their favor.

Possible Encounters:

Snow leopard
Giant
Dwarves
Lost travelers
Divine guardians

Sacred Mountains

Many mountains are considered sacred. Holy ground either too dangerous or too revered to be traveled.

Perhaps ancient traditions were handed down here. Maybe a great battle took place on its peaks. Perhaps the tomb of an ancient hero or ruler is located where on its slopes.

Possible NPCs

Priest guardian who takes his charge seriously.
Hermit writing her epic system of nature.
Huge white boar which is actually a god in disguise.

Holy Ground

Situation: The party must travel to a sacred mountain.

Scenario #1: The party needs to locate a wizard who lives in a labyrinth inside the mountain.

Scenario #2: The party must make an offering to the mountain to prevent an apocalyptic prophecy from coming true.

Possible Encounters:

Trolls
Monks
Druids
A tomb being raided

Living Mountains

In fantasy RPGs, seize the opportunity to include a living mountain if it suits your game.

The mountain seems to act with a will against travelers upon it. It seems to know when a lonely band of adventurers is making its way up its slopes. It causes rain and snow to beat upon them. It sends rocks hurling down about them. It wants to tease and hinder and torture any who dare walk on its heights.

At nearby inns, legends swirl about its hatred of travelers. Old-timers tell strange tales of the mountain speaking or weeping or perhaps even moving.

Of course, friendly mountains are a possibility as well. Perhaps their pleasant slopes are being deforested by bands of orcs. The characters are employed to stop the orcs and help the mountain flourish in peace.

Possible NPCs

Rock golem who is the avatar of the mountain.

Hill giant with a "splinter" the size a large board in his big toe.

Lost party of travelers confused and confounded by the mountain.

The Old Ones

Situation: The party encounters Yeti.

Scenario: The Yeti are not savage beasts. They are the last remnant of one of the elder races. The last few are dying and ask the party for help.

Snow Capped Mountains

Eternal snow caps the tallest mountains. Think of how this sight affects cultures or societies that live nearby.

Think about how to paint the picture to players. The characters, even many miles away, would see the mighty peaks looming in the distance. As they travel through the passes, the ominous mountains seem to threaten an avalanche at the slightest sound.

Struggling over the peaks, the characters trudge through deep snow drifts as a bitter wind tears at their clothing. But the view is spectacular. One can feel like a god looking down upon his dominion.

Think about whether or not the characters have ever seen snow. Even if only one of the characters has never seen snow, that can be a powerful detail. The session has just gained something a good player can latch onto and role-play.

Possible NPCs

Man looking for a Roc's nest.
Elf looking for a tomb entrance.
Young dragon looking for a cave to make its lair.

Desert Mountains

Some mountains in deserts are nothing more than gigantic heaps of stones. They are rocky, dry wastes that forebode danger and peril.

Think about Camelback Mountain in Phoenix, Arizona. Even though Camelback is not much of a challenge to climb, it can give you a great example of a desert mountain terrain.

Ayers Rock, or Uluru, in Australia is another unique terrain that can be used to add diversity into your campaigns.

While not a mountain, Ayers Rock is a massive sandstone dome that protrudes from the surrounding desert. Since the formation is essentially one giant rock, it has many distinctive features such as nearby springs, waterholes, and fissures created by rain running down the sides.

Enlarged and transported into a fantasy setting, Uluru could become a memorable challenge for any adventurer.

Possible NPCs

Halfling looking for water.
Monk on a pilgrimage.
Woman with a large scimitar who says climbing is good exercise.

Volcanoes

Of course, certain mountains are formed by volcanoes.

A mountain in the form of an active volcano can be a terrible encounter and present powerful complications for any adventuring party. The unpredictability of eruptions can be a constant threat that looms over the characters and the players.

When GMing an adventure near a volcano, consider the heat, the smoke, the ash, the steam, scalding or boiling rivers and lakes, different kinds of lava, and the dread pyroclastic flashes.

Ancient dormant volcanoes can provide excellent locations to use in your adventures. The caldera could be home of a thriving metropolis— think Mexico City. Or perhaps there is a fortress built in the very heart of the mountain.

An ancient volcano reawakening could be the centerpiece of a campaign. The heroes have to help move the population of an entire city or, through magical means, stop the eruption.

Possible NPCs

Man trapped by lava.

Dwarf harvesting lava.

Ash-covered child who doesn't remember her name.

Tropical Mountains

Tropical mountains can be covered in rainforests. Great canopies of mighty and powerful trees spread amid the cliffs and crags. These mountains add their own treachery to travelers.

Torrents of rain can send flash floods cascading down the slopes and paths.

Tropical forests always obscure visibility making the terrain ripe for ambushes. The vegetation also hides pits and traps of all kinds and possibly ancient cities or ruins.

Possible NPCs

Woman gathering honey.

Sick man who cannot speak.

Hunting party carrying a large pig they killed.

Terraced Gardens

Societies that live in mountains often craft the terrain to meet their lifestyles. Terraced gardens are one such example.

Stone walls built strategically on the slopes create rows of flatland. The flatland is used for building homes or farming wheat or barley or rice.

Possible NPCs

Young girl harvesting rice.
Man repairing a stone wall.
Farmer who needs help defending his family against corrupt officials.

The View

As your party is traveling through mountains, never forget to describe the view.

You should remind them of the striking vistas they see, how the land opens up before or behind them. They can see towns and lakes and rivers and other features far, far away.

Consider if this is the first time certain characters have ever been amid mountains. Help them imagine the sensation.

Fill your players with awe. Let them know they are truly on an adventure.

The Conclusion

Never gloss over a mountain in your game. Use them to create adventure. As I said at beginning, climbing a mountain is an adventure in itself.

Think of these things: the mythology, the height, the climate, the animal life, and the societies that live near or upon the mountain. All of these should inform your campaign and your world building.

When your players cross mountains in your game, at the end they should truly be able to say they had an adventure.

Bonus Section: Weather Tables

Spring

1. Sunny
2. Partly cloudy
3. Cloudy
4. Windy
5. Rain
6. Thunderstorm

Fall

1. Foggy
2. Partly cloudy
3. Cloudy
4. Misty
5. Rain
6. Thunderstorm

Summer

1. Drought
2. Languid
3. Sunny
4. Partly Cloudy
5. Cloudy
6. Rain
7. Windy
8. Thunderstorm
9. Hailstorm
10. Tornado

Winter

1. Partly Cloudy
2. Cloudy
3. Windy
4. Rain
5. Thunderstorm
6. Wintery mix
7. Sleet
8. Snow
9. Thunder snow
10. Blizzard

Bonus Section II: Encounter Tables

Random Wilderness Combat Encounters

1. Wolf
2. Brown Bear
3. Giant Boar
4. Goblin
5. Orc
6. Wolves (1D4)
7. Bandit
8. Goblins (1D8)
9. Bandits (1D6)
10. Gnolls (1D4)

Random Dungeon Combat Encounters

1. Kobolds (1D4)
2. Goblins (1D4)
3. Kobolds (1D8)
4. Goblins (1D8)
5. Orcs (1D4)
6. Gnoll Pack Lord
7. Goblins (1D12)
8. Orcs (1D8)
9. Bugbear
10. Dire Wolf

Random Hunting Encounters

1. Squirrel
2. Rabbit
3. Pheasant
4. Boar
5. Deer Hind
6. Deer Stag
7. Elk Hind
8. Elk Stag
9. White Hind
10. White Stag

Random Non-Combat Strange Encounters

1. Antler Armor
2. Ghost Light
3. Tar Pit
4. Wardian Case
5. Trapping Pit
6. Sunshower
7. Ancient Flint Mines
8. White Stag
9. Wishing Well
10. Two Green Children

Random Non-Combat Wilderness Encounters

1. Orphaned child
2. Pregnant Woman
3. Con man
4. Dead body (Elf)
5. Burned Wagon
6. Injured Dwarf
7. Blind Wanderer
8. Traveling Merchant
9. Adventuring Party (1D8)
10. Merchant Caravan (1D12 wagons)

Random Non-Combat Dungeon Encounters

1. Ghost
2. Dead Body (Halfling)
3. Prisoner
4. Lost Adventurer
5. Dead Orcs (1D4)
6. Dead Goblins (1D6)
7. Lost Child
8. Holy Man
9. Adventuring Party (1D8)
10. Talking Dog

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