

1-1-2009

Walking on the wild side: an examination of a long-distance hiking subculture

Kristi McLeod Fondren

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WALKING ON THE WILD SIDE: AN EXAMINATION OF A LONG-DISTANCE
HIKING SUBCULTURE

By

Kristi McLeod Fondren

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Sociology
in the Department of Sociology

Mississippi State, Mississippi

August 2009

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2009

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HIKING SUBCULTURE

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Pages in Study: 138

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A great deal of previous sociological research has examined the social contours of subcultures, focusing either on highly transient subcultures (e.g., among youth) or, conversely, stable institutionalized subcultures (e.g., among professionals). More recent scholarship has examined how leisure subcultures are formed and sustained around a particular interest or activity (e.g., windsurfing). However, little attention has been paid to the role of recreational settings (i.e., specific geographical locales) in the formation of leisure subcultures. Using the Appalachian Trail as a case study, I aim to fill that gap by examining a long-distance hiking subculture. I use ethnographic data collected from long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail to carry out the study. My investigation is guided by a subcultural perspective which allows me to identify and understand the sociality and social practices of a long-distance hiking subculture. Consequently, long-distance hikers can be identified and understood through (1) a negative relation to work, (2) a negative or ambivalent relation to class, (3) an association with territory, (4) non-

domestic forms of belonging, (5) a range of excessive attributes, and (6) a refusal of the banalities of ordinary life. My qualitative analysis of long-distance hikers' accounts and interactions permits me to explore how subcultural ideologies and practices are combined with a socially significant place to forge powerful emotional bonds among long-distance hikers and strong attachments to the Appalachian Trail.

Key words: subculture, community, hiking, identity, leisure, Appalachian Trail

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the forty-six men and women who gave freely of their time to share with me their experiences hiking the Appalachian Trail.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who assisted me during the research and writing of this dissertation. Of particular significance is the assistance of Dr. John P. Bartkowski and Dr. Duane A. Gill who have served as co-directors for this work. Dr. Bartkowski has been a wonderful mentor and friend throughout this entire process, and for that, I will always be grateful. Appreciation is also due to the members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Jeralynn S. Cossman and Dr. Nicole Rader.

I would like to thank Lynn Hempel, Deborah Harris, and Chris Bounds for their feedback and supportive comments concerning this study. I am also grateful to the following at Mississippi State University for their financial support: the College of Arts and Sciences, the Department of Sociology, the Gender Studies Program, and the National Strategic Planning and Analysis Research Center.

Second only to the long-distance hikers interviewed, I would like to thank my husband, Marty, for his patience and support during the writing of this dissertation. That he was able to accompany me in the field during one summer of data collection activities was an unexpected blessing for us both. I would also like to thank Dalton, my step-son, for not complaining when my research required that I work weekends. My parents, who have always encouraged me in pursuing my education and realizing my full potential, deserve my thanks as well.

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What are these, so wither'd and
so wild in their attire,
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th'
earth, And yet are on't?

- William Shakespeare, *MacBeth*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Appalachian Trail, a 2,178-mile foot path traversing the mountains from Maine to Georgia, is considered one of the most culturally-valued and successful wilderness projects of the 20th century (Foresta 1987; Minter 2001). The trail was completed almost sixteen years after Benton MacKaye's initial proposal of the Appalachian Trail project in 1921 (Foresta 1987). However, during World War II, much of the trail route was lost as maintainers were unable to work. By 1951 the trail was officially declared complete once again (Appalachian Trail Conservancy 2008a). As illustrated in Figure 1.1, the Appalachian Trail, often referred to as the longest and skinniest National Park, crosses fourteen states and more than sixty federal, state, and local parks and forests (Appalachian Trail Conservancy 2008b). Marking the official route of this congressionally recognized National Scenic Trail are white paint blazes two-inch by six-inch vertical rectangles, found in both directions on everything from signs, bridges, rocks, trees, posts, or other objects approximately one-tenth of a mile apart.

Of the "Triple Crown" of hiking trails (i.e., the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, the Continental Divide Trail), the Appalachian Trail is arguably the most internationally famous and most populated long-distance hiking trail in the United States (ALDA-West 2009; Berger 2009a, 2009b). The Appalachian Trail attracts the largest

number of thru-hikers each year, followed by the Pacific Crest Trail (ALDA-West 2009). Since 1936 slightly more than ten thousand completed hikes made by thru-hikers (i.e.,

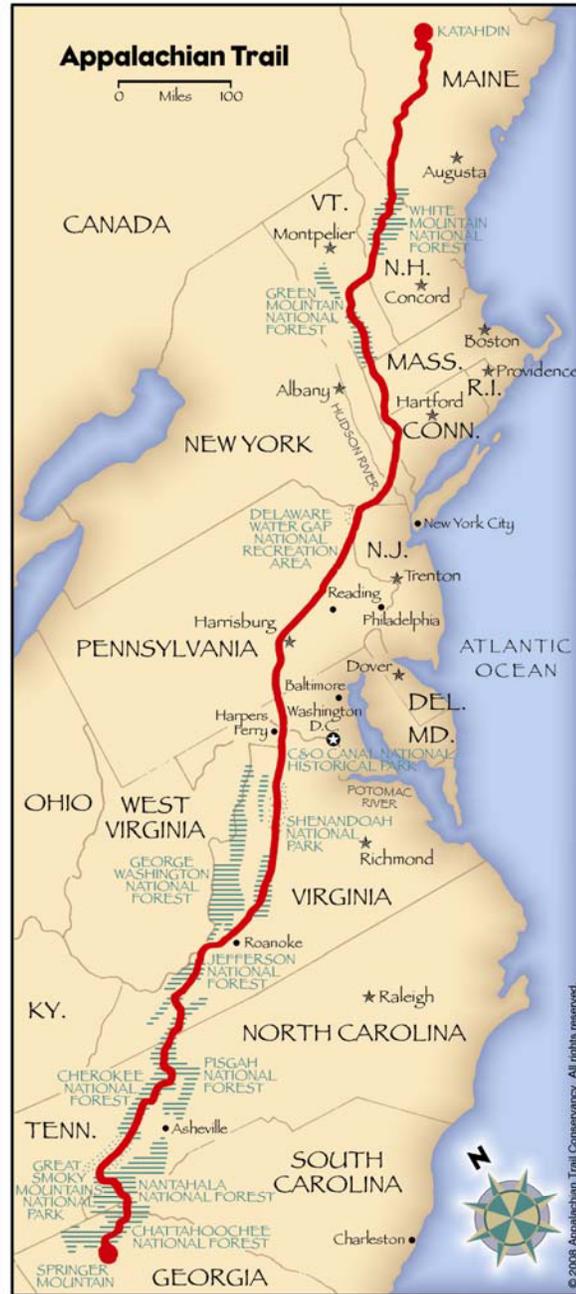


Figure 1.1: Map of the Appalachian Trail

Note: Picture used with permission from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

those attempting to hike the entire trail in one continuous journey) and section hikers (i.e., those completing the trail in large sections over a period of time) have been recorded by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (2008b). Of this number, approximately two hundred have hiked the entire trail on more than one occasion. For the thousands of individuals who attempt to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail annually, only about one in four accomplish their goal, with thru-hikers taking anywhere from four to seven months to complete the trail (Appalachian Trail Conservancy 2008a). The Continental Divide Trail is the least frequented trail of the Triple Crown with less than a dozen completed thru-hikes a year. Fewer than one hundred hikers have completed the Triple Crown, or all three hiking trails, to date.

Recent research on the Appalachian Trail has been quantitative in nature and has focused primarily on leisure activity involvement (i.e., hiking), place attachment, and predictors of behavioral loyalty among hikers (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, and Bacon 2003; Kyle, Bricker, Graefe, and Wickham 2004; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, and Bacon 2004). This body of scholarship has demonstrated a close connection between social and emotional ties long-distance hikers form in relation to the Appalachian Trail, as well as significant variation in terms of activity involvement and place attachment by user type (i.e., day hiker, overnight hiker, section hiker, and thru-hiker). Specifically, section hikers and thru-hikers have a stronger emotional bond to the trail compared to overnight and day hikers.

Long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail develop what Proshansky (1978) referred to as place identity, a component of self-identity formed in relation to physical environments. In studies of leisure and recreation, place identity is a constellation of patterns of ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals, and behavioral tendencies and skills relevant to specific recreational settings. However, abstract elements (i.e., attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and values) involved in the social and emotional bonds long-distance hikers associate with the Appalachian Trail have yet to be explored (Kyle, Bricker, Graefe, and Wickham 2004). While they recognized the need for qualitative techniques that would examine the extent to which (how and if) preferences in leisure settings reflected individual attitudes and values, this call for qualitative research has not yet been heeded.

Scholarship concerned with relationships between humans and nature reveals that people confer meaning on natural environments that reflect self-definitions of who they were, are, and hope to become within given cultural contexts (Greider and Garkovich 1994; Macnaghten 2003; Thrift 2001). Evidence suggests that individuals, groups, and organizations frame nature and the environment in a way that is meaningful and beneficial to them. As such, rather than speaking of one nature or one environment, this discourse includes many versions that are meaningful to different groups of people. Due to risks associated with increasing technological advancements (Beck 1992), directly or indirectly, nature has become a place of refuge for many individuals. Rather than viewing natural environments as something to be saved, natural landscapes are being redefined as something that saves us from pressures, anxieties, and insecurities associated with advanced modern societies (Beck 1992; Macnaghten 2003), including multiple

identities, some contradictory, that we must manage simultaneously. Moreover, as identities are becoming increasingly fluid and fragmented in contemporary society (Elias 2000; Holyfield and Jonas 2003), individuals are constructing identities from multiple sources, including sport and leisure lifestyles (Wheaton 2000). Given that we are faced with a multitude of identities to manage and our lives are becoming more intertwined with the lives of others, is it really surprising that some individuals seek escape or refuge on the Appalachian Trail, if only for a short time?

My study augments previous scholarship concerning relationships between humans and nature, use of recreational settings and place identity (i.e., activity involvement and place attachment), and the emergence of leisure lifestyles and identities by examining a long-distance hiking community. Using the Appalachian Trail as a case study, my qualitative analysis of hikers' accounts and interactions allows me to explore how subcultural ideologies and practices are combined with a socially significant place to forge powerful emotional bonds among long-distance hikers. I argue that a long-distance hiking subculture not only develops around a leisure activity (i.e., long-distance hiking) but also around a recreational setting (i.e., long-distance hiking trail). My investigation underscores the need to recognize the role of recreational settings in the formation of leisure subcultures and subcultural identities, while also providing additional depth to the largely quantitative body of research in leisure and recreational studies.

Research Question and Organization of Chapters

The general question to be investigated in my study involves the role of recreational settings in the formation of leisure subcultures and subcultural identities.

More specifically, my study attempts to answer the following question with respect to a long-distance hiking subculture: Does evidence point to the existence of a long-distance hiking subculture? If so, how do we understand a long-distance hiking subculture in terms of its sociality and social practices? The following chapters discuss relationships between humans and natural environments, provide a methodology for identifying and understanding leisure subcultures, and present the results of this study.

Chapter 2 begins with an examination of the nature-society debate and describes the nature of relationships between humans and natural environments. This section is followed by a discussion of the origins of the Appalachian Trail and describes how Benton MacKaye's pragmatic vision of wilderness conservation, the Appalachian Trail project, became the long-distance hiking trail it is today. Research conducted on the role of recreational settings and recreationists' attachments to leisure settings such as the Appalachian Trail follows. Finally, early and contemporary research on subcultures is presented. Within this work on subcultures, debates continue over the use and relevance of the term subculture. It concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and conceptual framework that guides my study.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology used to answer the research question. In particular, this chapter describes the ethnographic approach used to examine a long-distance hiking subculture. The Appalachian Trail serves as a case study of the broader universe of hiking since the Appalachian Trail is the most famous and most populated long-distance hiking trail in the United States. This chapter also includes a description of the setting, sample characteristics, and data used in my study. These data come from multiple sources including ethnographic fieldwork and interview accounts with forty-six

long-distance hikers to render rich, complex portraits of a long-distance hiking subculture. Finally, analytical procedures are provided that illustrate how these data will be used to address the research question.

Chapter 4 features the results of the investigation. In particular, this chapter addresses the contours of a long-distance hiking subculture using six key elements for identifying and understanding subcultures. Specifically, long-distance hikers can be identified and understood through: (1) a negative relation to work, (2) a negative relation to class, (3) an association with territory, (4) non-domestic forms of belonging, (5) ties to excess and exaggeration, and (6) a refusal of the banalities of mass society.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion and conclusion for my study. This chapter reports the major findings from my study and discusses the limitations of this work. Finally, it offers suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND THEORY

An analysis of recreational settings in the formation of leisure subcultures and subcultural identities is best predicated on an understanding of the relationships between humans and natural environments. This chapter begins with an overview of the nature-society debate and presents the two main perspectives on understanding relationships between humans and nature. Following this discussion, a history of the Appalachian Trail is outlined to illustrate the extent to which the trail is imbued with multiple meanings. Specifically, this historical account discusses how social and economic changes radically changed the nature of Benton MacKaye's original conception of the Appalachian Trail project.

This chapter also focuses on leisure settings as symbolic environments. Research conducted with respect to the Appalachian Trail is given specific attention. This line of research focuses on relationships between recreationists and recreational settings with primary emphasis on activity involvement, place attachment, and the role of leisure settings with respect to behavioral loyalty. Finally, early and contemporary research on subcultures is reviewed and debates over the use of the term subculture are presented. It highlights the emerging body of literature on leisure subcultures. This chapter ends with a discussion of a subcultural perspective and explicates the theoretical and conceptual framework that guides my study.

The Nature-Society Debate

Two major perspectives have been utilized to illuminate the relationship between humans and nature: essentialism and social constructionism (Greider and Garkovich 1994; Minter 2001). Essentialists adopt the view that nature and the environment are outside us and that there is a transcendental (i.e., superior) quality to wilderness beyond common thought or experience. Essentialists suggest that those who view nature as a product of society are trying to devalue nature, as well as devalue those who find value in nature. They offer several suggestions as to why individuals may view nature as an “Other” – the influence of science and technology, a disenchantment with the world, or that we, as individuals, have lost touch with our natural selves (Nordquist 2006). Constructionists, however, suggest that nature and the environment are evolving social constructs whose origins are found within society, not within the earth. Constructionists argue that essentialists’ stances devalue human labor on the land and ignore troubles faced by the urban and rural poor who are far removed from the “Nature” that essentialists fancy. In other words, the urban and rural poor do not necessarily have the means to escape in the troubled world in which they find themselves. From this perspective, nature is both a social and material expression of the sociocultural landscape. The main difference between the two camps is that essentialists view nature as fully defined by itself whereas constructionists view nature as fully defined by society.

Fay (2003) argues that nature and society should not be separate from one another but should be seen as intertwined entities that cannot be understood apart from one another. The notion that we need to “bring nature back in” is problematic because nature

has been with us the whole time. The combination of the natural and the social, the human and non-human, coexist in such a way that dualistic thinking does not capture. Thinking of nature and humans as of the same order will help address major flaws in the nature-society debate.

As we cope with a new environment, we change it and in the process are changed by it because nature and society are interrelated (Nordquist 2006). For example, life in a “risk society” is transforming how people experience nature and the environment. Beck (1992) argues that modernization has created a new society, a risk society, in which the risks are less visible and more widespread. He further attributes these unobservable risks to scientific and technological advancements of contemporary modern societies. In the earlier period of industrialization, risks such as smog were more obvious; however, in advanced modern societies, Beck argues the risks are not typically realized until there is widespread catastrophe, one that is often environmental in nature (e.g., global warming, Chernobyl). Due to risks associated with increasing technological advancements, nature has become a place of refuge for many individuals. Rather than viewing nature and the environment as something to be saved, natural landscapes are being redefined to symbolize something that saves us from pressures, anxieties, and insecurities associated with advanced modern societies (Beck 1992; Macnaughten 2003).

Holyfield and Jonas (2003) argue that an individual’s authentic self, while socially nurtured and informed, is constantly trying to defend itself against the societal influences that can spoil who an individual believes herself to be. As society becomes more complex and specialized, members become more functionally dependent on one another, but also restricted in their activities and behaviors making life less enjoyable and

less attractive (Elias 2000). When this feeling of loss occurs, members of society often look for alternatives.

Once on the Appalachian Trail, long-distance hikers adopt a new persona or trail identity. For those fully immersed in the hiking community, birth names are not used or possibly known to other hikers. Hikers know one another by “trail names”¹ and these names, whether chosen before the hike or given by a fellow hiker(s), means much more than the name given to them at birth (Mueser 1998). These names primarily arise out of interactions with fellow hikers, reflecting how one is seen or experienced by others, although some hikers may choose a name before starting the trail that is symbolic of their personal reasons for making the journey. Trail names allow hikers to adopt a new identity (if desired) and provide a rich source of association in an unfamiliar, but unique context, and convey more about a person than would a name like “Lisa” or “Tom.” Although not everyone participates in this symbolic renaming of themselves or others, more than ninety percent of long-distance hikers have trail names (Mueser 1998).

For those “2,000-milers”² who complete the journey, life after the Appalachian Trail can be difficult, especially when negotiating a newly formed identity. After the trail experience is over, long-distance hikers must re-enter the society they left behind. This transition is often marked by an initial period of culture shock, stress, and/or depression due to the physiological changes that occur when no longer hiking day after day, as well as the emotional aspects that follow when being immediately separated from the

¹ The Appalachian Trail is not the only long-distance hiking trail where hikers are known by trail names. After briefly viewing online hiking journals from long-distance hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail, I discovered hikers with trail names. However, after speaking with someone at the Pacific Crest Trail Association in February 2009, I learned that the majority of Pacific Crest hikers had previously thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail prior to attempting the Pacific Crest Trail.

² A 2,000-miler refers to a person who has hiked the entire length of the Appalachian Trail from one terminus to the other, either by section hiking or thru-hiking.

community and freedoms enjoyed on the Appalachian Trail (Bruce 2006). While they may long to escape the confines of society and their multiple identities, some hikers struggle with these identities, including the newly developed trail identity, and experience difficulty negotiating between their new trail identity and their former identities upon return.

Greider and Garkovich (1994) and Macnaughten (2003) suggest environmental sociologists remove themselves away from an objectification of natural meanings (i.e., of an environmental “Other” or the notion of a nature “out there”) and transform natural environments into meaningful subjective phenomena to study. They argue meanings that comprise landscapes are not inherent but are created through social interaction and negotiation (Greider and Garkovich 1994; Holyfield and Jonas 2003), as well as through the embodiment of the natural environment in everyday life experiences (Macnaughten 2003). Understanding relationships between humans and natural environments in this manner will allow scholars to gain insight concerning cultural expressions and identities employed to define who individuals were, are, and hope to become (Greider and Garkovich 1994). I now turn to a history of the Appalachian Trail to illustrate the extent to which the Appalachian Trail is a natural environment imbued with multiple meanings.

Origins of the Appalachian Trail

The history of the Appalachian Trail illustrates the extent to which the trail is a symbolic environment, a socially constructed natural (and national) landscape. The idea for the Appalachian Trail was first proposed by Harvard graduate Benton MacKaye in 1921 (Foresta 1987; MacKaye 1921; Minter 2001). While at Harvard, MacKaye’s

intellectual development was inspired by the social philosophy of one of his professors, Josiah Royce (Minteer 2001). During this time, Royce introduced his notion of provincialism which he conceptualized as “first, the tendency of such a province to possess its own customs and ideals; secondly, the totality of these customs and ideals themselves; and thirdly, the love and pride which lead the inhabitants of a province to cherish as their own these traditions, beliefs, and aspirations” – a true consciousness of unity (Minteer 2001: 188). Royce was not implying that America should be divided into sections (e.g., the sectionalism of the Civil War), but that national unity would transcend and connect the smaller, unique communities that provided dwellers with a sense of place and shared common experience distinct from other parts of the country. Royce’s “wise” province, a pragmatic approach to growing concerns of early modern 20th century, would address three key issues: social alienation, the discouragement of individual expression, and the “mob spirit” of popular government (Minteer 2001).

Upon graduating from Harvard University in 1905, MacKaye joined the U.S. Forest Service (Foresta 1987; Minteer 2001). During his time with the Forest Service, MacKaye came to view the American landscape as a product of two divergent cultures: the metropolitan and the indigenous. Metropolitan areas were growing and changing while many rural areas were becoming stagnant (Foresta 1987). MacKaye believed the rural countryside, after the Civil War, was being eroded for the benefit of metropolitan areas (e.g., for railroad construction, motorized transportation, and electrical power). He did not oppose such cultural innovations but wanted new developments to be a result of publicly-owned natural resources. MacKaye argued the use of public lands, timber, and

minerals involved in the creation of new communities would only strengthen indigenous American culture in the process (Foresta 1987).³

After leaving the U.S. Forest Service, MacKaye joined the U.S. Department of Labor in 1919 where his focus was on community planning. Later, along with Aldo Leopold and Bob Marshall, MacKaye was responsible for founding the Wilderness Society in 1935 (Appalachian Trail Conservancy 2008c; Minter 2001). However, a key difference between MacKaye and other conservationists during this time (e.g., Myron Avery) was that MacKaye included social and economic issues in his work of building strong communities through conservation and economic planning (Minter 2001).

A Pragmatic Vision of Wilderness Conservation

MacKaye's vision of the Appalachian Trail project was not the long-distance hiking trail known today but rather a pragmatic vision for wilderness conservation in the Appalachian region. He proposed his project in regional planning would bridge the gap between two spheres that had traditionally remained separate, wilderness preservation and community life (Minter 2001). For MacKaye it was important to integrate both the institutional and cultural features of human communities (i.e., shared experiences) with natural landscapes and enhance both rather than disconnect them. Social reformers, like MacKaye, envisioned a trail that would become an alternative to urbanization rather than an adjustment to it (Foresta 1987). The development of his project would also address ideas common in American reformist thought during the early 20th century – the idea that

³ In the language of social constructionism, Benton MacKaye could be described as a moral entrepreneur (Becker 1973), a crusading reformer dissatisfied by life as it currently existed. Guided by a humanitarian motive, MacKaye was devoted to the Appalachian Trail project in hope that individuals would achieve better living conditions.

cooperatively organized communities were more just and more efficient than capitalist corporations, and the idea that federally-owned natural resources would allow the government to redistribute power and wealth in a more satisfactory way (Foresta 1987).

MacKaye (1921) intended his project in regional planning to solve labor problems (i.e., not simply capital and labor but the standardization and mediocrity of the workforce) and problems of living (i.e., complications due to war, questions of personal liberties, bitter antagonisms, and economic problems of inflation and unemployment). MacKaye argued there would be no escape from either problem unless both were solved in concert with one another. When looking to solve problems associated with living, the customary approach of the time was to explore how working time could be increased (Foresta 1987; Minter 2001). MacKaye's approach was to ask whether or not opportunities for leisure could be increased as an aid in solving labor problems (MacKaye 1921). He further stated the problem of living had a vital connection to the Scouting movement (e.g., cooking and sleeping in the outdoors). In other words, he found it encouraging that individuals wanted to spend time outdoors; however, he also thought individuals should want to raise food "with less aid – and with less hindrance – from the complexities of commerce" (MacKaye 1921: 1) rather than merely cook outdoors. Most of the areas designated National Parks during the early 20th century were located in the Western portion of the United States (e.g., Yellowstone, Yosemite), but MacKaye (1921) proposed that camping grounds were of most use to people who were as close as possible to the heart of the population which happened to be on the Eastern coast of the United States. The Appalachian Mountains for most of the Eastern population were no more than a day's drive away and thus, a perfect base for both work and play.

MacKaye was not anti-urban or against industry but believed the urban could be incorporated into a balanced regional landscape (Foresta 1987). A recreational camp and community life, compared to modern society, would replace the dull, standardized existence of the working class and become a sanctuary and refuge from the commercialism of everyday life (MacKaye 1921; Minter 2001).

MacKaye did not offer a utopia of escape found in the wilderness but rather a “complex examination of the values of the American social and political community and its relationship with the natural environment” (Minter 2001: 192). Rather than strictly serving as a resource to critique industrialism, MacKaye’s vision was more of a practical solution for the “encroachment of socially and environmentally destructive metropolitan forces into authentic rural communities” (Minter 2001: 193). MacKaye’s new domain was neither urban nor rural but incorporated dimensions of both spheres. The new socioeconomic realm would be restructured in a way so that need, not profit, would drive economic activity and communitarian ideologies would influence and shape social relationships (Foresta 1987). The recreational camp MacKaye envisioned was neither lonely nor hectic with economic scramble (MacKaye 1921). Cooperation would replace competition; mutual helpfulness would replace mutual swindling (Foresta 1987; MacKaye 1921). The object of the Appalachian Trail project was to develop indigenous America so that the countryside and community could really live.

MacKaye’s project in regional planning contained four components, all of which were volunteer-based, not for profit, and constructed/maintained in the spirit of cooperation: (1) the Appalachian Trail – a service trail or path between shelter camps, divided into sections and maintained by a local group of people, dotted with lookout

stations for forest fires; (2) shelter camps – accommodations for sleeping (sometimes eating), spaced apart for a comfortable day’s trek and regulated so as not to be abused; (3) community groups – small communities on or near the trail used for non-industrial activities, and (4) food and farm camps – supplements to community camps offering possible sources for new and healthy employment in the outdoors (e.g., farming or forestry) (MacKaye 1921). MacKaye expected families or individuals on the Eastern coastline to come to the Appalachians for short vacations in the outdoors (Foresta 1987). These mini-vacations would allow visitors to gain perspective regarding the social context in which they lived and worked in metropolitan areas. MacKaye thought these vacation communities would develop around shelter areas on the trail and eventually become permanent exchange-based socioeconomic communities (Foresta 1987). The economy of these communities would be based on farming, forestry, and local manufacturing and become an alternative to urban industrialized society. For MacKaye, this new domain essentially belonged to the urban working class.

An Emergence of Modern Professionals

Although MacKaye thought the transformative value of experiences in the natural world would lead one to question and reject consumption and materialism, the Appalachian Trail project did not become the instrument of social reform that he initially envisioned. Inspired by the Scouting movement, MacKaye (1921) proposed his project of caring for the countryside would appeal to man’s primal instincts glamorized by previous wars and military action (e.g., heroism, volunteerism, and cooperation) and become at least one outlet for adults to vent and express their frustrations. According to

Foresta (1987), MacKaye's biggest problem was that his idea and how he initially envisioned the project came too late – the social structure and class outlook in America had changed. After 1918, there was no longer concern about improving American life through social reform, but rather how to accommodate the reality of industrial capitalism (Foresta 1987; Minter 2001). There was no longer a direct attack on modern industrial society because industry created wealth for many sectors of society and increased the range of consumption opportunities for citizens, including the consumption of leisure (Foresta 1987).

While industrialism had been responsible for the urban growth and rural decay that bothered social reformers like MacKaye, a more secure, privileged group of modern professionals (e.g., public land managers, foresters, lawyers, professors, physicians, editors, and scientists) emerged (Foresta 1987). These professionals were catered to by both industry and government and did not directly experience the negatives of industrialization that were of concern to social reformers. Due to the nature of their work, professionals often experienced an upward mobility and a level of individuality made possible by comfortable incomes (Foresta 1987). In other words, professionals benefitted from the rise of industrial capitalism because this new world was becoming increasingly technology-based, educated, and dependent on professional services. This level of security was not available for the working class who were more directly affected by the rising costs of living, and whose economic activities were marked by repetition, both examples of the problem of living for MacKaye. Since most of the trail builders were professionals and had secure jobs, they were not as concerned with the social ills of the day and instead viewed nature as a temporary escape from society. They believed the

Appalachian Trail would allow individuals an opportunity to enjoy material benefits of the city as well as spiritual and physical conditioning of the outdoors (Foresta 1987).

Another reason the Appalachian Trail project failed to be an instrument of social reform was because MacKaye and early reformers did not provide the leadership necessary for such a project (Foresta 1987; Minter 2001). Initially a cooperative venture guided by social reformers, the Appalachian Trail project fell into the hands of professionals guided by public land managers, all of whom were encouraged by industry and benefitted from the opportunities an emerging industrial society had to offer (Foresta 1987). Headed by Myron Avery, also a graduate of Harvard (specifically, its school of law), this new leadership established the first Appalachian Trail “Conference” (renamed the Appalachian Trail Conservancy in 2005). The primary focus of the ATC was on standardizing trail construction/design and coordinating the volunteer activities of local hiking clubs (Foresta 1987). Avery and his associates were typical of those who became active in the Appalachian Trail project after MacKaye – young, educated professionals, whose activities and interests in the Appalachian Trail were separate from their vocations, a definite pattern of variation between different strata of American society. The professionals and public land managers were able to assume the leadership position necessary and used it for their interests while the working class was not in a position to do so. Professionals and managers viewed the Appalachian Trail as a recreational site that provided a temporary escape from the pressures of society for the middle class rather than a project of social reform that would provide a permanent alternative to life for the urban working class.

MacKaye thought social reformers and radicals would embrace the Appalachian Trail project and corporations and conservatives would discount it (Foresta 1987; Minter 2001). Instead, the opposite occurred – corporations and conservatives embraced it and radicals ignored it. While MacKaye viewed natural landscapes as a progressive tool for social reform, the transformation of the Appalachian Trail from an instrument of social reform to a recreational facility illustrates an unfortunate vision – that of rearranging landscapes to address the shortcomings of modern life. According to Foresta, “The aura of success about the Trail is a reminder of this potential and of the degree to which a sensibly arranged landscape is a social artifact” (1987: 85).

Leisure Settings as Symbolic Environments

The Appalachian Trail has been imbued with multiple meanings since the idea was first introduced by Benton MacKaye in 1921. Since that time, research has been conducted in an attempt to understand relationships between humans and recreational settings like the Appalachian Trail. The majority of academic research conducted concerning natural resource-based recreational settings has been quantitative in nature and has been concerned primarily with issues of recreational use and management (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, and Bacon 2003; Kyle, Bricker, Graefe, and Wickham 2004; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, and Bacon 2004; Manning, Valliere, Bacon, Graefe, Kyle, and Hennessey 2000). This scholarship began with a focus on place attachment with respect to recreational spaces and then moved on to examine them as leisure settings.

Place Attachment and Activity Involvement

Approximately three decades ago, the concept of place identity was introduced into leisure studies by H. M. Proshansky in order to examine and understand the nature of relationships between physical environments and individuals' self-identity (Proshansky 1978). As discussed in recreational and leisure studies, place identity refers to "those dimensions of the self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals, and behavioral tendencies and skills relevant to this environment" (Kyle, Bricker, Graefe, and Wickham 2004: 155). Similar to the cognitive structure of gender identity or role identity, the concept of place identity defines a person's identity in relation to a particular setting.

A quantitative study was designed to identify processes that lead to recreationists' attachments to the Appalachian Trail (Kyle et al. 2003). Kyle and colleagues argued that some hikers would be attracted to the trail for instrumental reasons, a place they could enjoy a particular leisure experience (i.e., hiking), and that others may be attracted to the trail for more value-expressive reasons (i.e., how their identities would be received by others on the trail). Kyle and colleagues suggested that place attachment (i.e., place dependence and place identity) would be predicted by extent of activity involvement (i.e., centrality of hiking to lifestyle, attraction, and self-expression). Place attachment was defined as "an emotional or affective bond between a person and a particular place" (Kyle et al. 2003: 251) while activity involvement referred to "an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity" (252).

Results suggested there were variations by user type (i.e., thru-hiker, section-hiker, overnight-hiker, and day-hiker) on the Appalachian Trail (Kyle et al. 2003). Overall, section hikers and thru-hikers had higher scores on the individual measures for both constructs; however, when the full constructs were taken into account, the correlations between user type and place attachment and activity involvement became weaker. Researchers acknowledged that this particular study failed to include a social dimension in the activity involvement construct which may have yielded different results in terms of how central hiking on the Appalachian Trail was to an individual's overall lifestyle (Kyle et al. 2003). Attitudes were measured in terms of the activity of hiking on the trail rather than social aspects, which are one of many reasons chosen for hiking the Appalachian Trail, as opposed to other long-distance hiking trails (ALDA-West 2009; Berger 2009a, 2009b).

New Focus on Leisure Settings

As indicated above, early studies concerning natural resource-based recreational settings (Kyle et al. 2003) focused solely on involvement with a leisure activity (e.g., hiking) rather than on specific leisure settings where recreational experiences occur. The previous investigation was extended to further examine the association between recreationists and their preferred leisure activities and leisure settings (Kyle, Bricker, Graefe, and Wickham 2004). Specifically, the authors were concerned with the relationship between activity involvement and place attachment for hikers of the Appalachian Trail, kayakers and rafters along the South Fork of the American River in California, and for anglers in New England.

Results indicated that when there was an increase in use of a leisure setting, dependence on that setting, as well as an emotional bond with that setting, increased (Kyle et al. 2004). For example, the more time hikers (as a group) spent on the Appalachian Trail, the stronger the emotional bond and more dependent they were on the Appalachian Trail for hiking. They suggested that an emotional bond associated with a leisure setting was possible without sole dependence on that particular setting for the desired recreational activity (i.e., hiking). In other words, hikers could develop an emotional bond to the Appalachian Trail without being exclusively dependent on that particular trail for hiking. The authors were surprised at this finding given that previous research suggested the primary reason a particular leisure setting was chosen was because of the dependence on the setting for the specific recreational activity, not an emotional bond. Unlike the previous study conducted in 2003, the centrality item in the 2004 study included social elements. Specifically, participants were asked about how central hiking was in relation to friendships, rather than how important hiking was to the individual. Results indicated that emotional ties and social ties to settings were closely related to the extent that social ties may produce emotional attachments to recreational settings. In other words, the more central hiking was in the lives of participants in terms of friendships, the more dependent they were on the Appalachian Trail for their desired experiences (i.e., social bonds). More specifically, the Appalachian Trail may be valued for its potential to provide recreationists with social interaction. Thru-hikers were excluded from the group of hikers in this particular study due to the fact that they make up a small portion, specifically two to three percent, of all hikers on the Appalachian Trail.

In a related study, predictors of behavioral loyalty (i.e., days spent on the trail, miles hiked on the trail, proportion of use of total annual hiking) among hikers on the Appalachian Trail were explored (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, and Bacon 2004). Again, thru-hikers were excluded from the group of hikers for this study due to the small percentage of them on the Appalachian Trail compared to other types of hikers. Findings indicated that behavioral loyalty to the Appalachian Trail grew in conjunction with psychological dependence on the setting and a reluctance to alter activity preferences. In other words, the more time hikers spent on the Appalachian Trail, the more resistant they were to changing recreational settings, a sign of psychological commitment. Thus, it was concluded that place attachment was strongly correlated with use history and use intensity.

Given previous research findings suggesting variations among user type, with long-distance hikers (i.e., section and thru-hikers) scoring higher on the individual dimensions of place attachment and activity involvement (Kyle et al. 2003), I offer an argument for the inclusion of thru-hikers. First, thru-hikers spend more time engaging with the Appalachian Trail than anyone due to the extended amount of time spent on the trail (i.e., displaying behavioral loyalty) thus suggesting that they are more likely to develop an attachment or emotional bond to Appalachian Trail. Because I am interested in understanding how place attachment develops, it is vital that this phenomenon be a salient experience for the subjects in this study. Second, because thru-hikers spend roughly four to seven months hiking the trail, it would be expected that the social ties to hiking for thru-hikers would be stronger and positively affect their desire to hike. Typically, such immersed practices lead to a more intense form of social intimacy and

bonding with a particular setting as a result of shared experiences (Macnaughten 2003; Thrift 2001).

Below I review early and contemporary scholarship on subcultures and suggest how a long-distance hiking subculture contributes to the emerging body of work on leisure subcultures. Following this discussion, I present the theoretical and conceptual framework that guides my study.

Theoretical Background: A Subcultural Perspective

There have been many approaches to defining and understanding subcultures. Generally, these approaches to identifying and evaluating subcultures can be distinguished in three ways: (1) early scholarship, (2) contemporary scholarship, and (2) post-subcultural studies.

Early Scholarship

Sociology has been interested in the study of subcultures since the early twentieth century beginning with the Chicago School. At the Chicago School, research was focused on unassimilated subcultures, such as immigrant groups and criminal gangs (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918-1920; Thrasher 1927; see Gelder 2007 for review). The major questions were about when or how these subcultures would assimilate into mainstream American life (Gelder 2007; Griswold 2008). By the 1960s, sociologists were using the concept of subculture in areas of delinquency, adolescence, regional and class differences, religious sects, and occupational styles (see Yinger 1960 for review).

Early debates concerning the use of subculture dealt with lack of a precise definition of the term and the exact nature of the relationship between subcultures and society.

Although used frequently, Yinger (1960) argued the term subculture had never really been adequately defined but “had been used as an ad hoc concept whenever a writer wished to emphasize the normative aspects of behavior that differed from some general standard” (626). The result was a blurring of meaning, not to mention confusion with similar terms (e.g., sub-society, counterculture). After perusing one hundred sources, Yinger found subculture was being used in at least three different ways, two of which were relevant for sociologists. In the first definition, subculture referred to distinctive norms of groups smaller than a society such as an ethnic enclave or region (Yinger 1960). Emphasis was placed on ways smaller groups differed from larger society in terms of language, values, religion, diet, or style of life. Under this definition smaller, temporary groups could also be described as a subculture. The second definition noted by Yinger (1960) dealt with norms arising from conflict or frustrating situations between groups and the larger society (e.g., delinquent gangs, adolescent peer groups) which he referred to as a contraculture (referred to as “counterculture” by British sociologists).

Unlike a contraculture, Yinger (1960) argued subcultures did not require intensive analysis of interaction with the larger culture in order to be understood. In other words, the norms and behaviors of the subculture were communicated among particular groups with little reference to the larger culture. Miller (1969), however, disagreed and defined a subculture as “a culture within a culture, that is, an identifiable human group sharing some of the characteristics of the surrounding dominant culture but separated from it by special sets of behaviors, norms, loyalties, beliefs, etc., manifested and internalized by its

members” (302). In his investigation of a class-based occupational subculture, Miller argued that commercialism and industrial development were essential elements which created certain prevalent conditions considered necessary for the formation of a universal dockworker subculture. Regardless of whether one is using the term subculture, counterculture, or contraculture, there appears to be a lack of agreement regarding the nature of the relationship between subcultures and larger society (i.e., whether subcultures are similar to, set apart from, or in direct opposition to societal norms and values).

Fine and Kleinman (1979) claimed previous uses of subculture treated subculture as a material entity or closed social grouping isolated from society and that subcultural elements were being treated as a checklist rather than as a product of interaction. More specifically, they argued previous research on subculture (1) treated subculture as a membership category, (2) did not offer a clearly defined referent group, (3) viewed subcultures as homogenous and static thereby ignoring change, and (4) objectified the term by placing emphasis on shared values and themes. As a result, subculture was reconceptualized to mean “a set of understandings, behaviors, and artifacts used by particular groups and diffused through interlocking group networks” (Fine and Kleinman 1979: 18). In other words, Fine and Kleinman linked subculture to the process of interaction and viewed a subculture as an ongoing cultural system. They further argued that subculture and identification are best understood as a dialectical process because each is involved in the construction and reconstruction of the other.

Using examples of youth subcultures to illustrate their point, Fine and Kleinman (1979) offered a range of possible transmission systems or social networks by which

subcultures are transmitted as groups and individuals interact: multiple group memberships, weak ties or acquaintances, structural roles (i.e., people or organizations who link others with no direct or indirect ties), and media diffusion (i.e., mass media or mass entertainment viewed by those with prior interest). This reconceptualization of subculture explained how cultural elements can become widespread in a population, considered variations in cultural content as a result of interactional negotiation, and incorporated the dynamics of social change (Fine and Kleinman 1979).

Contemporary Scholarship

Debates continue over the relationship, or lack thereof, between subcultures and the dominant culture of larger society. The major questions today are not so much about the relationship between subcultures and society but whether or not there is an identifiable dominant culture or whether society is comprised of a combination of subcultures differentiated by lifestyle (Chaney 1996; Huq 2006). In the absence of a coherent, uniform “dominant culture,” there are shared cultural elements or values (e.g., consumerism, individualism) that are pervasive in contemporary American society (Bartkowski 2004; Dowd and Dowd 2003; Smith 1998; Williams 1970). Dowd and Dowd argue that a dominant culture exists and further suggest that contemporary American society is held together by five different, but related, sources: (1) the economy – we share in common our participation as rational actors working for basic needs in a capitalist society; (2) education – we share a similarly structured educational experience that teaches the basic language, laws, and customs of American society; (3) technology – American society is full of technological devices and all members of society share this

material culture; (4) consumption – we are joined together in the sense that we are all shoppers, although what we shop for differs; and (5) memory – we share a common knowledge of our nation’s disasters, wars, and heroic accomplishments, including those of war heroes and celebrities (2003: 31). In the manner presented above, an identifiable dominant culture shared by all members of society exists.

Although there has been debate over the precise definition and identifiable characteristics of subcultures, youth subculture research continues to carry on the tradition of focusing on highly transient or temporary subcultures, specifically those related to dance or music (Moore 2007; Nogie and Riley 2007; Tanner, Asbridge, and Wortley 2008), and style (Baxter and Marina 2008; Wallach 2008). Contemporary scholarship has also focused on institutionalized subcultures that are quite stable, such as those associated with professions, specifically law enforcement (Herbert 1998; Jackall 1997) and medicine (Boyce 2006). Most relevant to my investigation is an emerging body of scholarship that examines the formation of leisure subcultures (e.g., windsurfing, skateboarding, diving, climbing) and subcultural identities (Dant and Wheaton 2007; Hunt 1995; Wheaton 2000; Wheaton and Beal 2003; Wheaton and Tomlinson 1998; Williams and Donnelly 1985) which is discussed below.

Post-Subcultural Studies

The Chicago School and Britain’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) approach the study of subcultures somewhat differently (Gelder 2007). The Chicago School views subcultures as social worlds and is more concerned about the narratives of real people and the social worlds they describe. In contrast, the CCCS,

whose primary focus is class, views subcultures as aesthetic movements rather than distinct social worlds. The CCCS does not really examine the lived experiences of people but what their style signifies in relation to society.

To distinguish themselves from the work of the CCCS, terms such as ‘after subculture,’ ‘beyond subculture,’ or ‘post-subculture’ are being used by some sociologists studying subcultures (Gelder 2007). As noted by Gelder, these scholars (see Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003; Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Huq 2006) distinguish themselves in three ways. They argue that: (1) the CCCS overemphasized subcultural difference and in doing so ignored the features of ordinary, everyday life which are often casual and fluid; (2) class, the working class in particular, is no longer a determinant of subcultures as was the case for the CCCS; and (3) the CCCS ignored the fact that young people construct new identities bound by consumer reflexivity. Youth are making conscious choices and in doing so are taking on roles “for fun” as opposed to tradition or habit. From this perspective, subcultures today are not to be “distinguished from, or opposed to, mass culture” (Gelder 2007: 105), but should be understood in terms of their sociality and social practices.

Post-subcultural research involving British youth culture is beginning to address leisure choices and lifestyles in forming cultural identities for youth. However, scholars associated with the CCCS (e.g., Shildrick and MacDonald 2006; McCulloch, Stewart, and Lovegreen 2006) continue to argue for the inclusion of class. More specifically, they suggest that post-subcultural studies have rejected the importance of class and other structurally embedded inequalities in studies of youth cultural identities. Because social class is an important factor in choices of sport and leisure, this line of research should be

broadened to include those who have traditionally been excluded (MacDonald and Shildrick 2007; Shildrick and MacDonald 2006).

As identities become increasingly fluid and fragmented in contemporary society, individuals begin to construct identities from many sources, including sport and leisure lifestyles (Wheaton 2000). Specifically, sports considered new or “extreme” have been viewed as a product of postmodern society and culture offering a basis for the construction of new and multiple identities (Wheaton 2000; Wheaton and Tomlinson 2003). The recent attention given to leisure subcultures that develop around particular activities does not imply that members of a leisure subculture constitute a homogenous group (Dant and Wheaton 2007). For example, windsurfing is an individual sport. However, windsurfing is also a multilayered leisure subculture where membership, identity, and status are shaped by intersections of class, race, and gender (Wheaton 2000). For core members of this leisure subculture, windsurfing may even dictate where one lives, career choice, and time devoted to work and leisure pursuits.

In light of the existing scholarship on subcultures, my study contributes to recent research on leisure subcultures by examining the leisure activity of long-distance hiking, as well as the role of recreational settings in the formation of leisure subcultures and subcultural identities. I will now outline the theoretical and conceptual framework used in my study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework used in this Study

The primary focus of subcultural studies, as suggested by Ken Gelder (2007), entails an analysis of subcultures (in their many forms) in terms of their sociality and

social practices. Gelder argues that subcultural identities are a matter of narrative and narration. In other words, every subculture carries with it a set of narratives about itself, some of which are generated internally while others, which can be both positive and negative, are developed in and by the society around the subculture. The most common narrative about a subculture, as indicated previously, is one that casts a subculture as nonconforming, dissenting, or different. The accuracy of these narratives about subcultures has been of great concern for researchers studying subcultures; however, Gelder (2007) suggests accuracy is beside the point because subcultures are first and foremost social and should be understood as such.

In “Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice,” Gelder (2007) offers a cultural history of subcultures and identifies a range of subcultural forms and practices. Gelder reviews the subcultural studies of the Chicago School and the CCCS beginning with the Elizabethan underworld and continuing to the virtual communities of the present day. He aims to provide subcultures, and approaches to subcultures, with a deeper history. In doing so, Gelder identifies at least six key ways subcultures have generally been understood and evaluated throughout history (2007: 3):

1. Through their negative relation to work – many might not work at all (idle, unproductive, leisure, pleasure-seeking, self-indulgent) or may represent an alternative mirror image to legitimate work (e.g., prostitution);
2. Through their negative or ambivalent relation to class – self-interested rather than class-affiliated or are without class-consciousness;
3. Through an association with territory as opposed to property ownership – subcultures territorialize their places rather than own them;

4. Through their movement from home into non-domestic forms of belonging – members come together away from home and family making new adjustments outside the family circle;
5. Through ties of excess and exaggeration (related to dress, consumption, language, behavior, style, etc.) in contrast to restraints and moderations of “normal” populations ; the opposite can also be true in that some subcultures are defined by restraint of self-discipline; and
6. Through their refusal of the banalities of ordinary life – they appear to be non-normative or non-conforming when pitched against pressures of mass society.

Gelder (2007) asserts that subcultures are distinct social worlds and can take many forms (e.g., gangs, tribes, communities, networks, scenes, clubs, and so on). For example, modern tribes (e.g., New Age Travelers) are characterized by primitive features. They are disenchanted with the modern world and view the outside world as alienating. There is also something primitive in their socialization as they work to reacquaint members with spirituality and optimism. Religiosity is an essential element as modern tribes share all the features ascribed to religious cults. Scenes, on the other hand, are associated with choice and lifestyle in an increasingly fragmented and alienated world. Cities alienate people; however, they also provide scenes that encourage impersonal relationships built around pleasure and leisure pursuits (e.g., disco scene, bar scene, therapy scene). Scenes change and become undone as individuals move in and out of them.

Gelder (2007) contends that subcultures are “a matter of social affiliation” (4) in which the social is understood in a particular way depending on the term employed. In

other words, each term has “a particular application and relevance, depending on the subculture, the predicament in which it finds itself and the kinds of meaning or significance” (4) invested into it. Gelder argues that the six features outlined above find expression across many different subcultural groups (i.e., the Ranters, riot grrrls, taxi dancers, drag queens and kings, bebop and hip hop, dandies, punks, hobos, leatherfolk, hippies, bohemians, digital pirates, virtual communities). However, he does not include those that may form around outdoor recreational activities or leisure settings.

When long-distance hikers first step foot on a long-distance hiking trail, they find themselves in a predicament similar to Victor Turner’s notion of liminality (Turner 1974) which refers to a kind of space or moment where one is suddenly marginal or decentered, where one experiences a change in state or social position. To be liminal is to be, at least for a period of time, without property, outside the law, and free of social conventions. In liminality, relationships are characterized as *communitas* or “anti-structural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential” (Turner 1974: 274). In other words, *communitas* relationships are emotional rather than rationally-based, natural and authentic rather than mechanical, and are collective and cooperative rather than individual and competitive (Gelder 2007; Turner 1974). For Turner, *communitas* is an antithesis to structured relationships. He views structured relationships as relationships characterized by difference which serves to keep people apart and restrain their actions. *Communitas* relationships, on the other hand, do not merge identities but allow individuals to maintain their uniqueness while at the same time recognizing their commonness.

The Appalachian Trail represents a liminal place, a primitive environment, where long-distance hikers are temporarily separated from modern society. Therefore, I argue that certain prevalent conditions involved in hiking long-distance may help promote a unique geographically situated leisure subculture. Some conditions to be explored in my study are presented below:

- the geographical, physical, and social isolation from mainstream society
- continuous contact with other long-distance hikers, directly or indirectly
- the casual nature of living and lack of accountability to others in the “real world”
- the exceptional arduousness, danger, and variability of the trail
- the necessity of being and living on the trail on a daily basis for an extended period of time
- contact with local community members who may or may not support hikers

The foregoing conditions may provide long-distance hikers with a unique subcultural identity, one that potentially remains with them after their time on the trail has expired.

Having reviewed the literature on subcultures and outlined the theoretical and conceptual framework that guides my study, I now turn to the methodology.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The overall goal of this study is to examine the role of recreational settings in formation of leisure subcultures and subcultural identities. Specifically, it focuses on one major question with respect to the Appalachian Trail that will be addressed in the chapters to follow: Does evidence point to the existence of a long-distance hiking subculture? If so, what are the social contours of this long-distance hiking subculture as manifested on the Appalachian Trail? This chapter reviews the research question and provides the data and analytical procedures that will be used to answer the research question. Addressing this question will provide theoretical, methodological, and policy-relevant insights that will advance current understandings of leisure subcultures.

The primary goal of this work is to use the concept of subculture and some of its objective and subjective components as an analytical tool providing a more comprehensive understanding of the role of recreational settings in the formation of leisure subcultures and subcultural identities. Utilizing Gelder's subcultural perspective allows me to identify whether or not there is a long-distance hiking subculture on the Appalachian Trail. If a subculture is present, there should be evidence of the six cultural characteristics presented by Gelder for understanding and explaining subcultures. Once identified, I analyze the subcultural contours of long-distance hiking in terms of its sociality and social practices. As a result, this analysis will bring together interview

accounts with those emerging from ethnographic fieldwork to render rich, complex portraits of the long-distance hiking subculture on the Appalachian Trail. The following sections reveal the data collection procedures and provide a discussion of how the data will be analyzed.

Data Collection Procedures

Given the nature of my study and because I wish “to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” (Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 455), ethnography is an appropriate method of inquiry. Conducting fieldwork is a practice that assumes a degree of total dedication requiring full-time or longtime onsite presence in the setting one wishes to study (Wolcott 1995). During this process, in-depth interviews were conducted with long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail. In addition to conducting in-depth interviews, I interacted with many subjects on more than one occasion as a participant observer. By combining ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interview data, I gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of recreational settings in the formation of leisure subcultures and subcultural identities, as well as how long-distance hikers are able to create and sustain a geographically situated subculture in the absence of formal institutions.

The Setting

As discussed in chapter 1, the Appalachian Trail is the most famous and most populated long-distance hiking trail in the United States (ALDA-West 2009; Berger 2009a, 2009b). Given this information and the research presented in chapter 2 suggesting

that long-distance hikers have stronger attachments to the Appalachian Trail compared to other user types (Kyle et al. 2003), the Appalachian Trail is the long-distance hiking trail selected for data collection. Data collection activities (i.e., fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured qualitative interviews) took place in two waves on various sections of the Appalachian Trail. Close contact with long-distance hikers allows me to examine the social practices and behaviors situated in the everyday lives of long-distance hikers. As a result, I offer a comprehensive understanding of the long-distance hiking subculture on the Appalachian Trail.

During the summer of 2005, I spent thirty-two days on the Appalachian Trail hiking three hundred thirty miles between North Carolina and Virginia. I spent twenty-two days on the trail during the summer of 2007 and hiked approximately two hundred fifty miles between Virginia and Pennsylvania. In mid-May of both 2005 and 2007, I attended the annual Trail Days Festival in Damascus, Virginia along with approximately ten thousand people (e.g., locals, current and former long-distance hikers, gear representatives). Trail Days is an event that reunites Appalachian Trail hikers and celebrates their journey with food, music, gear replacement or repair, a hiker parade and talent show, and nightly drum circles around the campfire at Tent City.

In-Depth Interviews

During the summers of 2005 and 2007, in-depth interviews were conducted with long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail. In-depth interviews allow me to recount the various standpoints (e.g., perceptions), strategies (e.g., motivations, goals, behaviors),

and stories (e.g., narratives)⁴ used by long-distance hikers as they reflect upon and understand their experiences on the Appalachian Trail. In my selection of interviewees, I employed a purposive sampling technique. Because I was interested in capturing the lived experiences of long-distance hikers, hikers with the most exposure and who were most embedded in the trail were purposively sampled. Specifically, hikers were selected based on the amount of time they had been hiking on the Appalachian Trail (i.e., at least four weeks' worth of continuous hiking), as well as on their availability and willingness to participate and be interviewed. No one I approached declined to be interviewed. Given that previously reviewed literature (Kyle et al. 2003) indicated thru-hikers and section hikers on the Appalachian Trail interact with the trail in a more meaningful way when compared to other types of hikers, day hikers and weekend/overnight hikers were not sampled. The majority of long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail tend to be young, white, college-educated males. As a result, I selected a sample of long-distance hikers balanced in terms of gender, and one that would reflect a range of ages, educational backgrounds, and occupational experiences. I was not able to select an inclusive sample in terms of race/ethnicity as there is a lack of racial diversity on the trail.

The instrument was pre-tested during the summer of 2005, provided rich data, and thus proved to be a solid instrument. No changes were made to the interview instrument between the two waves of data collection.⁵ The interviews were conducted in a semi-

⁴ This coding scheme was communicated through personal contact in a Qualitative Analysis Seminar during the summer of 2004. I am indebted to Dr. John P. Bartkowski for sharing this approach.

⁵ Prior to conducting the second wave of interviews, I consulted with dissertation committee members for additional input. Although the committee did not recommend any changes to the instrument, they did offer comments or aspects I might consider to which I was attentive during the second wave of data collection. Those aspects included environmental narratives used by participants, gender dynamics, the safety of hikers on and off the Trail, and issues of trust and reciprocity. If any of these topics of interest were broached by participants, follow up questions were asked.

structured fashion, meaning that each respondent had the opportunity to answer every question. However, unanticipated topics that surfaced during the interview were pursued further through follow-up questions not originally included in the interview questionnaire. A pre-interview questionnaire was administered orally to participants to gather demographic information and oral consent. The information collected consisted of age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, current employment, parental education, parental employment, hometown, and prior experience as a long-distance hiker. In general, interview questions covered topics such as day-to-day life on the Appalachian Trail, trail names,⁶ trail magic, trail angels, hiking experiences and expectations, visits to local communities, relationships or interaction with fellow hikers, and memorable experiences (see Appendix A).⁷

Interview sites included, but were not limited to, shelters, local communities, and hiker hostels, all of which are found along or near the trail.⁸ The majority of interviews were conducted in the evenings at trail shelters or during the annual Trail Days Festival. Each interview was recorded on audiotape and lasted anywhere from forty-five to ninety minutes, yielding three hundred fifty-seven pages of interview transcripts. Additional notes were taken after the interview to enhance the analysis of recorded accounts.

⁶ Trail names, rather than pseudonyms, are used when presenting the results of this study. Trail names provide anonymity in this context and are used with permission by the participants in this study.

⁷ Topics chosen for my interview questionnaire were informed by my personal hiking experiences on the Appalachian Trail. Beginning May 1, 1999 I spent forty days hiking three hundred fifty miles of the Appalachian Trail from the Delaware Water Gap Recreation Area on the Pennsylvania-New Jersey border to Manchester Center, Vermont. I have section-hiked approximately half of the Appalachian Trail.

⁸ Nine of the interviews were conducted by a second researcher during the summer of 2005. The first few interviews conducted by the second researcher were in my presence to ensure that the process would be uniform and the data would be collected as indicated in my original proposal.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

To examine more fully how the long-distance hiking subculture on the Appalachian Trail is constructed and negotiated among long-distance hikers, I conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork to observe and record interactions among long-distance hikers and between hikers and non-hikers (i.e., trail angels, local community members, members of religious congregations), while observing and recording my own experiences and interactions with others along the trail. Such fieldwork is designed to explore the “accomplishments” and constructed character of ongoing social interaction. As I immersed myself in the ongoing social activities of the long-distance hiking subculture, I was mindful to look for recurring themes or patterns in behavior or action that were, and perhaps were not, happening in this environment. I was also conscious of the ways long-distance hikers drew symbolic boundaries between themselves and relevant reference groups.

Changes occurred between the two stages of observational fieldwork. I was more attuned, more involved, and more descriptive in conducting the fieldwork phase of data collection in 2007. In 2005 the interview process was a primary concern given that this was my first time to use the instrument. As I became more comfortable with the interview questionnaire over the course of data collection, I was able to devote more attention to my surroundings. This is true during the first wave of data collection but more apparent in comparisons between the two stages. During the first wave of data collection in 2005, gender issues on the trail (i.e., identities, performances, negotiations) were not something I was attending to when making observations and taking field notes;

however, it became one aspect I paid careful attention to during the second wave of data collection in 2007.

My observations of the long-distance hiking subculture on the Appalachian Trail have been recorded in approximately two hundred pages of field notes. By engaging in this level of fieldwork rather than resting on assumptions, this intimate, interpersonal approach to seeking human understanding will allow me to recount the everyday lived experiences of participants. By combining ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, I am able to attain a level of understanding of the long-distance hiking subculture on the Appalachian Trail to be shared with others that I would not achieve simply by being in the field.

Sample Characteristics

During the summers of 2005 and 2007, I conducted in-depth interviews with forty-six long-distance hikers (e.g., section hikers and thru-hikers) on the Appalachian Trail. Forty-one of the interviews were conducted individually while two married couples were interviewed together. Consistent with the conventions that underlay qualitative research, I do not assume the existence of an objective, obdurate, or uniform reality to surface from interviews with those who setting navigate this social setting (that is, the Appalachian Trail). As such, the accounts that emerge from these interviews are not expected or intended to be exhaustive of all possible perspectives of those who are

part of a long-distance hiking subculture.⁹ The total sample characteristics are presented in Table 3.1.

Slightly more than half of long-distance hikers interviewed during the summers of 2005 and 2007 are male, at fifty-two percent and sixty-two percent respectively. Almost two-thirds, or sixty-three percent of participants interviewed in 2005 were between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-five. Other age concentrations include individuals who were fifty-one or more years of age (15%) or less than twenty-two (12%) years of age. In 2007, just less than half, or forty-six percent of hikers were between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-five, while another forty-six percent were either less than twenty-two or between thirty-six and fifty years of age, each representing twenty-three percent of long-distance hikers. In terms of education, all participants interviewed in 2005 and 2007 received high school diplomas. Fifteen percent indicated they had attended some college. However, the overwhelming majority, or approximately two-thirds of long-distance hikers interviewed in 2005 and 2007 reporting having received a college degree (i.e., two-year, four-year, graduate).

⁹ The hikers interviewed are not representative of all types of hikers along the Appalachian Trail given that nearly 4,000,000 people will step foot on the trail each year, nor are long-distance hikers a homogenous group. Thus, the long-distance hikers who were interviewed reflect a range of different standpoints, transitional states, and come from a variety of life circumstances.

Table 3.1 : Long-Distance Hiker Sample Characteristics, 2005 and 2007

	2005		2007	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>
<i>Demographics</i>				
Total	33	-	13	-
Population				
Gender				
Male	17	51.5	8	61.6
Female	16	48.5	5	38.4
Age				
Less than 22	4	12.1	3	23.1
22 through 35	21	63.7	6	46.1
36 through 50	3	9.0	3	23.1
51 and Over	5	15.2	1	7.7
Education				
High school diploma/GED	9	27.3	3	23.1
Some college	5	15.2	2	15.4
Two-year degree	4	12.1	2	15.4
Four-year degree	11	33.3	4	30.7
Graduate degree	4	12.1	2	15.4
Occupation				
Professional/Career	11	33.3	5	38.5
Trade/Craft	4	12.1	1	7.7
Service/Retail	9	27.3	5	38.4
Seasonal	2	6.1	-	-
Full-Time Student	3	9.1	-	-
Retired	4	12.1	-	-
Unemployed	-	-	2	15.4
Region				
New England	6	18.1	3	23.1
Mid-Atlantic	1	3.0	3	23.1
Southeast	9	27.3	5	38.4
Midwest	10	30.3	1	7.7
Southwest	2	6.1	1	7.7
West	3	9.1	-	-
Country other than U.S.	2	6.1	-	-
Types of Distance				
Thru-hiker	22	66.7	7	53.9
Section hiker	11	33.3	6	46.1

For both 2005 and 2007, the most common occupations held by long-distance hikers interviewed were those considered professional/career (e.g., nurse, teacher, police officer, ordained minister, graphic designer, deputy auditor general for Navajo nation, music and film production) and service/retail (e.g., restaurant and retail industry, group home assistant, photographer's assistant). More specifically, nearly sixty percent of long-distance hikers 2005 and seventy-five percent in 2007 were represented in one of these two occupational categories. In terms of region, a large percentage of long-distance hikers interviewed reside in the eastern United States (i.e., New England, Mid-Atlantic, or Southeastern states). Nearly half of those interviewed in 2005 and more than three-fourths interviewed in 2007 come from this area representing nine of the fourteen states making up the Appalachian Trail. Slightly more than half of long-distance hikers interviewed in 2005 were from either the Midwest, Southwest, or Western regions, and two were from outside of the United States (i.e., Canada, Israel). In 2007, approximately fifteen percent of interviewees represented the Midwest and Southwest regions.

Type of distance refers to the self-identification of hikers at the time of the interview. The majority of long-distance hikers interviewed identified themselves as thru-hikers. Specifically, two-thirds of those interviewed in 2005 identified themselves as thru-hikers, whereas slightly more than half identified themselves as thru-hikers in 2007. Of all long-distance hikers interviewed, thru-hikers and section hikers, nine were thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail for the second time, and in at least four cases, the third time. Most long-distance hikers interviewed began hiking the trail in mid to late March or early April. While April Fool's Day is a traditional day for starting a northbound thru-hike, a few of the long-distance hikers interviewed started as early as February. All

participants, with the exception of three, had been hiking the trail for four or more weeks. One had only been on the trail for two weeks at the time of the interview but planned on hiking five hundred miles. A young couple whose car broke down on the way to Jazz Fest in New Orleans decided to hike back to Connecticut and had been on the trail almost three weeks when interviewed. Having described the characteristics of the sample, I now turn to the analytical strategy used in my study to examine a long-distance hiking subculture.

Data Analysis Procedures

My analysis of this long-distance hiking subculture is generated from primary data that I collected (e.g., field notes and transcripts of audiotaped materials). Data analysis procedures are anchored in the proposed research question, the review of existing literature, and the theoretical perspective, then coded appropriately by hand. I did not analyze interview responses on a question-by-question basis with respect to the interview questionnaire. This would do a disservice to the lives and social experiences of the interview subjects. While some qualitative researchers do make use of software programs, such programs do not adequately capture the complexities and richness of the data at hand, nor have the virtues of such programs proved to be better than conventional qualitative analyses (Lofland and Lofland 1995).

In-Depth Interviews and Ethnographic Fieldwork

Interview transcripts and field notes are analyzed using three interpretive frameworks: (1) a theory-generated coding scheme based on Gelder's six cultural

characteristics for identifying and explaining subcultures, (2) an emergent themes technique to capture other issues that may surface apart from those highlighted by the theoretical framework, and (3) narrative analyses, including storylines, images, and metaphors that tend to engage members and distinguish long-distance hikers from relevant reference groups.

Before attempting to understand and explain a long-distance hiking subculture, I had to be certain that a leisure subculture existed. The first phase of analysis was guided by the first part of the research question “Does evidence point to the existence of a long-distance hiking subculture?” Using Gelder’s six characteristics for identifying and understanding subcultures, I read through the interview transcripts looking for evidence of a long-distance hiking subculture. As evidence was found, it was placed in a separate word document for later coding.

With the new document supporting evidence of a subculture, I read through and coded each paragraph in numeric fashion to distinguish the specific Gelder characteristic(s) that were identified and supported with quotes from personal interviews. Next, I grouped the new data by the six subcultural characteristics. Doing so allowed me to answer the second part of the research question: “If so, how do we understand and explain the long-distance hiking subculture in terms of its sociality and social practices?” Once the characteristics were grouped, I was mindful to be aware of unanticipated themes or concepts that may emerge. By using an emergent themes approach, I identified several themes or sensitizing concepts within each of the six characteristics.

Once the themes within each characteristic were identified, they became definitive concepts. I went back to the full interview transcripts a second time and coded

each paragraph to see whether or not I may have missed evidence of the above. I used the same coding scheme for coding ethnographic field notes so the themes would remain uniform across both types of data. When coding, I also paid careful attention to various standpoints, strategies, and stories told or used by long-distance hikers to understand their experiences on the trail. These two data sources provide an indication of the presence (or absence) of an identifiable long-distance hiking subculture.

In sum, the methodology presented in the foregoing paragraphs enables me to gain a rich, complex portrait of a long-distance hiking subculture. Using in-depth interviews, I recounted the various standpoints, strategies, and stories used by long-distance hikers as they reflected upon and understood their experiences on the Appalachian Trail. At the same time, ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to further examine how a long-distance hiking subculture was constructed and negotiated among long-distance hikers. Neither use of a single method of inquiry, nor a qualitative software program, would allow me to gain such an in-depth understanding of the situated behaviors and everyday practices of long-distance hikers.

The next chapter provides the results from the research question. Specifically, it focuses on Gelder's six key characteristics for identifying and understanding subcultures. These characteristics are used to describe the contours of a long-distance hiking subculture.

CHAPTER IV

SUBCULTURE ANALYSIS

My study attempts to answer the following research question with respect to a long-distance hiking subculture: Does evidence point to the existence of a long-distance hiking subculture? If so, how do we understand a long-distance hiking subculture in terms of its sociality and social practices? To understand and evaluate a long-distance hiking subculture, it is important to determine whether an identifiable long-distance hiking subculture exists. As may be recalled from chapter 2, subcultures can be identified and evaluated through (1) a negative relation to work, (2) a negative or ambivalent relation to class, (3) an association with territory over property ownership, (4) non-domestic forms of belonging, (5) ties to excess and exaggeration, and (6) a refusal of the banalities of ordinary life.

In this chapter, each of the six subcultural characteristics is discussed in the manner presented above. For each of the six characteristics, a brief description is provided, followed by a list of emerging themes. Once each theme has been identified and discussed, connections between the characteristic, the research question, and the theoretical framework are demonstrated. Evidence from ethnographic field notes and interview accounts are combined below to describe a long-distance hiking subculture.

A Negative Relation to Work

Subcultures can be identified and understood through a negative relation to work. In other words, subcultures may not work at all (e.g., at leisure, self-indulgent, pleasure-seeking) or they may represent an alternative mirror-image to legitimate work (e.g., prostitution, selling drugs). The following themes emerged concerning a negative relation to work and are discussed below: (1) Long-distance hikers find themselves on the trail because they are unhappy with their work situation, (2) Long-distance hikers are evaluated negatively by non-hikers, (3) Long-distance hiking is an alternative to legitimate work, and (4) The activity of long-distance hiking is considered work.

Unhappy with Work

One theme that emerged regarding a negative relation to work is that many long-distance hikers find themselves on the Appalachian Trail because they are unhappy with their current work situations. During the course of her interview, Phoenix Rising, a thirty-two year old thru-hiker from Arizona, said she was miserable at her job. When asked if that factor played a role in her decision to hike the Appalachian Trail, she replied “Oh definitely. I realized that my job, I was basically supplying insurance for a bunch of rich people who owned airplanes, and it wasn’t very rewarding and it wasn’t very gratifying. I had been thinking about, questioning what I was doing and why I was there for a while.” For work-related reasons, Phoenix Rising was at an airport when she came across Bill Bryson’s “A Walk in the Woods.” She said reading about Bryson’s adventures on the Appalachian Trail renewed a childhood dream of thru-hiking the trail;

and since she was miserable at her job, Phoenix Rising made the decision to thru-hike the next summer.

Phoenix Rising is not the only long-distance hiker who was fed up with her current work situation prior to hiking. Slack, a twenty-nine year-old section hiker from North Carolina, admitted during my conversation with him that he “really needed this chance to heal” from what he had been doing. When I specifically asked him what he meant by that, Slack replied “I needed to heal from my environment, from my job. Just the hardness of being what I was, what I did. Having to do the things I did in my job.”

In order to put this into perspective, Slack explained his situation:

I wheel-locked cars in private parking lots that people pay five to six hundred dollars a year to park in. Actually now it's almost seven hundred a year to park. We wheel-locked cars that were parked there illegally. Sometimes you have to take people's last month, last sixty dollars to remove that lock, and it just gets more expensive every day. It's just like being a tow truck driver. It's a pretty, you pretty much, as soon as the sticker's written, there's no deal. There's nothing you can do. You're just paid to unlock the lock. So it was a rough job. And sometimes you had to take people's good times at least. At the least you took their good time. Only one time can I say that anybody had fun paying the money and that's because they probably had more than they needed anyway. And they were just laughing about the whole thing.

Following this explanation, I reiterated that he wanted to get away from that job, to which Slack replied “It's not that I really wanted to get away from having a job and trying to get stable in an environment but that job in particular.” Slack was living in Boone, North Carolina and was unhappy with his lifestyle there, especially his job. He decided it was time to “move on, at least for a while” and found himself on the Appalachian Trail by accident. Slack was invited by a friend to join him and a few others for an eight-mile

hike, which turned into a fifty-mile hike, and eventually into what he planned to be a six hundred-mile hike on the Appalachian Trail.

While most long-distance hikers, like Slack and Phoenix Rising, were unhappy at their current jobs, Kodak, an eighteen year-old thru-hiker from New Mexico, had a negative feeling toward work of any kind. When I asked her what her most challenging experience had been on the trail thus far, Kodak recalled a time when she was hiking “a string of days that were a little bit too long” for her. She said the worst moment came when she “sat down and [thought] this is just like a job. I get up every morning and I hike until I drop and I get up and I do it again. When I thought the words ‘it’s like a job,’ that was the absolute worst.” Kodak had recently finished high school and was intentionally delaying entry into the workforce.

Although not every long-distance hiker interviewed had a negative view of work, the majority was at a transitional stage in life, which for the most part was work-related. As Turbo, a twenty-four year-old thru-hiker from North Carolina, indicated, “A lot of people, some admit it and some don’t, but I think a lot of people just want to put their life on hold. Maybe they’re in the same position as me where they really don’t want to start their real job, quote unquote, or they want a break from their real job.” In addition to removing themselves from their current work situations, many long-distance hikers have recently finished high school or college, like Turbo and Kodak, and want a break before starting their careers.

While many long-distance hikers found themselves on the Appalachian Trail because they were unhappy with work, others had recently retired and were hiking for leisure. More specifically, the majority of long-distance hikers interviewed found

themselves on the Appalachian Trail because they love hiking, because they love nature and the outdoors, or for the adventure and challenge of hiking two thousand miles. Gus, a sixty-two year-old section hiker from Massachusetts, enjoys hiking; however, at the same time, he is fulfilling a lifelong dream by hiking a long-distance trail. When I asked him why he decided to hike the Appalachian Trail, Gus enthusiastically replied “Well, like I said, I’ve been hiking all my life and this is kind of like a dream, to come and do long-distance hiking for more than say a week. This is like big time. It’s like being in major league baseball.” He added that “Most everybody is out here for the same reason – because they enjoy the outdoors, they enjoy the hiking.”

While a majority of long-distance hikers interviewed enjoy hiking and the outdoors, not all interviewed hikers concur. Others find themselves on the Appalachian Trail for the challenge and adventure that awaits them. For example, although Romer, a twenty-five year-old thru-hiker from Illinois, was hiking to challenge herself “mentally, physically, and spiritually,” T-Mac, a twenty-eight year-old thru-hiker from Virginia, was solely out for the physical challenge. When I asked him specifically what it was about the Appalachian Trail that brought him here, he boldly replied “It was the challenge of it. Two thousand miles. Just being able to hike that far in one stretch. I don’t necessarily enjoy hiking all this much.” When I inquired as to how his reasons compared to what other hikers may have said about their decisions to hike the Appalachian Trail, T-Mac said “It’s about fifty-fifty. Fifty percent are out here for the same reason, the challenge of making it from Maine to Georgia. The other half are out here just because they love hiking (laughs). They love hiking a LOT (laughs).” Admittedly, T-Mac did not come to

the trail to remove himself from the workplace but simply for the challenge of hiking a long-distance trail.

A Negative Hiker Stereotype

A second theme that emerged concerning a negative relation to work is a perceived stereotype of long-distance hikers as unproductive and lazy. The one thing Graceful, a twenty-five year-old thru-hiker from Tennessee, would like to change or do away with, if in her power to do so, is “the stereotype of hikers because when we [hikers] come to a town a lot of people are afraid of the way we look.” When I inquired as to what the stereotype of a long-distance hiker was she replied “That we’re lazy bums, that we don’t have a job, that we’ve quit our job.” To further illustrate her point, Graceful recalled an experience she had at a restaurant in a local community near the trail where she was treated poorly by the person waiting on her. I asked if she felt the treatment went back to the stereotype of the hiker being lazy and not wanting to work and she replied, “Yeah, or in that case I think, too, it was a hardworking community. I could tell the woman, she was working hard and had probably worked long hours at this diner, and she saw me as being lazy and you don’t work.” Obie, a forty-six year-old return thru-hiker from New York, admitted during my interview with him that when he first heard about the Appalachian Trail from a couple planning a thru-hike his first thought was “that’s pretty irresponsible that you could not work for six months.”

Due to their apparent lack of engagement in the workforce, many long-distance hikers interviewed believe they are perceived and evaluated negatively by those outside the hiking community because of their lifestyle of leisure. For example, when I asked

Rez Dog, a fifty-seven year-old thru-hiker from Arizona attempting a second thru-hike, to describe his experiences in local communities, he said “You walk by this big plant in Pearisburg, you know, and those people are going to work every day and here we are on kind of a permanent vacation. Sometimes I think they might resent us.” Although he felt as though local community members may resent him for not working, Rez Dog continued to say that he had not experienced any hostility when passing through local communities; however, this is not the case for everyone. When I asked Sweet Sixteen, a sixty-three year-old section hiker from Michigan who recently retired, if other hikers had positive experiences in town similar to her, she replied “I think in general, yes. There have been isolated incidences, but essentially I think everyone has had positive experiences.” I asked if she could give me an example of a town experience that was not positive. Sweet Sixteen offered the following example:

The area that we just came through between Erwin and pretty much through Hampton. We are aware that the locals have some issues with hikers. It’s not with hikers but with the way their land was acquired so there were a few instances but not with me. I made sure to stay in shelters and stay around people rather than to camp on my own. I’m careful but usually not as concerned and wasn’t going to camp on my own in this area because I was aware of some hostility.

Like Sweet Sixteen, Socks, a fifty-three year-old thru-hiker from Connecticut, also recalled instances in Tennessee where “Some [hikers] feel like people are staring at them or they’ve said things to them. There were some places in Tennessee where they told us to be careful, that people would holler things at you from cars and some people did experience that.” When I asked if she knew why this might happen, Socks replied “Someone said that the Appalachian Trail Conference or the National Park Service has taken some land that belonged to families.” Socks continued to suggest that the land was

taken from families who have lived in that area forever and even have mountains named after their family name. During my conversation with her, Graceful recalled another hiker being yelled at and being called “hiker trash” by children on a school bus when passing through this section of Tennessee. Most long-distance hikers are aware of a negative evaluation casting them as lazy, unproductive bums as indicated by Graceful, Sweet Sixteen, and Socks; however, some make efforts to change the negative stereotype by confronting it directly because they are hiking for work-related reasons.

Hiking as an Alternative to Work

A third theme that emerged concerning a relation to work is that many long-distance hikers are hiking the Appalachian Trail as an alternative to the structured realms of work. Although long-distance hiking may be perceived by non-hikers as a non-productive leisure activity or as an aversion to work, some long-distance hikers view their hike as an alternative to work because they are hiking for a cause or taking their work with them onto the trail. During my conversation with Bramble, a thirty-two year-old return thru-hiker (or homeless nomad as he prefers to be called) from Connecticut, I asked about his experiences in local communities. Because he believes that hikers are misunderstood, Bramble says he tries “to make a better effort at letting the community be more aware of who we are as thru-hikers, that a lot of us out here are out here for a cause or our own cause for our self.” Bramble is one of many long-distance hikers hiking the Appalachian Trail to raise awareness or money for a particular cause. Bramble made a promise to his aunt before she died that he “would walk for five years to tell people who she was and help people through her name, The Marie Colligan Cancer Fund.” He has a

pink ribbon tattooed on his right shoulder blade with his aunt's name as well as the names of other women he has met on his journey who have battled breast cancer. Because Bramble was hiking to raise money for breast cancer, he was often approached by local newspapers as they followed his hike. In this way, he was able to directly confront the stereotype of the lazy, unproductive hiker. Swinging Jane, a sixty-three year-old thru-hiker from Ohio, always wanted to hike the Appalachian Trail but thought she needed another reason to keep her going through the pain and unpredictable weather so she was hiking for two fundraisers – a new D-bell for the bell choir at First Methodist Church in Newark, Ohio which she attends, and a 501 charity, Newborns in Need. Although I did not have an opportunity to meet him, many long-distance hikers talked about Tyvek, a thru-hiker who found himself hiking the Appalachian Trail to bring awareness to soldiers coming home from the war with post-traumatic stress disorder in hope that the government would start a debriefing program. Rather than being unproductive, Bramble, Swinging Jane, and Tyvek considered their respective hikes as alternatives to legitimate work (i.e., wage labor) because they are hiking for instrumental reasons, not simply for leisure or because they have an aversion to work.

In addition to hiking for a cause, other long-distance hikers may take their work onto the Appalachian Trail with them. UPS, a twenty-two year-old student enrolled at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, was thru-hiking for a class assignment. She was required to write a two-hundred page paper for a creative writing class and decided to write about her experiences on the trail. Montreal, a thirty-five year-old film producer from Canada, was hiking with his wife Kutsa, a twenty-eight year-old return thru-hiker from Israel, who he met on the trail in 2002. During their interview, I inquired as to why

they decided to thru-hike the trail again in 2005. Montreal replied “She has fear of heights and snakes and tons of stuff so we decided, we don’t want to do a documentary of the trail, but we want to maybe do a visual essay. We’re just documenting all along our way and maybe creating something at the end.” Clay, an ordained minister from Georgia, hikes the Appalachian Trail with his wife, Branch, as part of their hiking ministry. In addition to hiking, the ministry sets up a tent and trailer at Trail Days in Damascus, Virginia to offer hot showers and medical attention to hikers for free. When I asked if they approached hikers on the trail to minister to them, Clay said their primary goal is to meet hikers’ physical needs first and their spiritual needs second. Clay and Branch prefer to lead by example and do not proselytize but make themselves available to anyone wishing to talk about God, religion, or spirituality. When I asked Clay what that experience had been like for him, he replied “Well, every professional likes to use their training if they’re really passionate about it.” In addition to ministering to fellow hikers, Clay and Branch also wrote approximately forty practical and spiritual lessons they learned from being on the Appalachian Trail that they hope to share with others.

Hiking is Work

The last theme that emerged regarding work is that some hikers view the activity of long-distance hiking as work in itself, both physically and mentally. When I asked Rez Dog what his average day was like on the trail, he replied “It’s like a job. My job is to get up and walk.” Skywalker, a forty-four year-old thru-hiker from Georgia, shared this sentiment when I asked what he learned from the highest points experienced on the trail. He commented that “everybody out here is working pretty hard. I mean this can be

work. Challenging themselves, extending themselves.” As Clay noted, “Up until Damascus it’s a lot of fun but it sort of becomes a job afterwards.” Most of the long-distance hikers who start in Georgia at Springer Mountain make it to Damascus, Virginia for the Trail Days Festival. However, after Damascus, the number of hikers gradually decreases leaving some to view their hike as work, rather than the social experience they were accustomed to prior to Trail Days.

Not only do the daily tasks involved in hiking become routine and monotonous, but the planning that is necessary for long-distance hiking can also be physically and mentally demanding. Hustler, a twenty-five year-old thru-hiker from Colorado attempting a second thru-hike, provides some insight into all that is involved when hiking long-distance. Although this is not “a Hustler original thought,” he concurs with what he was told by the person who runs Kincorra hostel in Hampton, Tennessee when I inquired about characteristics shared by long-distance hikers:

He always says the first thing is that a thru-hiker is very task-oriented. They have a task at hand and they need to get to the next town. So you’re very task-oriented and your task is to make it to Maine. They’re very highly confident because who knows how many people say “you’re hiking to Maine, you’re never going to make it, whatever, that’s too big, you’re hiking two thousand miles, you’re crazy.” So you have to be very, very confident. The third thing he says is you’re very logistically-minded because there are a lot of logistics that go into it as far as planning where your gear drops are, food drops, how many miles between towns, where towns are set up at, where the water sources are, just a lot of logistics...But that’s his theory and I can’t really think of how better to explain than the way he does. I think he’s had ten thousand hikers through his hostel and that’s the conclusion he’s come up with and I agree one hundred percent.

For long-distance hikers who are planners, the hike can feel like an enormous amount of work. However, not everyone is “logistically-minded” or concerned with

planning ahead. A small minority of hikers interviewed prefer to live in the moment, in the now, and enjoy every second of their hike. As Montreal noted “A lot of rock bands like Pink Floyd criticized the fact that people are living a life for their pension or their retirement or it’s always the goal and not the journey. And on the trail they always say the journey is the thing, not the goal.” While some hikers, like Montreal, may be living in the present moment rather than thinking about the future or reliving the past, most long-distance hikers are goal-oriented in their task to get to Maine.

Summary: A Negative Relation to Work

The findings presented above provide initial evidence of the existence of a long-distance hiking subculture. Consistent with the first key element through which sociologists define a subculture, long-distance hikers can be identified and understood through a negative relation to work. However, it is important to note that long-distance hikers do not view themselves negatively with respect to their lack of engagement in productive labor. While some hikers found themselves on the Appalachian Trail because they were unhappy with the jobs, the majority of hikers interviewed consider themselves at leisure and find themselves hiking because they love nature, they love hiking, or simply for the challenge of hiking long-distance. Because they are far removed from the workplace, a (perceived) negative stereotype has emerged characterizing long-distance hikers as lazy and unproductive. Although most hikers interviewed in this study are at leisure, there is a small group of long-distance hikers who are hiking for work-related reasons, who view their hike as an alternative to work, or who view the hike as work in itself. And, while some long-distance hikers interviewed were on the trail because they

were unhappy with their current work situations, the notion that subcultures can be understood through a negative relation to work is not entirely accurate. Most hikers are at leisure and are hiking the trail because they love hiking and the outdoors. This characteristic should be broadened to include a more general relation to work as opposed to focusing solely on a negative relation to work.

A Negative Relation to Class

As noted in chapter 2, subcultures can also be identified and understood through a negative or ambivalent relation to class. In other words, subcultures are not organized around class in that they do not have a class-based identity and are without class-consciousness. Put differently, subcultures are viewed as being organized around factors other than a shared economic position. The following themes emerged concerning a negative or ambivalent relation to class: (1) Everyone is equal on the trail, and (2) Hikers are united through a collectively valued set of common experiences.

Everyone is Equal on the Trail

One theme that emerged during my interviews was that on the trail everybody is equal regardless of occupation or income. Rather than shared economic position, it is the physical act of hiking long-distance that allows hikers to view themselves as equals on the trail. Obie stated “Out there, out on the trail, it doesn’t matter what you do. Everybody is the same. You want to stay fit, you prefer to stay dry, and you head north.” When I asked Branch about characteristics shared among long-distance hikers, she thoughtfully replied, “Prince and pauper are the same out here.” For Bramble, one of the

positive things about the Appalachian Trail is that “It doesn’t matter what anybody does or has done in the past. Everybody is equal here. Everybody is equal.” When I asked her about the significance of trail names and how they influence the hiking experience on the Appalachian Trail, HeartFire, a forty-nine year-old section hiker from Texas, smiled and replied

We’re all here under pseudonyms. Nobody knows who anybody is but that’s part of the leveling of everybody out here on the trail, too. You know, doctors, nurses, lawyers, judges, sanitation workers, blue collar nobodies, and people between jobs, we’re all out here doing the same thing and we’re all equal.

Like HeartFire, Turbo recalled meeting a variety of people but did not see a common thread in terms of occupation. He said the only common thread he noticed among all long-distance was “dedication. That’s really all that it takes. People have hiked the whole Appalachian Trail with a duffle bag or stuff they bought from Walmart. All they have to do is keep walking.” In addition to dedication, Taz, a twenty-one year-old thru-hiker from Maryland, thought that patience, persistence, and stubbornness were also “big ones” needed by hikers to keep them going through the pain and discomfort associated with long-distance hiking.

United through Shared Experiences

A second theme that emerged is relationships that form among long-distance hikers are the result of shared experiences rather than shared economic position. Hustler recounted an unpleasant experience on the trail which illustrates the connection among long-distance hikers as a result of shared experiences:

All of the hikers have this same connection here. They're all, you're all hiking to Maine. It's kind of cool because I was hiking with this multi-millionaire last year who had a little bit better gear than we had obviously and when he went into town he would stay in plush hotels and things like that. But on the end of a rainy day he would come into the shelter. One time it was fifteen degree weather, not fifteen but it was really cold, pure hypothermia conditions. We hike into this shelter and he's just as miserable as everybody else. It equals the field. In that way you feel connected to all the other hikers out here because you are experiencing everything. The experience doesn't really change whether you have money or not or what social class you're in. You're all one and all experiencing the exact same thing, the same pain, same everything, same weather conditions. It doesn't matter what kind of money you have or how good of shape you are in or what kind of gear you have. You're still suffering the same and going through the same experience.

As noted by Hustler, relationships are not structured along class lines but around experiences endured on the trail. Geronimo, a twenty-five year-old thru-hiker from Ohio who had been a paratrooper in the military until he "smashed his ankles" during a jump, said he had not experienced a closeness like he felt with fellow hikers since his days in the military. He said this closeness develops because "You're suffering the same way and doing the same thing." Although they are not military, Montreal and Kutsa also likened bonds that form between hikers to those formed in the military. During the interview, which took place in their hotel room in Atkins, Virginia, Montreal recounted a story about the instant connection they had at Trail Days in Damascus, Virginia the previous week with a fellow thru-hiker from 2001 named Rocky Top, the only black long-distance hiker I recall meeting at Trail Days. Montreal and Kutsa had not seen Rocky Top or talked to him for four years since they reached Katahdin in 2001 when they finished their respective thru-hikes. He said when they saw each other at Trail Days it was like "Oh, how are you?!?" Montreal continued to talk about the strength of the bond

among long-distance hikers and the reasons this is similar to those shared among members of the military:

You shared some fears and you share some experiences. Like I told you, you want to share this experience with people. A lot of times you go back home and unless they did something, unless they did the same thing, they don't really understand. And it's like the army. A guy going into Iraq or Vietnam comes back and tells people the stories and they listen but they cannot really understand unless they've been there with him. This is why they have this connection between army people. "Oh, you did Vietnam? Oh yeah, where were you?!?" They know. It's the same thing with hikers. You don't have to say it. We've been through a lot of this stuff before so we see people, "Oh, man where were you? Oh you did that?" Well, you don't have to say it. You know what the guy is feeling. You know it. So, when you meet with these other people after there's this very tight bond.

Montreal reinforces the notion that members of this leisure subculture come together, not because of a shared economic position, but because they share a unique experience. As a result of these shared experiences, long-distance hikers develop strong social and emotional bonds with one another and to the trail.

Summary: A Negative Relation to Class

The findings presented above are yet another piece of evidence that a long-distance hiking subculture does exist. Long-distance hikers can be identified and understood through a negative or ambivalent relation to class. Relationships that form among long-distance hikers are not formed along class lines. For the majority of long-distance hikers interviewed, their commonalities go beyond class affiliation to the extent that, for them, class is transcended. While the majority of hikers referred to shared experiences as a uniting factor, others referred to common characteristics. The notion that subcultures can be understood through a negative or ambivalent relation to class is

supported. Long-distance hikers are not organized around class in that they do not have a class-based identity and are without class-consciousness.

Long-distance hikers come together due to their participation in a particular recreational activity and are united by situations encountered and endured on the Appalachian Trail. Their social difference and sense of social isolation is more accurately depicted by choice in leisure activity as opposed to being imposed upon them by others. However, it could also be argued that long-distance hiking is organized around class to the extent that one must have the means to afford participation in this long-term leisure activity. While one's income appears to be a non-issue for long-distance hikers, income is selective of those who participate in this extended leisure activity given that it costs, on average, two dollars per mile to hike the Appalachian Trail. This characteristic should be broadened to include a more general relation to class as opposed to focusing solely on a negative or ambivalent relation to class.

Association with Territory

Subcultures inhabit places in particular ways and can be identified and understood through their association with territory rather than property ownership. In other words, subcultures territorialize their places rather than own them and, in this way, their modes of belonging and their claims on place find expression. Subcultures create their own geography, or a set of sites or places through which members gain cohesion and identity. These sites or places can be permanent or temporary, meaning some may last longer than others. Migration is a foundational event in the development of a subcultural identity. The following themes emerged from ethnographic field notes and interview accounts

concerning an association with territory: (1) Once on the trail, long-distance hikers adopt a trail persona, (2) The trail changes people, (3) There are multiple ways to hike a long-distance trail, and (4), There are sites and places along the trail that allow a hiker community to flourish.

A Trail Persona

One theme that emerged concerning an association with territory is that once on the trail hikers take on a new identity, a trail identity, or according to Sunshine, a twenty-one year-old section hiker from Connecticut, “a trail persona.” When I asked Kodak about her experiences in local communities away from the trail, she smiled and said she enjoyed the looks she received at Newfound Gap in the Smokies. This particular area, near Gatlinburg, Tennessee, is heavily traveled by tourists year-round. For the first time, Kodak said she realized that she no longer belonged “to this group” which was a liberating experience for her. She noted “It was great to be able to draw the line finally. I stink and I live in the woods and you guys have RVs.”

For many long-distance hikers like Kodak, travelling through local communities, as the trail does at times, or leaving the trail completely to resupply in towns or to return home, reinforces a subcultural identity. While at Trail Days in Damascus, Virginia, I spoke with Taz about her experiences in local communities. Specifically, I asked if she ever looked forward to leaving towns to return to the trail. After a short pause Taz replied, “You get an itch. You just get a feeling that you need to get back out on the trail really soon.” I further inquired as to whether or not staying longer in towns, like for the Trail Days Festival, made it harder to go back to the trail. Taz thoughtfully replied

It probably is that way. I've been in town for a week now but I'm leaving tomorrow. I've already gotten my stuff ready and everything is organized and planned. But I'm pretty sure. Sometimes it's just a day, sometimes it's two days, but you just get the feeling that you've got to get on the move again. I can't explain it and I don't know where it comes from either. I just think the trail becomes you.

For some hikers, their trail identity or persona becomes a part of who they are not only when they are hiking but remains with them when they are no longer hiking the trail. Long-distance hikers know one another by trail names, and this practice allows hikers to adopt a new identity if desired and provide a link between fellow hikers and the trail experience even after the hike is over. During my interview with Drifter, a forty-four year-old return thru-hiker from Connecticut, I asked him whether or not trail names add, or possibly take away from, the trail experience. Drifter quickly replied, offering an example of how trail names help reinforce the trail experience:

I've got a lot of friends from years ago who I am still friends with and when we get together real names don't come into play. I mean my buddy Otter, who is my brother until the day one of us dies, he will always be Otter. It doesn't matter what his real name is. I think when you have that, I don't even know what to call it, it's when you're, when we are referring to each other as Otter and Drifter at home we're still sort of in our heads here. It's a way to keep the dream alive so to speak. It's such a big experience to so many people that we don't want to let it go completely and I think that's just a way for us to do it very subtly so we don't bother a lot of people with it (laughs). But it's kind of cool. I have a lot of people in my life who only call me Drifter and there's a lot of people in my life who I only refer to by their trail names. Whenever we get together it's, regardless of what part of the country or what we're doing, it's always a trail related feeling and we always talk about the trail. We always go back to the old experiences on the trail. So that's, I think that's one thing the trail names allow us. We can keep living that little, that part of our lives.

Drifter's comment speaks to the essence of place identity, or a hiker's conception of self, which results from patterns of behaviors and feelings related to their experiences in this leisure setting. Even the use of trail names quickly takes him back to the trail,

reinforcing a subcultural identity. The dialogue below between married couple Kutsa and Montreal is another illustration of the extent to which a trail name can become an essential part of one's identity:

Kutsa: This is my identity because in Israel I am Shelly and this is totally my other life. My whole family is there, my friends, but that is my past. And since I started hiking and I became Kutsa, everybody on the trail, his family, friends know that I'm only Kutsa. This is my adventure name. This is my freedom name. There are no ties to this name. There is no bad past. It's only good. It's achieving. It's fun and it's the trail. So it really, like if he suddenly, he always calls me Kutsa, but if suddenly on the phone my mom calls and he says, Shelly, I'm like oh, don't say that.

Montreal: Yeah, I call her Kutsa. My family knows her as Kutsa.

Kutsa: Yeah, they know me just by Kutsa because it really became me.

Kutsa first heard of the Appalachian Trail in 1999 when she read an article about the first Israeli woman who thru-hiked the trail. She thought that sounded "really cool" and made the decision two months later to try it herself. She hiked approximately twelve hundred miles in 2000, four hundred miles in 2001, and thru-hiked the trail in 2002 when she met Montreal. Kutsa admitted to me during the course of her interview that when off the trail she falls into a deep depression. Kutsa feels that she finally found her passion on the Appalachian Trail and is still searching for something to do when outside the trail. Kutsa added that she did not have much outside of the trail because the Appalachian Trail was her life.

The Trail Changes People

A second theme that emerged concerning an association with territory is that the trail changes people. In other words, hiking the trail is a transformative experience for

many long-distance hikers. During his interview, Drifter said quite pointedly, “Being on the trail changes people.” When I asked him to elaborate on how the trail changes people, Drifter explained:

There is just something that I think is really cool out here and I didn’t know it would happen and it happened in 1994. It’s like this change you go through, like a metamorphosis where at some point in the hike you’re more comfortable in the woods than you are in the towns. You’d much rather do the hit-and-run get what you need in the town and get back out onto the A.T. with your friends as fast as you can. I think it happens at a different point in the hike for everybody. It hasn’t totally happened for me yet this year, but I know plenty of people who are already much more comfortable out here.

In offering this observation, Drifter echoes what Taz was referring to when she said “the trail becomes you.” It is not only the activity of long-distance hiking that is transformative, but the entire trail experience that is transformative for the majority of hikers interviewed. It appears as if the development of a subcultural identity, or place identity, occurs gradually with the attachment to place becoming stronger the more time one spends on the trail. Since Drifter thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail in 1994, I asked him to speak a little about his experience returning home, which he referred to as “re-entry.” He said that for hikers who have been on the trail for an extended period of time, “the transition is often full of intense emotion.” While some hikers, like Gus, get nervous at the thought of going home, others have difficulty adjusting to life after the Appalachian Trail as noted by Kutsa and her deep depression. However, Drifter acknowledged that others do not have trouble adjusting at all despite the initial shock.

Toward the end of my interview with Drifter, I asked if he could recall his highest point on the Appalachian Trail since he first began hiking. It did not take him long to say his highest point was in 1994 when he reached Mt. Katahdin, the northern terminus at

Baxter State Park in Maine. When I further inquired as to what he learned or took away from the experience, Drifter replied:

Well, I learned, probably just like anybody who would complete an experience like this, that we are able to handle a lot more than we think we can. It definitely served to (laughs) kind of strengthen my faith in people. I was pretty cynical. I was a lot different of a person then than I am now. People are basically good and I look at people a lot differently now than I did eleven years ago and that is just one of probably a lot of things that I've hung onto over these years and will probably hang onto for the rest of my life...Because like I said, I was a pretty tough case coming out here in 1994. I was very cynical and wasn't happy and this whole experience calmed me down and made me realize that it ain't so bad after all. It's all how you make it. And I carry that with me on a daily basis just like I do so many other experiences on the trail. You never, if you do a hike like this, you never, I don't think you ever lose it. If it was really a meaningful experience to you, I don't think you ever lose it. You have, to this day I still have flashbacks at home of places I've been, the things that I have done, and just for no reason. You'll be in the middle of doing something at home and bam, you're on a mountain top in Maine or wherever, just these wonderful images and moments come back to you. That's like one of the greatest things and I don't think I'll ever lose that and I don't think anybody who does this will ever lose that. It's a benefit that you didn't know you were going to get and it's a great part of the trip.

Drifter carries his trail experiences with him on a daily basis and he admits these experiences have changed him and become a part of who he is today. This new identity, as well as his experiences on the trail, is part of what compels Drifter to return to the Appalachian Trail time and time again, as it does for other hikers like Kutsa.

During my interview with Phoenix Rising, I commented that it sounded like the trail experience thus far had been an important part of her life with respect to change.

She commented:

Part of me wishes I'd done this in my twenties or even in my teens because I wonder where I would be today. I know people who have done it younger and now are living a much different lifestyle than the average American lives and part of me is jealous of that because I think if I had started earlier where would I be today? How much happier would I have

been for the last ten years than just kind of subsiding as an average American? But I think I definitely see big changes. I'm trying to avoid going back to the real world because I've had so much fun out here that I just don't want to do it, you know. I see big changes, though, for me in the future.

As indicated above, the physical act and extended period of time required of long-distance hiking often leaves hikers feeling different, which often leads to a change in lifestyle once hikers return home.

“Hike Your Own Hike”

A third theme that emerged related to an association with territory involves various ways for hiking a long-distance trail. While “hike your own hike” is a common mantra among long-distance hikers, meaning hikers are free to hike the trail in a manner that satisfies them most, a closer examination reveals this is not entirely accurate.

Montreal and Kutsa both enjoyed the people on the trail the most; however, they view the long-distance hiking community through a critical lens. When I asked them what they liked least about the trail, the following dialogue took place between them:

Montreal: Drifter yesterday I think he said at Partnership Shelter it is funny because you have little cliques like gangs and a lot of people think that because they are here everything from the modern society is outside which is not true. We have the same competition on the trail, the same social classes and type people who look at each other a bit, you know. Some people have less education.

Kutsa: I think it's just on a different scale. Instead of “we're lawyers,” when we're here it's on a different, either it's the clothes, the pace you're hiking, if you're with a cool group. If you're fast you want to keep up with the young fast group. If you're very slow or if you're overweight, “Maybe she won't make it.” If you're slacking, if you're whatever, if you're not going straight and you're going to flip-flop, that's a different kind. Purists, blue-blazers, yellow-blazers. All that I think kind of puts it, it's a different language, but it's the same exact judgment almost I think.

As noted by Kutsa, long-distance hikers may slackpack (i.e., hike without a pack) though this approach to hiking is not typically adopted or accepted by traditional thru-hikers. Slackpacking most often occurs when hikers want to make big miles without the weight of their packs to slow them down. When slackpacking, hikers often take a small day pack or fanny pack with a little food and water and leave their big pack behind with someone who drops them off and picks them up at the end of the day. Flip-floppers, on the other hand, are hikers who start at one terminus and hike to a certain point, get off the trail and jump to the other terminus and start hiking back to the place where they left the trail to fully complete their hike on the Appalachian Trail; however, whether or not one completes the entire trail is irrelevant. If a hiker jumps around and switches direction, they are considered a flip-flopper.

Purists, also known as white-blazers, are hikers on the trail who believe the only way to hike the Appalachian Trail is to hike every single white blaze, the official mark of the Appalachian Trail. Blue blazes typically indicate water sources; however, there are times when a hiker will come across a blue blaze signifying a scenic or less strenuous route back to the Appalachian Trail. If this is the case, the scenic route is often noted in hiker handbooks. A blue-blazer then refers to a long-distance hiker who substitutes a blue-blazed section of the trail between any two points. Yellow-blazers are individuals who hike on the roads near the trail, but meeting a yellow-blazer is a rare occasion unless you are also traveling the highways.

As married thru-hikers Montreal and Kutsa noted, the hiking community is very special although it is not perfect. Along with Montreal and Kutsa, Taz is another long-

distance hiker who also enjoys the people on the trail; however, she acknowledges that “not all of them are great” and further describes some of them as “bad eggs.” I was curious as to how she determined who the “bad eggs” were. So I asked Taz if she recognized a bad egg when she saw one or if it was through interaction to which she replied:

It’s interaction. They’re very volatile. I mean they’re mean, just downright mean. There are some that know how to do everything on the trail and they’re telling you how to do it right. And then they’re others that just make fools of themselves. They kind of ruin the hiker reputation in towns. I think you know what I’m talking about. And then there are others that are mean to day hikers. It’s like they’re purists. Purists. That’s another big thing. You’re either a purist, a blue-blazer, a yellow-blazer, section hiker, whatever like that. And some of the purists, not all I’ll guarantee you that, but some of them are very, I mean once they learn that you are not following every single white blaze, it’s like you’re garbage. So they treat you that way.

Because Taz was a thru-hiker, I asked her whether or not she considered herself a purist and made an attempt to hike past every white blaze, being mindful not to include her with the “bad egg” purists. She thought a minute and replied

Not all of them. When I first found that whole idea, that purists are people I didn’t want to be involved with, the next day I backtracked a mile and took the Kinsey Creek Trail and I did the blue blaze so I wouldn’t be a purist. It was great. It was like the greatest day I had in a couple of weeks. It was great! But it’s not, it’s also that other people are being picked on.

Whether or not anyone else knew she backtracked, Taz did not want to be associated with those who considered themselves purists.

While Taz, nor Montreal or Kutsa, mentioned the pink-blazer classification, I first heard the term “pink-blazers” from Boone, a twenty-two year-old thru-hiker from Iowa, when we ran into one another after stopping for a water break. Boone brought up T.V.

Ted and Coffee (T.V. Ted's dog) and said that he was pink-blazing. Boone continued to tell us that T.V. Ted skipped one hundred miles of the Appalachian Trail and got a ride covering that stretch of miles and got back on at Front Royal, Virginia which happened to be where I first met T.V. Ted. This would mean that T.V. Ted essentially skipped Shenandoah National Park in northern Virginia or the one hundred miles of trail between Waynesboro and Front Royal. I just assumed that he was calling him a sissy for taking rides and not hiking the whole trail. I later asked HeartFire what pink-blazing was and she said it meant he was chasing girls. In other words, she thought he was skipping around and taking rides from women so he could meet them. This made sense to me as I recalled Sweet Sixteen telling me about her trail name. During my interview with Sweet Sixteen, I asked what her trail name said about her to which she replied:

Being older as I am, I'm kind of unique. Other hikers have read my registry journal, many young people. Then when you meet me they are, well, at first I met some young people, some young guys who said "Oh, you're Sweet Sixteen? We were rushing to catch up with you." And that was embarrassing because I had never thought of that possibility. It was just supposed to be humorous, but then, they were very good about it and word got passed along I think.

The young men who were chasing Sweet Sixteen mistakenly thought they were chasing a young sixteen year-old female hiker, and as such would be considered pink-blazers.

Bramble, during his interview, admitted that some guys do come to the Appalachian Trail hoping to meet someone but that once they realize "the girl" is not interested then the relationship becomes more like that of a brother and sister. Bramble was also quick to say "Not everybody comes out here to hook up. There's a community of people that float over that."

A Hiker Community Flourishes

A fourth theme that emerged concerning an association with territory is the presence of sites and places frequented by hikers that allow a hiker community to flourish. The Appalachian Trail itself is a place that brings long-distance hikers together. When I asked why they decided to hike the Appalachian Trail, the majority of hikers interviewed echoed Clay who specifically chose the Appalachian Trail because “this one is very much a social trail.” While Gypsy Lulu, a twenty-three year-old thru-hiker from Michigan, acknowledged “there are many gorgeous trails all over the world,” she was drawn to the Appalachian Trail, as was Turbo, because of “all the different people that you meet and all the people that live on the trail who love to help out, the camaraderie and stuff.” While Boone chose to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail because “It’s kind of the really classic trail,” he went on to say “It’s also the easiest or the safest in another sense [because] there are other people around.”

As may be inferred from Turbo and Boone, long-distance hikers are not the only people who associate themselves with long-distance hiking. “Trail angels”¹⁰ are present to offer “trail magic” to long-distance hikers in the form of food and drink. Trail magic can range from a cold six-pack of soda or beer floating in a stream to an army green lockbox full of miniature chocolates in the middle of the trail to elaborate spreads of food near road crossings.¹¹ Swinging Jane noted that trail magic is often given by trail angels

¹⁰ Trail angels are typically defined as individuals who bestow random acts of kindness on hikers. While trail angels are often anonymous, former hikers, local religious congregations, and hiking clubs also serve as trail angels who return year after year to meet hikers’ nutritional needs and show their support through trail magic.

¹¹ While trail magic is often equated with food and drink, trail magic is also considered anything a hiker needs most to encourage him on his journey. This can include a ride into town, a kind word or smile from a fellow hiker, experiences found in nature, or having a lost piece of equipment or similar item magically appear somewhere down the trail.

who are former thru-hikers themselves who know from experience how long it takes to get from Springer Mountain to Neels Gap, for example, as well as exactly what hikers would be craving at that point in their hike. When asked if she had experienced trail magic, Swinging Jane described a “complete spread” where “there was lunch meat of all kinds, pops of all kinds, chips, cheeses, cookies, cakes, and brownies” as well as another place with “hotdogs and slaw and condiments to put on them and chips.” These elaborate spreads of food could be considered sites where long-distance hikers come together on the trail, although unexpectedly, allowing a hiker community to flourish.

While the Appalachian Trail is a social trail where trail magic brings hikers together unexpectedly, designated campsites, shelters, hostels, and events along or near the trail are the only established social centers available to long-distance hikers. One of the largest gatherings of long-distance hikers transpires every May in Damascus, Virginia for the annual Trail Days Festival. Hobo Joe, a twenty year-old thru-hiker from Massachusetts, explained to me during his interview why Trail Days was the highest point of the hike for him:

It was just this huge sense of community and huge sense of kind of like once you're out here you really belong to this group of people. It's very exclusive in the way that unless you know about it from being on the trail, you wouldn't necessarily know that it even existed. It was one of the most memorable experiences for me, especially community-wise. Just to know that there are so many people out here that will never forget their hike and will always remember and always come back to relive memories and all that.

For many long-distance hikers, Trail Days is similar to a high school class reunion. Not only is there a hiker talent show but there is also a parade during the festival. For the hiker parade, held on the Saturday of the festival, long-distance hikers

come together and make a banner for their hiking class (e.g., Class of 2004) which they carry in front of them as they hike through the town of Damascus during the parade.

While the banners are nice, the highlight of the parade is the water fight between long-distance hikers and local townspeople. Lady Mustard Seed, a twenty-six year thru-hiker from Florida, described the event during my interview with her while laughing and smiling the entire time:

Well, the balloon fight (laughs)...I don't even know what to say (smiles). It was the rowdiest thing I've ever been in the middle of...it was crazy! You're in the middle of just this mob of hikers and everyone has water balloons and water guns and I only had my Nalgene [a brand of plastic bottle]. It was pouring down rain. It was raining so hard that the poor little high school band could not march. They got cancelled. And we were just walking down the street. The locals, in the beginning, there's houses on either side where the people that live there in the community are just watching the hikers go by. And they were attacked by the hikers, and throwing balloons at the hikers, and the hikers were throwing balloons at them. And if people saw it...there were guys with huge water guns and they saw locals standing in their yard and they just ran up and fought with them. I just laughed the whole way. It was such a retreat to childhood. Yes! I just laughed and laughed and laughed. It was so much fun!!

As illustrated by Hobo Joe and Lady Mustard Seed, events like Trail Days (and there are other festivals throughout the summer along the length of Appalachian Trail), create cohesion and solidarity for members of this leisure subculture.

Summary: Association with Territory

Hikers' association with territory, namely, that of the Appalachian Trail, underscores the existence of a long-distance hiking subculture. As demonstrated by the foregoing evidence, long-distance hikers can be identified and understood through their association with territory rather than property ownership. Long-distance hikers are not

ted to property, even though they are tied for a time to a particular geographical setting (i.e., hiking trail). Once on the trail, long-distance hikers develop a trail persona. A majority of hikers interviewed suggest that the strength of this identity changes over time, becoming stronger the more time hikers spend on the trail. Although approaches to hiking long-distance are diverse, there are sites and places on or near the trail which encourage hikers to come together. As expected, migration is a foundational event in the development of a subcultural identity. Whereas migration and immigration typically referred to groups moving into cities and forming diverse social worlds (e.g., Chicago gangs), migration for long-distance hikers involves moving back and forth into society as they leave the trail to re-supply in local communities or when they leave the trail to return home. Thus, this characteristic has been broadened to include social groups that form around natural resource-based recreational settings.

Non-Domestic Forms of Belonging

Subcultures can be identified or understood by their movement away from home into non-domestic forms of belonging. In other words, long-distance hikers adjust to new forms of belonging away from home and family. The following themes emerged as long-distance hikers come together outside the family sphere: (1) The hiking community is like family, (2) Relationships are personal and immediate, (3) Trail names signify belonging, and (4) The hiking community is in a constant state of flux.

The Hiking Community is Family

One theme that emerged concerning new forms of belonging is that long-distance hikers frequently referred to the hiking community as family. Gus offered someone else's explanation for understanding relationships among long-distance hikers. He said "Well, one guy explained it as we're a moving family. That's what it is. You're just a moving family. Everybody gets up in the morning and moves. I don't know what it is but you all feel related." Little Cubit, a twenty-six year-old hiker from South Carolina, was attempting her first thru-hike with her boyfriend. When I asked her about her interaction with other hikers, she noted "It's kind of interesting how the community forms out there. These makeshift families kind of change from day to day but you keep up with each other through the journals." She continued to say that because they were slower hikers, a lot of the fast, younger ones had passed them and they found themselves hiking with an older group of hikers, mostly men. Little Cubit said it seemed to her as if the men were missing their daughters because they often gave her fatherly advice when sitting around the shelters at night.

Bonzo, a forty-eight year-old thru-hiker, who has thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail on two occasions, now works in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. Harper's Ferry is often referred to as the psychological half-way point on the Appalachian Trail, although the true half-way point in terms of mileage is near Pine Grove Furnace State Park in Pennsylvania. As a form of trail magic, Bonzo frequently invites hikers into his home on a regular basis during hiking season. When I inquired as to why Bonzo invites hikers into his home, he offered the following explanation:

The hiking community is kind of like family to me. I'm close to it. I like the people that are out there and normally the people that make it here, whether they are hiking south or north, are serious about it. A lot of the riff raff is gone. And it's just like family. I wouldn't go five miles anywhere around here and meet a total stranger and invite them back here. I just wouldn't. I wouldn't do it. But hikers? You smell like butt, you're coming to my place (laughs).

As we hiked into Harper's Ferry, we were approached by Bonzo immediately.

Without hesitation, my hiking partner and I accepted his invitation and spent a weekend with Bonzo and his girlfriend. While his girlfriend thought he looked like Jesus, our initial impression was that he favored Osama Bin Laden due to the salt-and-pepper goatee and the faded bandana he wore around his head. Gunna, my hiking partner, frequently joked with Bonzo's girlfriend about the ransom they would receive by turning him in to the authorities. We spent the weekend sharing tales from the trail and watching a trail documentary made by Lion King, a former thru-hiker who video-taped his thru-hike. After a relaxing weekend, Bonzo took us back to the trail and we headed north. Before leaving, his only request was that we sign the inside of his van which he asks of every hiker welcomed into his home. The van, an old Ford turned into a makeshift RV fully equipped with a desk and twin bed, was once owned by Miss Janet who runs a hiker hostel in Erwin, Tennessee.

While most long-distance hikers interviewed referred to the hiking community as family, others recalled specific friendships that developed along the course of the trail. Señor Nobs, a thirty-four year-old return thru-hiker from Minnesota, said his most memorable experience "has to do with the people that I became friends with and enjoyed the most on the trail. There's not a single story. It has to do with people. It's always about the people. When I take out my pictures and review my trail experience from last

time it's a picture of the people that I remember." For many of the long-distance hikers interviewed, the social aspect is half of their trail experience.

Relationships are Personal and Immediate

A second theme that emerged concerning adjustments or new forms of belonging outside of the domestic sphere is that relationships among long-distance hikers are characterized as personal and immediate. While we were sitting in the Baja Café in Damascus, Virginia, North Florida Swamp Donkey, a twenty-eight year-old thru-hiker from Florida, talked about the instant connection he made with other long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail. When I specifically asked him about his interaction with other hikers, he responded "I'm a social person at home, but not nearly as much as I have been out here. It just gives you...you bond so quickly with other hikers...There's an immediate connection and it's just really different and I love that." Later during the interview I asked Swamp Donkey what, if anything, he had learned about himself since he began his hike on the Appalachian Trail to which he thoughtfully replied "Man...I've learned that I can be more friendly and outgoing than I thought I could be. That I can start conversations with strangers and it's okay." When I asked Sunshine what her highest point had been on the trail thus far, she recounted the following experience:

When we got here to Pine Furnace. Just everyone that we've been reading, your entries and Gus' entries and HeartFire's entries and T-Mac and Turbo, we all just came together in this one place and had an awesome afternoon with ice cream and everyone just hanging out and having a good time. Just the fact that everyone we were kind of reading about just came together.

All of us “just came together,” as Sunshine stated, at Pine Grove Furnace State Park in Pennsylvania, near the half-way point on the Appalachian Trail and home of the Half Gallon Challenge. The challenge involves purchasing a half gallon of ice cream and eating it as fast as you can. Even though not everyone participated in the Half Gallon Challenge, being there together and watching others attempt the challenge was a bonding experience. Unlike in modern society where relationships are a matter of contract or obligation, relationships that form among long-distance hikers are best characterized communitas relationships because they are personal and immediate as illustrated by Swamp Donkey and Sunshine.

During my interview with Graceful, I asked her specifically about the role other hikers played in terms of her experience on the trail. She thought for a minute and then told me about a group of sisters she formed a strong attachment to and the impact they had on her even though their relationship only lasted a short time:

Yesterday, I had gotten to be close to these sisters – there were four sisters out here, the Barefoot Bunch – and a day out here is equivalent to a week in the “real” world it feels like to me. I was hiking with them specifically for about a week and when they left it was like this sudden feeling of loss. My brother only knew them for two days and he was feeling the same thing.

Whereas Graceful was attempting a thru-hike, the Barefoot Bunch only had the time to hike for a few months, long enough to make it from Georgia to Damascus, Virginia, and it was time for them to leave the trail.

Slick, a twenty-three year-old thru-hiker from Florida, also mentioned how quickly relationships form among long-distance hikers, as well as how personal and emotional they become, as she recalled a situation with an injured hiker. When he had to leave the trail due to serious medical issues, a handful of hikers left the trail with him to

wait by his side. Slick was amazed at this level of commitment from other hikers when they had not really known each another for very long. Golgi, a twenty-six year-old thru-hiker from North Carolina, captures this feeling of closeness when he suggests “Even though everybody is pretty much out here by themselves, we all kind of take care of each other. You have to be willing to take part in that.” Like the group of hikers who left the trail to wait with their friend, most long-distance hikers share the sentiment that they are watching out for one another, whether it be in the form of entertainment, food, equipment advice, or emotional support.

Trail Names Signify Belonging

A third theme that emerged is that trail names signify one’s belonging to the hiking community. One of the first things long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail ask one another in first encounter situations is “What is your trail name?” According to Lady Mustard Seed:

You know when you meet a thru-hiker as opposed to a weekender because they immediately ask for your name because you’re out there together. You need to know each other because you’re in community with each other. A weekender doesn’t care. They might ask you how the trail is, but a thru-hiker’s going to immediately ask you your name.

Lady Mustard Seed implies that weekend or overnight hikers are not aware of trail names because they are not part of this leisure subculture. As mentioned previously, having a trail name is one of the first indicators that one is part of a long-distance hiking subculture. The overwhelming majority of long-distance hikers have trail names, which come about in one of two ways. Hikers may choose a name for themselves that is symbolic of their personal reasons for making the journey, or they may have one

bestowed upon them reflecting how they are seen or experienced by fellow long-distance hikers.

When I asked Branch what, in her opinion, was the significance of trail names, she hesitated and thoughtfully replied, “It’s definitely the subculture to have a trail name. To have a trail name means you sort of are in the subculture. You automatically feel like you’re a part of the community.” Kodak hiked for three weeks and was the only person in her group without a trail name which she admitted was a little upsetting. While she was with the hiking community, Kodak did not feel she completely belonged until she was given a trail name. Turbo, on the other hand, typically introduces himself as Justin because he thinks trail names can be kind of silly. The first question he is then asked by fellow long-distance hikers is “Do you have a trail name?” He laughed and said after that “Then it’s okay Turbo, come over here Turbo.” Turbo’s trail name was given to him by two thru-hikers he met his first night on the Appalachian Trail in Georgia at Gooch Gap Shelter. Turbo and the two thru-hikers did not see one another for several days until Turbo appeared ahead of them. The two hikers he left behind had been calling him Turbo because they thought he was a quick hiker. Turbo said he really did not do more miles than other hikers but “it’s my demeanor, the way I go about, especially at camp.” A trail name was bestowed upon Turbo by fellow hikers even though he was not aware of it at the time.

Happy Feet, a thirty year-old thru-hiker from Texas, also spoke about the uniqueness of trail names during his interview. When asked if he thought trail names added to the trail experience or possibly took away from it, Happy Feet replied, “You don’t walk up to somebody on the street and say ‘Hey, Big Head’ or whatever so it’s a

unique characteristic to the A.T. in itself. If you run into someone who says, ‘Hey, I’m Slow Going’ or ‘Baldy’ or something like that you know that they’re a hiker.” Like Happy Feet, Phoenix Rising also suggested that trail names provide hikers with a sense of community and family. According to her, trail names are what long-distance hikers share in common and what she believes sets them apart from everyone else, both on and off the trail. During my interview with Lady Mustard Seed, she described the significance of trail names to hikers and to the long-distance hiking community:

I guess it does speak to the essence of what it is people are after. I guess that’s really what it is. It’s interesting, people that would pick one for themselves as opposed to having other people pick for you. That probably does speak to what people are out here for. And I’m kind of self-directed on this. Really, it is the calling of the spirit to be outside. I wanted to pick my own and something that reflected that. And a lot of people find such unity in the community of it. It feels great to have people put a name on them. And I do think that a trail name, nicknames are very familiar, and they’re very friendly. Someone has to really like you to call you by your nickname. You have to be really good friends to get a nickname. So, I think it probably has a lot to do with breaking down the barriers and becoming a community and a family and renaming. Yeah, transition, transformation of the self.

While it may be assumed that all long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail take part in the giving and receiving of trail names, the opportunity a hiker has to interact with others in order to be given a name or find significance in the giving and receiving of trail names is dependent on where he or she starts hiking. The majority of long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail are northbounders, or NOBOs, meaning they begin in Georgia at Springer Mountain, the southern terminus, and hike north. Southbounders, or SOBOs, begin their hike in Maine at Mt. Katahdin, the northern terminus, and hike south.

During my conversation with Drifter, a twenty-four year-old section hiker from North Carolina, he spoke about his previous hiking experiences on the Appalachian Trail.

He started a southbound hike from Maine in 2004 and found himself alone much of the time as the majority of hikers on the Appalachian Trail hike north. Drifter met northbounders on occasion but noted it was only for a day since they were hiking in opposite directions. Because he was on his own much of the time, there was no one to give him a trail name so Drifter decided upon a name for himself that he thought was fitting to his personality. When Kodak first began her thru-hike, she told me about a couple of southbounders she met in Georgia who were finishing their thru-hikes. Naturally, they asked the southbounders what their trail names were. Kodak said “They hadn’t taken trail names because they thought that it was ridiculous, that you didn’t represent yourself if you had this façade or other identity.” A possible reason trail names were not adopted by the two southbounders may be because they were not hiking with others, and thus, did not experience the camaraderie that often develops among long-distance hikers traveling north.

A Fluctuating Community

A fourth theme that emerged regarding non-domestic forms of belonging is that the long-distance hiking community is in a constant state of flux. Although personal and immediate, relationships that form among long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail are “loose associations” to use Skywalker’s term. Like most hikers, Turbo enjoys hanging out and spending time with people; however, one thing Turbo admitted that was tough for him was knowing that “even if you spend three or four days with somebody, you know, one of you is planning on staying in a certain hostel or meeting somebody and then you may never see that person again.” Although personal, many end as quickly and

abruptly as they started. However, it is not unusual for relationships among fellow hikers to become more permanent than temporary. For example, at the time of the interview, Geronimo told me he had been hiking with a guy he met on his first day and how amazed he was that they were still together after eight hundred and fifty miles given that they were once complete strangers. While Geronimo and his hiking partner had been together for an extended period of time, this is not the norm for most long-distance hikers as illustrated by Turbo.

The hiking community, while stable and solid at times, is constantly evolving or changing as hikers drop out or move ahead more quickly than others. During her interview at Trail Days, Gypsy Lulu commented that “there will come a point in the trail where it will change, where the hiking community isn’t going to be quite as large as it is right now. Already it’s starting to change. Already I’m looking at some pretty high percentages that are not on the trail anymore of the people that I started with.” She went on to say that while she would miss the larger community, her hike was not dependent on that and she would keep hiking towards Maine. For others, especially those who enjoy the social aspect like Turbo, these changes can be “kind of strange and kind of hard to get used to,” but overall he finds it “an interesting experience.”

The amount of face-to-face interaction and extent of involvement one has with other long-distance hikers is impacted by the point on the trail at which he or she starts. During my interview with HeartFire, I asked her what it was that she liked most about the Appalachian Trail to which she replied:

It’s funny because last year I came out to do a thru-hike and to do the trail, not so much to meet and party with people and stuff. And, you know, when you start with the whole crowd at Springer during the peak of the

season, you're with all these people. And they really do become special to you like family members. This year when I started out, I'm way ahead of the pack, and it's very much alone and I miss all that camaraderie of the people. I miss that special bond that I made with people.

As illustrated by HeartFire, most people who hike the Appalachian Trail start in Georgia at Springer Mountain, the southern terminus, and head north. The "peak season" for northbound hikers typically begins late March or early April. HeartFire's 2006 thru-hike became a section hike when she left the trail in Front Royal, Virginia after hiking through Shenandoah National Park. When she started in 2007, she began in northern Virginia where her previous hike ended, well ahead of those who started at Springer Mountain in Georgia. The few hikers who had made it to northern Virginia by this time started from Georgia in late February or early March, well in advance of those who started during the "peak season."

Not only does the point of entry impact interaction with other hikers as HeartFire noted, but so does the direction of one's hike. As mentioned above, most people who attempt to hike the Appalachian Trail begin in Georgia and hike north. However, there are some long-distance hikers, like the younger Drifter, who start in Maine at Mt. Katahdin, the northern terminus, for a southbound thru-hike. During his interview I asked Drifter about the role other hikers played in terms of his experience on the trail to which he replied:

This year has been great with other hikers. I was in a group for a long time just until Pearisburg and then I decided to run off ahead and try to finish it. But, I would say other hikers, they're there to support. They give motivation, they entertain. It's definitely something you don't want to miss on the trail. It's very good. It wouldn't be the same without it.

Drifter's experience illustrates the extent to which membership within the hiking community can be both persistent and fluid. While being part of a larger community creates solidarity and feelings of camaraderie among long-distance hikers, the community is in a constant state of flux as the community is also built around the movement of hikers through and around the trail. The previous year Drifter hiked southbound and found the trail to be "a lot less crowded." He mentioned that he was behind a group of southbound hikers by a couple of weeks but was never able to catch them. Most of the time Drifter found himself hiking alone; however, he felt that was good for him at the time because he and his wife had recently divorced and it gave him a chance to reflect on the past year. He said "This time I'm getting the aspect of thru-hikers every day, people I haven't met before, so I get to see both sides and it's been really good." Drifter hiked almost halfway beginning at the northern terminus the previous year but decided to hike with the crowd from Springer to the halfway point to complete his hike on the Appalachian Trail.

Data collection procedures allowed me to experience both the social aspect and solitude of long-distance hiking. When I started hiking northbound from North Carolina in 2005, I was hiking with most of the long-distance hikers who started during the "peak season" at Springer Mountain. As I conducted interviews, almost every single hiker mentioned the people, the camaraderie, and the community that forms among long-distance hikers on the trail. As I reviewed my field notes I recalled feeling isolated and envious that I was not part of something that seemed so special to long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail. However, after spending three days in Damascus, Virginia in 2005 with hundreds of hikers who were in town for the annual Trail Days Festival, I gradually began to feel as if I was becoming part of the community hikers spoke of so

fondly. As HeartFire stated, we were ahead of the pack in 2007 and that feeling of community and camaraderie was not readily apparent among hikers this far north because the number of hikers was significantly smaller. However, we still considered ourselves long-distance hikers and members of the larger hiking community.

Summary: Non-Domestic Forms of Belonging

The existence of a long-distance hiking subculture is underscored by the non-domestic (extra-familial and quasi-familial) forms of belonging by which it is characterized. As evidenced by the narratives and practices discussed above, long-distance hikers can be identified and understood as hikers adjust to new forms of belonging outside of the domestic sphere. The Appalachian Trail provides hikers with a situational experience that encourages strangers to come together in a unique way, where trail names signify one's belonging. While relationships among long-distance hikers are characterized as *communitas* relationships (i.e., personal and immediate), this traveling family is in a constant state of flux. Membership within a long-distance hiking subculture can be characterized as both fluid and persistent. Thus, the notion that subcultures can be understood through non-domestic forms of belonging is supported. On the trail, long-distance hikers come together outside of the domestic sphere, away from home and family, and form meaningful social bonds with one another.

Ties to Excess and Exaggeration

Subcultures can be identified and understood through a range of excessive attributes (e.g., dress, behavior, language, patterns of consumption, style) compared to

“normal” populations. However, the opposite can also be true in that subcultures can also be understood through restraint or moderation compared to “normal” populations, or any combination of the above. Long-distance hikers engage in a variety of behaviors and social practices that many would consider abnormal in contemporary society. Four themes emerged and will be discussed in the paragraphs to follow: (1) Long-distance hikers have an uncivilized appearance, (2) Long-distance hikers develop excessive eating habits, (3) Long-distance hikers place unreasonable amounts of trust in strangers, and (4) Long-distance hikers are extremely self-disciplined.

An Uncivilized Appearance

One theme that emerged concerning dress (i.e., modifications of and supplements to the body) is that long-distance hikers are associated with an uncivilized or unkempt appearance. A temporary exchange of poverty over property often marks long-distance hikers with an uncivilized appearance where dirt, often accompanied with an identifiable stench, is a primary indicator of social difference. In other words, the appearance and dress of long-distance hikers is viewed as extreme in comparison to the dress and appearance of “normal” populations. Branch distinguishes between the civilized and uncivilized appearances below when I asked about her experiences in local communities:

Prior to hiking you're used to people perceiving you one way. You're clean, you're sort of dressed well, you didn't wear that shirt yesterday usually, so you're used to that kind of stuff and you almost want to melt into the crowd as a non-hiker. But with a hiker, it's almost like you have a completely different persona. You're a nasty, smelly hiker. And that attracts some people and that definitely detracts other people. So you get people who are super excited to see you just because you are a hiker and you've got other people who would cross to the other side of the street just to stay away from you.

Branch noted her experiences in towns were “a little odd” because she “was ready to be treated like a normal person” rather than “the smelly person you don’t really want to go around in the grocery store.” Like Branch, many long-distance hikers feel out of place in local communities, especially towns or areas where locals, and in some cases tourists, are not aware of the trail’s proximity. However, it appears as if the more time hikers spend on the Appalachian Trail, the less their appearance matters because social norms associated with appearance and hygiene are less important and less stringent in the context of long-distance hiking than they are in “civilized” societies. When I asked Spirit, a fifty-six year-old section hiker from Tennessee, what her average day was like on the trail, she explained that at home she was used to being “prim and proper” and “showering everyday and sometimes twice a day.” She continued to discuss her home beauty regimen and how that compared to life on the Appalachian Trail:

I fix my hair. I don’t wear it in public unless my hair is just perfect. I wear dresses most of the time. This is not how I would want it to be but you learn. You learn to deal with it. I know last time when I went home after I’d hiked a while my kids told me mom you’ve lost all modesty. You do, you lose. It’s not that you lose it but you learn that it wasn’t that important. Life goes on and you can’t fret about the little things. I don’t like being dirty all the time and stinkin’ but you have to, you have to live like that.

Spirit found herself really enjoying nature and the solitude it afforded her even though she was often uncomfortable in her own skin because she was used to being clean and wearing dresses at home. Most long-distance hikers have one or two sets of clothes (i.e., shirts, shorts, socks) and have the opportunity to do laundry and shower every five to seven days if desired. Even when hiking clothes are washed, sweat stains are still noticeable. Once one set is laundered in town, hikers quickly take off the last set to be

cleaned, even if that means standing behind their laundry basket or another hiker using either as a shield as they change in the middle of the laundromat. However, some hikers choose not to do laundry or shower as often, nor do they wear deodorant. This behavior or social practice associated with long-distance hikers is in stark contrast to the importance placed on personal hygiene in modern society as illustrated by the sweet fragrances of shampoo and body wash emitted by two day hikers as they passed me just shy of Partnership Shelter, approximately a quarter of a mile from the parking area at the Mt. Rogers Recreation Area Visitor Center in southern Virginia.

Rituals of Food Consumption

A second theme or excessive behavior associated with long-distance hikers deals with excess food consumption. Specifically, long-distance hikers engage in rituals of food consumption which would be excessive compared to the eating habits of “normal” populations. For long-distance hikers, the majority of excessive food consumption is associated with trail magic. Because long-distance hikers are carrying the bare essentials on their backs, extra food or comfort foods are considered a luxury. When trail magic comes in the form of pre-planned cookouts or “hiker feeds,” some refer to this not as trail magic but “trail catering.”

The most memorable trail magic spread for me occurred in southern Virginia. After hiking five miles to a road crossing, we were met with the greeting of “Hey hikers, orange juice or apple juice?” Afterwards, we heard “Well, would you like some breakfast?” Needless to say it was a unanimous “Yes!” The group that met us was from a local United Methodist Church in Bastian, Virginia, as well as a pastor and his family

from Star City, Arkansas. Once in the van, I asked the pastor from Arkansas why they were doing this for hikers and he replied “It’s what we think Jesus would do or want us to do.” They were all wearing t-shirts with the words A.T.O.M. which stood for Appalachian Trail Outreach Ministry. Just below the words was a diagram of an atom with hikers representing electrons. Once we arrived at the little white country church, we were greeted with smiles and hugs. First they took our picture, asked us to sign a register, and then sat us down at a table for nearly fifteen people. They had local honey which one person ate by the spoonful. Then they brought us apple butter, coffee, milk, orange and apple juice, green beans, potato casserole, and egg casserole with salsa if desired. Next they gave us sausage and biscuits, rolls, another vegetable casserole, spiced apples, homemade cinnamon rolls, and strawberry-rhubarb pie for dessert. We were absolutely stuffed. Once we returned to the trail, we had only hiked a small piece before we met the young pastor and his family from Arkansas. They had more juice and were grilling hotdogs and hamburgers for anyone who missed breakfast or who still wanted to indulge.

In addition to trail magic, there are traditional challenges along the Appalachian Trail that involve an excess of food consumption. Long before reaching Pine Grove Furnace State Park, near the true half-way point on the Appalachian Trail in Pennsylvania, I heard many tales of the “Half Gallon Challenge.” The Half Gallon Challenge is a thru-hiker tradition, and anyone hiking from Maine or Georgia who makes it this far can join the “Half Gallon Club.” As mentioned earlier, the challenge is to purchase a half gallon of ice cream and eat it as quickly as possible. Although as a section hiker I could have participated, I chose not to do so – partly because I did not feel

I had earned it and partly because of the horror that comes afterwards. There were two thru-hikers who attempted the challenge; however, one in particular dearly paid for the indulgence when he did not make it to the bath house in time, something he was reminded of quite often throughout the night not only from his hiking partner but from the sounds coming from around the vicinity of his tent.

During the course of my interview with Kutsa, she said one of the things she misses most upon returning home, other than being free, is “being hungry.” Kutsa, who admitted to struggling with diets and weight all her life, noted that “Most hikers hate that, but me, since I’m always overweight, I’m never hungry in my life, and here it’s like you can eat whatever you want. First of all you’re accepted by the other hikers because everybody accepts that you would eat. You lose weight even though you eat whatever you want so I mean it’s all good, right (laughs)?” In a society where people are consciously bombarded with diet plans, the fact that hikers can binge on occasion, eating whatever they want, and still lose weight is an example of extreme behavior in contrast to the restraints of dieting and moderation of food to maintain a healthy weight.

Trust in Strangers

A third excessive behavior associated with long-distance hikers is that they place an unreasonable amount of trust in total strangers compared to “normal” populations where people tend to be somewhat skeptical and distrusting of others. During the course of my conversation with Gus, he commented that he feels “safer out here [on the trail] than I do back where I live.” When I inquired as to why he felt there was rarely an occasion to distrust a fellow hiker, Gus replied “You know, it’s a strange phenomenon,

but the people out here are just so laid back that you just trust them. You don't fear anybody." HeartFire also expressed feelings of comfort on the trail; however, she also mentioned a concern shared by some female hikers when she noted "I mean women worry about the rape issue, but it's probably closer to town. The thing is not to be near road crossings on the weekends. But in the woods, I feel safe. I feel fine." If long-distance hikers fear anyone, they tend to be wary of people at road crossings. Overall, all of the long-distance hikers I interviewed said the Appalachian Trail was a safe environment and further believed they could completely trust one another.

When I asked Clay, the ordained minister and section hiker from Georgia, about his experiences in local communities and how they differed from experiences on the trail, he noted that "on the trail, hikers aren't worried about their gear being stolen but in town they are." When I asked if he could explain the difference in levels of trust on the trail versus in town, Clay said it was due to "the tight knit community," and then continued:

It's a subculture unlike out in society where one waves to their neighbor through their car window or waves to each other when mowing their lawn. There is definitely, you're sleeping next to a person that you don't know. There's accountability. It's sort of like a primal culture in a sense with modern gear.

Following up, I inquired of Clay as to why he thought we feared at home but not on the trail to which he replied "Well, in regular American society almost all of T.V. is fear-based, especially the news. It's like a daily fear report." He added that when he and his wife, Branch, left the trail they were shocked at what they saw on the news because they were "sort of in a state of innocence again." They could not watch the news without being brought to tears over someone being murdered.

Because he was a police officer back home in Virginia, I was interested in what T-Mac had to say about trusting blindly in other hikers. When I inquired as to why he placed complete trust in fellow hikers, he replied “Back in the cities, I don’t know, you just raise your guard up because back in the city you don’t want to open up. You’ve got to question when people open up or offer you something. You wonder why they are asking.” He continued to explain that people want to trust one another on the trail because “Everybody’s got the same mentality that we’re all in this together. We’ve got a long way to go. We should help each other out and make it a little more enjoyable.” In the spirit of helping one another, Phoenix Rising made a reference to the Good Samaritan Bible story when asked if there were certain characteristics shared by long-distance hikers. She furthered explained:

I don’t see the general public stopping to help the way they do out here on the trail. You hear stories of people, just walking into the shelter tonight one of the guys said, “Yeah she saved my life because she was in the shelter and shared her food with me that night. I was running out and it was in the middle of a snowstorm and it was in the Smokies and if it hadn’t been for her I may not have made it out of the Smokies.” You hear that so often... You don’t see that in the normal world, the normal American society and that to me is an awesome, awesome thing.

Phoenix Rising was referring to the helpfulness of fellow thru-hikers and added “with thru-hikers you’ll see somebody who is much more willing to do something for somebody else.” Compared to “normal” populations where there are often expectations tied to relationships, long-distance hikers interact differently with one another and do not expect anything in return.

In addition to the faith and trust long-distance hikers place in one another, long-distance hikers also trust non-hikers. This is best illustrated through hitchhiking which occurs on a fairly regular basis along the Appalachian Trail. During the course of my

interview with Boone, he admitted to accepting rides from people who say “You can just leave your bag in the car, I’ll meet you at the so and so.” He acknowledged that his behavior suggests he is “an idiot” but noted they seemed like “really nice people.” Turbo said if he was home and offered a ride he would never accept it. I inquired as to why his behavior was different on the Appalachian Trail to which Turbo replied, “It’s a different thing unless you want to walk ten miles to town.” When asked about being more open to offering rides to strangers upon returning home, T-Mac and Turbo acknowledged that it would be different if they lived near the Appalachian Trail and a guy with a backpack needed a ride. The backpack signifies to both that “the guy’s a nice guy.” They laugh and playfully add “He just needs a shower or a hamburger.” Back home, if they see a guy with a backpack nowhere near the Appalachian Trail, ninety-nine times out of one hundred they said they would keep going. My exchange with T-Mac and Turbo illustrates the extent to which context matters when it comes to accepting or offering rides to strangers.

In addition to accepting rides, many long-distance hikers trust non-hikers and accept invitations into people’s homes for a hot shower or a home-cooked meal. Hatchet Jack, a nineteen year-old thru-hiker from North Carolina, described such an experience:

There was this sign that said trail magic, go down to the road, take a right, it will be worth your walk. And we go up there and the people take us into their house. They give us a three course meal. They give us Belgian waffles with syrup and then they give us a barbeque sandwich, potato salad, Jell-O. Then they give us a dessert and they had like four different kinds of dessert to choose from. And then they have all these books and we could just take any books we wanted to read. It was just really nice. It’s just amazing that someone can take a dirty hiker into their nice house and share everything they have.

This is an example of a reciprocal relationship involving trust between hikers and non-hikers. While hikers trust non-hikers, non-hikers also put their trust in hikers by inviting them into their vehicles and homes. Turbo recounted one of his more memorable experiences which took place in Virginia at Bear's Den Rocks:

There was a sign that said thru-hikers go around back. So you go around the back and there was this keypad combination deadbolt and it says use your handbook. The combination is the mileage from someplace to someplace and so you get all excited and punch in the numbers. It worked, it worked! And you go in and there's a free computer set up with internet access to hikers, and a phone with free long-distance. It's like, if you're a hiker we trust you not to take our computer. If you're a hiker we trust you not to tear up our stuff and put graffiti on our beds. It's like if you're a thru-hiker we trust you come on in.

Bear's Den Rocks, a stone lodge built by local stonemasons in 1933, is a trail center open to the general public. Visitors can park their cars and take smaller day hikes on the Appalachian Trail or make group reservations for an extended stay. Bear's Den is located in the middle of the twenty-mile "Roller Coaster" section of the Appalachian Trail and is a popular overnight stop for long-distance hikers wanting a shower, bed, pizza, and pint of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. As Turbo noted, Queen Diva, caretaker of the hostel, caters to and trusts long-distance hikers to take care of themselves and the property.

Self-Disciplined

A fourth theme that emerged related to excessive attributes is that long-distance hikers are extremely self-disciplined. The physical act of long-distance hiking (i.e., backpacking, camping outdoors on a daily basis), and the discomfort and injury that is often present, can be understood as excessive or abnormal behavior. Long-distance

hikers have to be self-disciplined if they are to continue in spite of the pain, the weather, or the terrain. Hustler, out on a second thru-hike, said the “key to hiking” is “to be comfortable being uncomfortable.” Backpacking on a daily basis in rugged terrain is not a comfortable, plush experience. During my interview with Taz, she admitted her most challenging experience was pushing herself to keep hiking despite her injuries. When I asked her to elaborate, Taz replied:

I’ve had a lot of problems. Coming down Blood Mountain I blew out my right knee and that bothered me for a couple of weeks. Then I was diagnosed with giardia in Robinsonville at the clinic there. I also went to the hospital again in Newport I think it was. I had that for about two and a half weeks strong and it’s still lingering. But everybody knows that I’m always sick or injured at some point (laughs). I’ve got tendonitis in my Achilles so it’s just keeping going even though my body seems to be falling apart. I just love being out here. I want to be out here and I’m probably going to be crawling on my hands and knees saying “I’m gonna do it, I’m gonna do it.”

Taz, through her dedication and commitment to continue in spite of injury, is a good illustration of the self-disciplined hiker. Unlike Taz, most people would stop hiking, self-medicate, and heal in the comforts of home rather than remain on the trail; however, like Taz, the majority of long-distance hikers continue hiking on a daily basis despite the fact that they are experiencing serious physical discomfort or injury. The pain and discomfort is accepted by dedicated long-distance hikers as part of the hiking experience.

Not only are hikers self-disciplined with respect to the pain experienced while long-distance hiking, but they also continue hiking when exposed to various types of weather. While HeartFire found it “wonderful to be out here in the elements day in and day out,” others struggled with the exposure at times, including HeartFire herself. During the course of my interview with Firefly, a twenty-four year-old section hiker from

Indiana, she said her most challenging experiences on the trail have been weather-related. During those times when the cold was unbearable, she struggled trying to convince herself to stay on the trail rather than go home. Because Firefly was accompanying her husband, Hazy Sonic, for part of his thru-hike, it would have been easy for her to make the decision to go home. Most “normal” people would have chosen to go home rather than stay and be miserable but she willed herself to remain on the trail.

Graceful spoke about how the weather, as unpredictable as it was, could sway one’s emotions, often making or breaking a day. Specifically, Graceful noted how, at times, a brief shower can invigorate, while on other days the rain is “just added punishment on top of the pain you are already feeling.” When I asked Hatchet Jack about his most challenging experience, he described the following weather-related account:

I had a week of twenties lined up and I did a twenty-three mile day and I woke up and it was pouring down rain. I was like I’ve got to do it. I felt motivated to go do it and so I started hiking. I hiked ten miles and it was pouring down rain the whole entire time. I go in this shelter to eat and get a little bit dry but you’ve got to go right back out there in it. I’m hiking and everyone I know stopped in Pearisburg. The trail goes right through Pearisburg and I had to keep going because I had just stopped in town. It was really seeing everybody else stay in town and it’s pouring down rain and cars are driving by and just seeing civilization and knowing that you could be in a warm room and then it turns to sleet as I started going up in altitude. Then it turned to snow and it just got harder and harder. I was sliding going up the mountain trying to climb and it was extremely rough. It was extra work because when it started snowing I took two steps and it counted as one. When I got to the end of the day it was just exhausting. It was one of the first times that I was hiking as fast as I could and I was still chilled. Usually you can hike and be warmed up immediately but I was hiking as fast as I could and I was still chilled because everything I had was soaking.

Hatchet Jack’s recounting of his difficult experience illustrates the self-discipline displayed by many long-distance hikers. He could have stopped with the rest of the

group in Pearisburg, stayed dry, and let the weather pass. Alternatively, he could have stayed in the first shelter and only hiked ten miles that particular day. Either of these options is what any “normal” person would have done; however, Hatchet Jack was determined to meet his goal of hiking a string of twenty-mile days. The only thing that kept Hatchet Jack moving was perseverance, commitment, and dedication.

During an interview at Partnership Shelter, I asked Slack if there were any characteristics shared by long-distance hikers to which he replied, “You’ve got to be a special kind of wing nut to be out here.” He continued to suggest that it is “not normal” to “climb mountains day after day after day after day after day for months going up and down and up and down through heat and bugs and snakes and bears.” North Florida Swamp Donkey referred to the difficulty of the trail when I asked if there was anything I needed to know that I did not ask in order to understand his experience on the Appalachian Trail. After giving it some thought, Swamp Donkey said “The pain in the ass the trail is makes it to where there are only so many people that will do it. If it was real easy, then everybody would do it and there’d be nothing special about it.” Hiking in the mountains on a daily basis is supposed to be hard, and it requires self-discipline to continue when every bone and muscle is begging that you leave the trail.

Weather-related challenges are not the only challenges faced by long-distance hikers. During an interview at The Place in Damascus, Virginia, Obie recounted the following story which illustrates not only self-discipline but the extent to which unexpected terrain can lead to irrational decision-making:

So I’m standing there. Impassible? Just what do they mean by impassible? Do they mean if you’re out hiking with your kids don’t do it? Or do they mean it’s impassible, nobody’s getting through? What

happened was you needed to cross this creek about five or six times. It got a little bigger each time. But within two miles you cross it the final time and then it's clear sailing. So I'm going to go try it. We'll see what happens...So first I'm walking and then suddenly I hear this roaring. And it winds up, it's this big waterfall but it's on the other side...I go a little further and there's a really rushing little creek or stream. It's not that big but it's really gushing. I got across it, no problem. Then about a hundred feet after that you walk across the bottom of the waterfall...Well, then about a hundred yards after that you've got to cross where the two of these join together. And now it's getting a little bigger...and I cross it a few more times and it's getting worse and getting worse. I get to the final crossing and it's like oh my God. It took me half an hour to find a place where I thought I would be able to cross. At that point, we're talking easily a hundred foot wide because now this little stream is called Big Creek. So at this point, after about half an hour I'm just about ready to say forget it I've got to go all the way back and I think wait a minute, I think I can cross here. I'm thinking, well I thought I was thinking but it shows how much I wasn't. I undo a few of my pack straps and my belt strap so this way in case I get knocked down in the water I'm not going to get dragged. But just the fact that I'm thinking like that means I shouldn't be doing this (laughs) but I didn't think that at the time, though...but I made it and it was great. I had gotten through. My legs were red because it was so cold but now I'm all excited.

While these challenging, risky, unpredictable experiences leave some hikers, like Obie, with a feeling of accomplishment or excitement, others do not particularly enjoy the challenges the trail lays in their paths. One of the things that Spirit likes least about the trail is the "obstacles." While she does not care for boulders, rock climbing, rocky paths, mud when it rains, or getting caught in thunderstorms, she realizes that "you're going to have many obstacles along the way and you've got to go with the flow and deal with what the trail lays before you." She mentioned that the trail is a lot like life with its ups and downs and that you need the downs in order to appreciate the ups. Looking back on these difficult and trying times, Spirit and so many others interviewed consider them lessons, not only in survival, but ones they will take with them once they leave the trail.

Summary: Ties to Excess and Exaggeration

The ample evidence on hikers' excess and exaggeration presented above offers further confirmation of a long-distance hiking subculture. When compared with "normal" populations, long-distance hikers can be identified and understood through a range of excessive attributes. Long-distance hikers often exhibit an uncivilized appearance, through their excessive eating habits, through an unusual amount of trust placed in strangers, and by their self-disciplined behavior. Once on the Appalachian Trail, many long-distance hikers go through an un-civilizing process as they leave society behind for a distinctive social world, namely, life on the trail. This un-civilizing process encompasses not only the way hikers look in terms of dress and appearance, but also involves eating behaviors that cycle between deprivation and what might be best described as short-term restorative gorging given the calories they expend in hiking such long distances over a protracted period of time. Finally, life on the trail is characterized by a degree of trust that is not found outside of this cloistered social world. Such unusual levels of trust are, in part, a product of the sparse resources and vulnerability to the elements that are a regular part of trail life.

Refusal of the Banalities of Ordinary Life

Modern subcultures can be identified and understood through a refusal of the banalities of mass cultural forms and "ordinary life." As such, subcultures may appear non-normative or nonconforming when pitched against the pressures of mass society. The following themes emerged from ethnographic field notes and interview accounts:

- (1) Long-distance hikers selectively resist conventional gender norms and practices, (2)

Long-distance hikers resist structured environments, and (3) Long-distance hikers seek refuge in the wilderness from societal distractions.

Selective Resistance against Conventional Gender Norms and Practices

Gender conventions influence relationships among long-distance hikers on the trail, but do so in a complicated fashion. According to many hikers, the initial weeks of one's hike are often marked by a reaffirmation of traditional gender roles between male and female hikers. When she began her thru-hike, Slick was hiking with a group of male hikers. When I asked Slick about her interaction with fellow hikers, she laughed and said "It's funny how you fall into roles – they were the ones making the fire and would be like, "We'll go hang your bear bag." She said the whole time she hiked with them, she never had to hang her own food bag or collect wood to build a fire. The division of labor among this mixed-sex group was initially divided along gender lines. However, when I asked Slick what her highest point on the trail had been, she replied "This is probably going to answer your next question. My highest and lowest was when I split off from the guys I started with. They were kind of like my security blanket." While the men took the protector role and did most of the physical work around camp, Slick became dependent on them in performing those activities. In their behavior, Slick and her male friends initially embraced a gendered division of labor. When I inquired as to what she learned or gained when her male friends left the trail, Slick thoughtfully replied:

It definitely made me feel that much more independent and stronger after I realized I would be fine being by myself. It was such a mental thing, especially even before I left. Everyone's first response was, "You're a girl, you can't go out there by yourself." And I had that so ingrained in

my head that I was like I can't be out here by myself, my guys can't leave me.

When male hikers first encounter female hikers on the trail, they often take on a protector role as illustrated by Slick's relationship with her male companions. In a sense, they are held hostage by traditional gender ideology prior to setting foot on the trail as illustrated by Slick when she referred to others' responses to her attempting a thru-hike. Slick believed she would not be able to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail without being dependent on male hikers. Once she was forced into the situation, Slick realized how good it felt to do things herself. The experience of hiking alone in the woods and depending solely on one's self leads to feelings of empowerment, especially for female hikers.

Yet, there is also plenty of evidence of hikers' resistance against conventional gender norms and practices. Flying in the face of gender traditionalism is the overarching ethic of self-reliance among hikers. Long-distance hikers are expected to carry their own backpacks, pitch their own tents, and cook their own dinner. Essentially, hikers are self-sufficient in that no one is going to carry their weight for them. In terms of cooking, Spirit mentioned how "impressed" she was "with the guys on the trail." While she would rather fix a simple dinner, she found the guys to be "culinary cooks out here." Swinging Jane added that there was a lot of "cooperation" going on between the guys, too, because they all kind of "add something to the pot" and share amongst themselves. It is commonly accepted in society that men are competitive in their relationships with one another, not cooperative and sharing. However, on the trail, cooking and sharing recipes are homosocial events for men whereas in society such

domestic activities are perceived to be woman-centered. Of course, gender difference is not completely absent from such activities on the trail because outdoor cooking has long been viewed as the penchant of men. In mainstream society, moving cooking outdoors through grilling removes the potential “stigma” of emasculation for an activity that, when performed indoors, is commonly viewed more as “women’s work.” Thus, there is a complicated “gendering” of food preparation on the trail, one in which gender traditionalism is both resisted and reinforced.

Gender complexities are also manifested through the negotiation of social space while hiking. During my interview with her in the Damascus library, Little Cubit mentioned she “found it to be completely natural to live among men again” as a result of hiking and sleeping in shelters with men on a daily basis for an extended period of time. This feeling or level of comfort among long-distance hikers with members of the opposite sex is best exemplified in my observations while at Trail Days in Damascus, Virginia. During Trail Days, many people stay at The Place, a hostel operated by the local Methodist church on a donation basis. Even if hikers choose to stay at Tent City, many still come to shower at The Place. One of the bathrooms at The Place has two shower stalls meaning two people can take separate showers at the same time. When we first arrived, there were three women in line waiting for their chance to shower. After a few minutes, a male hiker joined the group. When everyone realized it was an open changing area, the male hiker said, “Oh, I guess I can wait,” and one female hiker said, “I don’t care. You can shower while I’m in there. It doesn’t matter to me. I’m just here to get clean.” While it would be questionable behavior in society, it was not unusual to see male and female hikers sharing such a space.

Most hikers who make it to Damascus, Virginia are serious about hiking the Appalachian Trail. It appears as if the more time hikers spend on the trail together and share experiences, the less they find themselves influenced by traditional gender ideology. Modesty is beside the point for hikers at The Place where the primary goal is simply to get clean after days of being dirty. One explanation for this indifference, as Spirit and Swinging Jane noted, is that hikers seem to be in awe of one another and are respectful of one another. In most, if not all of the hostels along the trail, bathing areas and restrooms are unisex although most are set up for individual use unlike the one at Damascus. Neither the Appalachian Trail Conservancy nor the various handbooks encourage men and women to shower and sleep together (in the literal, non-sexual, sense of this term) in this context; however, this is recognized as acceptable behavior by many long-distance hikers.

In addition to relationships, traditional gender ideology does not appear to influence the dress of long-distance hikers on the trail. For example, it is not unusual to see male hikers wearing sport kilts. On the trail, this form of dress is acceptable for men; however, those outside the hiking community often find it troubling. During my interview Bramble, one of many male hikers who wear a kilt, he shared with me an experience he had in a local community:

I bought a kilt and I wear this kilt all the time. So me, with the scruffy beard and the backpack with all the patches and the kilt, other hikers wear the kilts, too, but some of the local communities through the trail aren't used to seeing men wearing kilts. They think they are just a dress or something. Some people don't know what a kilt is. Then when people approach you they expect you to be somebody different like a foreigner from a different country. And then when you don't sound exactly the way you are supposed to sound then they call the cops. Not that I am doing anything bad it's just that people are concerned. I can tell you that in

Bryson City, North Carolina I went in to get resupplied. I went to the library and just walking down the street someone saw me and called the police department and four cops approached me. So that is one reason I bought my t-shirt that says Special Forces on it because I don't realize I am like six-one, six-two, two hundred and fifty pounds, wearing a kilt, a backpack with different patches, and I sound like I am from New York (laughs).

The main reason Bramble and others wear kilts while hiking is “because they are comfortable.” For male hikers, like Bramble, being comfortable hiking is far more important than their appearance. However, because of the way he has been received by people outside the hiking community, Bramble purchased the “Special Forces” shirt to reaffirm his masculinity. In doing so, he believed he would appear more approachable and less threatening to non-hikers.

Because hikers are not able to shower on a daily basis, some of them, including women, shave their heads. In shaving their heads, female hikers remove themselves from what would be considered appropriate feminine behavior in American society. While they may shave their heads, female hikers do not necessarily shave their legs or underarms. Such “inappropriate” gender displays are not sanctioned by those who are part of the long-distance hiking community. While it seems as if long-distance hikers have a disregard for traditional gender ideology, it is not accurate to suggest that men and women are intentionally resisting gender traditionalism on the trail. Rather, on the trail, comfort, expedience, and other factors simply trump the gender conventions around which so much of mainstream is organized.

Resistance to Structured Environments

Long-distance hikers reject pressures to conform to a structured routine and schedule, both of which are characteristics associated with modern society. This was most apparent to me when hikers spoke about their experiences in Great Smoky Mountain National Park. During my interview with Socks, she recalled one of her highest points was making it through the Smokies due to the difficulty of the trail in this section; however, it was also an experience she did not like because she felt rushed.

When I inquired as to why, Socks responded “There were parts that would have been nice if you could have stayed another night there but you couldn’t. They just regulate how many people. They need you to move on because of other people.” Because many long-distance hikers are out for personal or spiritual reasons, they want to hike at their own pace without feeling rushed. For Socks, being regulated through the Smokies did not allow her to “hike her own hike.” Slick experienced similar frustrations in the Smokies.

When I asked her if there was anything she would change about the Appalachian Trail, Slick quickly replied:

The only thing so far that I’ve really begrudged was in the Smokies. The Smoky Mountains were beautiful but the way they’ve got that system set up, umm...I don’t know. It’s just frustrating because you’re going through there and they’re so strict and there’s like all these rules in the Smokies that they’ve got set up so you can’t stay, you can’t set up your tent – most of us like to tent unless there’s bad weather – like I can’t sleep very well in the shelters anyway. The only time I sleep in the shelters is when it rains. And in the Smokies, it’s like you have to stay in the shelter, and once the shelter is full, then you can tent right around the shelter. But, the problem is that they reserve for section hikers. Like you know seventy-five percent of the space is out or reserved for section hikers and then the rest is for thru-hikers. And if the section hikers don’t show up, then the thru-hikers have to fill those spots.

Slick offered an example to illustrate her point:

Like say there's eight reservations for a shelter and the three or four thru-hiker spaces that are reserved are already, someone's filled them, and you show up and you want to set up your tent because the ridge runner says there's eight reservations so the shelter by reservation should be full. If you set up your tent and they don't show up, you've got to break down your tent and get into the shelter. Or, on the flip side which is even worse, say you go, "Okay fine I'll get in the shelter" – because they won't let you set your tent up until the shelter is full – say you get into the shelter and the section hiker that has a reservation comes in at midnight for some reason, then you have to get out and set your tent up. I mean we had one night where we got snowed in and you're not supposed to spend more than one night in the Smokies and the ridge runner was trying to tell us we had to go. We were all wearing trail runners. We didn't have boots and one guy had already tried to leave in trail runners and try to break snow and he came back saying, "I'm going to get frostbite." And this guy was trying to tell us we had to leave. It just, I don't know, there were a lot of politics about the Smokies that I didn't like a lot, but other than that, it's all been great.

For the most part, long-distance hikers experience ultimate freedom while they are on the Appalachian Trail which is one reason for Slick's frustration. Hikers are no longer punching a time clock and are not responsible for or dependent on anyone other than themselves. Aside from the weather, hikers perceive themselves to be in complete control when on the trail.

Returning to a work-oriented, rule-governed society like Socks and Slick encountered in the Smoky Mountains can be overwhelming for some long-distance hikers. During my interview with Drifter, he suggested I ask how long-distance hikers handle "re-entry" as they leave the Appalachian Trail and return home. Since he had previously thru-hiked the trail on two occasions prior to our meeting, I asked him how he handles going back to a structured environment. Drifter took a deep breath and replied:

You give yourself some time back home where you still control your structured daily routine. In other words, if you can take a month after your hike before you go back to work, good, because that will sort of smooth out the re-entry process. Otherwise, it's like breaking through the

atmosphere. All of a sudden you're just on fire and you can't control anything. Re-entry, the first time...I just freaked out getting back into the environment that I was in. I lasted about five months in my job before I quit it and I spent the next two years living in a tent working as a whitewater rafting guide in Kentucky because I just couldn't handle getting back into a normal routine. It didn't work for me. I learned enough out here to know that what I was doing before wasn't going to be working for me. It took me five months of getting back into it to figure that out. But re-entry is not something, again, that I look forward to or that I would wish upon anybody. It can be real hard, but it doesn't bother some people at all.

Drifter was not the only hiker who talked about the difficulty switching from trail life to the "real world" as some hikers referred to life off the trail. Once they leave the Appalachian Trail and return home, many long-distance hikers experience a culture shock. They have been in the woods in an unpopulated, unstructured environment for an extended period of time. Adjusting to traffic lights, asphalt, talk shows, local and national news, the structured realms of work and city life, not to mention crowds of people, can be overwhelming. These are just a few of the reasons some hikers, like Drifter, have difficulty adjusting to a structured work environment upon leaving the trail.

Refuge from Societal Distractions

As hikers remove themselves from the daily cares, concerns, and "negatives" of society, they have time to think and reflect without the influence of others or the distractions of everyday life. When I asked Bonzo if there was a common thread shared among long-distance hikers, he hesitated. He attempted to answer the question by saying "It's the outdoors" but then asked "Has anybody been able to explain it to you?" Bonzo thoughtfully added that this level of escape cannot be found anywhere except on the Appalachian Trail because "you don't have the influence of radio, television, newspapers,

your nasty neighbor, your boss. I mean it's you and whatever you hear which is nature, the smell, the energy.”

Geronimo, who recently left the military, decided to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail to remove himself from the negative influence of “the media, the T.V., the news,” while Sweet Sixteen wanted to do something “that was not negative.” When I inquired as to why she decided to hike the trail, she said “America is so full of fear it just seemed...I wanted to do something unusual, something different...and not be afraid.” Golgi was asked what his most memorable experience had been concerning the natural environment. He recalled a specific moment at the top of Max Patch when the beauty of nature reminded him how great life is and how easy it is to forget that because “of all of the consumerism and materialism we leave behind.” Many long-distance hikers view consumerism, materialism, and media influence as negatives in society. Behind this leisure activity is the motivation to leave these societal “negatives” behind and fully focus on developing oneself without the distraction of outside influences.

Happy Feet spent the last eight years of his life working as a network administrator for a paper company for in Tyler, Texas, and did not like the “political battles” or the “corporate yucky” that his work environment had become. One of Happy Feet's co-workers told him about a book entitled A Walk across America written by Peter Jenkins. According to Happy Feet, Jenkins grew up in a snobby, rich environment in Connecticut and decided to hike across America to see if there were “different people” than what he grew up around back home. He hiked south from Connecticut stopping in towns along the way to work and make money. Along the way, he became a Christian, met his wife, and then hiked from New Orleans to the Pacific Coast with her. Happy

Feet was inspired by this story and wanted to do something similar to Jenkins. He thought about travelling along railroads but decided to do a Google search to see what he might find. As he was searching for something meaningful to do with his life, he came across the Appalachian Trail.

While speaking with Lady Mustard Seed, she also talked about how she needed to come into the wilderness to “figure out some things” in her life. I inquired as to what barriers at home might keep her from finding the answers she was searching for to which she replied:

Your whole life in town is focused on sustaining your life in town. We work forty plus hours a week to sustain a certain lifestyle and that lifestyle is exhausting. It's hard to work forty hours. After I work my job I'm exhausted on the weekend. I don't have the energy to give back to my family, to myself, to God. And retreating into the woods, just leaving all of these obligations, leaving everything behind specifically just to seek and just to be with nature is just a complete shift in focus. And it's a retreat into God and it's a retreat into nature whereas I feel like I'm spinning my wheels in town just trying to get the rent paid, just always rushing, you know, always tired.

As long-distance hikers remove themselves from the working world and the multiple roles or identities they occupy in society, spending time on the trail gives them a chance to sort through their lives.

As indicated by Happy Feet and Lady Mustard Seed, many who seek to thru-hike or section hike the Appalachian Trail are spiritually motivated as opposed to financially motivated. Although financial support is necessary for hiking long-distance, many view money and possessions as distractions. Several long-distance hikers with whom I interacted were hiking for spiritual reasons. They view God as the primary director in their lives, not money. Rather than having a primary goal of reaching Katahdin, the main

goal for those who were spiritually motivated was having this quiet time to listen to God as indicated when I initially asked Happy Feet why he chose to hike the Appalachian

Trail:

My main goal is not necessarily, a goal is to get to Katahdin, but my main goal for this is basically just to have a lot of time available to me away from the world or what I was accustomed to, to basically spend some time working on me and getting back to basics and getting back to the core of who I am. It's praying and spending time with God and just really focusing on, you know, what the next section of my life needs to be and allowing God to work in my life during that. Because if you're too busy worrying about your job or your stresses of life and things like that you have trouble hearing what God has to say to you. So it's best to be silent so that God can speak to you...If I end up going through a particular trail town and God says "Hey, this is where I need you to be. This is where I need you to stay," then that's the direction that I'm going to take. Like I said, it would be nice to go all the way to Katahdin and things like that but I'm not focused on that. I'm just focused on where God is going to connect me next. And if that takes six months or a year or tomorrow, then fine.

During his interview, Happy Feet acknowledged that there were other situations that would allow God to connect him to other people, to bless other people, but the Appalachian Trail was the radical change he needed. For this self-described "city boy," this new venture would be an experience that required his faith in God be the primary director.

Not only does hiking the Appalachian Trail provide a refuge from societal distractions for long-distance hikers searching for meaning, but hiking the trail also provides others with the opportunity to settle unresolved personal issues without the daily distractions associated with home and work. Rez Dog, for example, served in Vietnam, a war that he opposed. During the interview, he mentioned that any time he was hiking he would think about his Vietnam experience because walking in the woods felt the same to

him as walking in the jungle. Because they were smaller day hikes, he never allowed himself to resolve his feelings about the war. When the thought came up he “could always put it aside because of job, family, or whatever.” Rez Dog admitted that he was eventually able to face this demon on the trail because there were no other responsibilities to occupy his mind.

One of Rez Dog’s most memorable moments on the trail came unexpectedly when he passed the Audie Murphy Memorial. Audie Murphy, the most decorated veteran of World War II, died when his plane crashed in the mountains near Roanoke, Virginia. The Veterans of Foreign Wars erected a monument in his honor near the crash site. His experience is recounted below:

Probably one of the seminal moments of the hike was when we went by the Audie Murphy Memorial. And I sat and looked at that, and I’m real cynical about that sort of thing, and I read that and it was hard to be cynical about it. Looking at all those decorations, one of which was a combat infantry badge which I also have. And I finally realized that he and I are brothers. Even though the wars were different and how we participated were different, we are brothers in that. It was the first time that I ever had that sense of brotherhood and pride in my service. Seeing all of those decorations, I could stand back and salute and suddenly realized I am a veteran. I did serve and for the first time I felt a sense of pride even though I felt I did nothing for my country. By the time I got to Virginia, central Virginia, that pretty much, I said I did the best I could.

Rez Dog was able to resolve his feelings over the Vietnam War as he hiked the Appalachian Trail. As he mentioned previously, being at home he could always put his thoughts about the war aside because of other responsibilities and distractions. On the trail, when passing the Audie Murphy Memorial, he was unable to push the war aside. He no longer had the distractions or responsibilities of media outlets, work, home, or family with him on the trail which allowed Rez Dog to resolve a personal issue that had

been weighing on him a long time. On the Appalachian Trail, long-distance hikers find themselves with hours of uninterrupted time away from anxieties associated with a risk society, and far away from the world of asphalt and traffic lights in which to think and resolve unsettled issues.

Summary: Refusal of the Banalities of Ordinary Life

Lending further evidence to the existence and contours of a long-distance hiking subculture, hikers commonly refuse the banalities associated with mass society and “ordinary life.” Long-distance hikers are viewed as non-normative or nonconforming as they challenge traditional gender ideology through relationships and dress. Long-distance hikers are opposed to structured environments, both on and off the trail. While many long-distance hikers are non-normative in that they are spiritually motivated as opposed to financially motivated, some seek refuge on the Appalachian Trail away from what they consider societal negatives or distractions (e.g., media, work, family), even if only for a short time. The notion that subcultures can be identified and understood through a refusal of the banalities of mass society and ordinary life is supported.

Chapter Summary

Using Gelder’s subcultural perspective for identifying and understanding subcultures, this chapter has answered the research question with respect to the existence of a long-distance hiking subculture. Given the supporting evidence presented in the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that a long-distance hiking subculture does exist. Specifically, long-distance hikers can be identified and understood through (1) a

negative relation to work, (2) a negative or ambivalent relation to class, (3) an association with territory, (4) non-domestic forms of belonging, (5) a range of excessive attributes, and (6) a refusal of the banalities of ordinary life.

This chapter has provided ample evidence of the existence and contours of a long-distance hiking subculture. The next chapter includes a discussion of the findings, including ways Gelder's subcultural perspective for identifying and understanding subcultures can be strengthened and extended. Major limitations of this work are presented followed by implications of my study and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The overall focus of my study was to explore the role of recreational settings in the formation of leisure subcultures and subcultural identities. More specifically, my study attempted to answer the following question with respect to a long-distance hiking subculture: Does evidence point to the existence of a long-distance hiking subculture? If so, what are the social contours of this subculture? That is, how is this long-distance hiking subculture characterized in terms of its sociality and social practices? Recent scholarship has examined how leisure subcultures are formed around a particular interest or activity (e.g., windsurfing); however, little attention has been paid to the role of recreational settings (i.e., specific geographical locales) in the formation of leisure subcultures. My study was designed to fill that gap by using the Appalachian Trail as a case study to examine a long-distance hiking subculture. A subcultural perspective was used as an analytical tool to bring interview accounts together with those emerging from ethnographic fieldwork to address the research question.

A Multi-Layered Leisure Subculture

Among the most significant general findings to surface from my investigation is the complex character of long-distance hiking as a subculture. The long-distance hiking

community, as it exists on the Appalachian Trail, is a multilayered leisure subculture. Long-distance hikers live in isolation, for the most part, with their own way of acting, talking, and thinking; their own vocabulary; their own activities and interests; their own conception of what is significant in life; and to a certain extent their own scheme of life. As recalled from chapter 4, long-distance hikers can be identified and understood through a (perceived) negative relation to work, as well as a negative or ambivalent relation to class. While many of the long-distance hikers interviewed are not opposed to work, many view the Appalachian Trail as an antithesis to work and are hiking because they are unhappy with their current jobs. Members of this leisure subculture exchange property for a life of poverty which, at times, leads to a negative evaluation of long-distance hikers as lazy and unproductive. However, many long-distance hikers confront this negative stereotype directly in that they are hiking for a cause. Others challenge the stereotype by taking their work with them on the Appalachian Trail, viewing their hike as an alternative to legitimate work, or equating the physical and mental aspects of long-distance hiking as work.

Long-distance hikers do not have a class-based identity and are without class-consciousness, as understood in a traditional sociological sense. Hikers come together due to their participation in a particular recreational activity and are united by situations encountered on the Appalachian Trail. There are many sites and places frequented by long-distance hikers, including the Appalachian Trail itself, which leads to cohesion and reinforces a subcultural identity among long-distance hikers. Once on the trail, long-distance hikers adopt a trail identity or trail persona which strengthens over the course of the hike to the extent that hikers begin to feel more comfortable in the woods than they

do in town. Given that “hike your own hike” is a common mantra among long-distance hikers, there are various approaches to hiking a long-distance trail, not simply one. On the trail, long-distance hikers adjust to new forms of belonging away from home and family where trail names and an uncivilized appearance signify belonging. While relationships among long-distance hikers are likened to familial bonds or those formed in the military, the hiking community on the Appalachian Trail is in a constant state of flux as hikers move on and off the trail. Because the community is constantly evolving, the amount of face-to-face interaction one has with members of the hiking community varies depending on the direction of one’s hike, as well as by their point of entry.

Long-distance hikers can be identified and understood through a range of distinctive attributes (e.g., style, language, consumption, style, dress) compared to the restraints and moderations of “normal” populations. Specifically, long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail place an unreasonable amount of trust in strangers, both on and off the trail, as well as engage in rituals of consumption often indulging on food and drink. Long-distance hikers are self-disciplined and continue hiking despite injury or discomfort, unpredictable weather patterns, and the difficulty of the terrain. Behind this leisure subculture is a rejection of larger societal structures (i.e., bureaucratic and social). Long-distance hikers resist structured environments and do not necessarily conform to traditional gender ideology. Many are spiritually motivated as opposed to financially motivated as they seek refuge in the wilderness from societal distractions or negatives (i.e., media influence, consumerism, materialism, stresses of work and family). Although long-distance hikers resist structured environments, the unstructured features associated with long-distance hikers (e.g., rootlessness, spontaneity, living outside structured realms

of work, production, and property ownership) are invested with positive values rather than negative ones by members of this leisure subculture.

The discovery of these behavioral patterns among long-distance hikers may give the impression that the hiking community is a model society, a social world where everything is perfect and everyone gets along; however, the Appalachian Trail should not be characterized as a utopia where inequalities or social hierarchies do not exist. Just as individuals form cliques in society, social groupings are also present on the Appalachian Trail even if organized around a recreational activity as opposed to (economic) class. A close examination of the language used by long-distance hikers as they refer to themselves and others reveals the social structure of this leisure subculture. For example, there is an identifiable hiker hierarchy on the Appalachian Trail distinguished by user type (i.e., thru-hiker, section hiker, weekend or overnight hikers, and day hikers). Thru-hikers are at the top of the hiker hierarchy followed by section hikers, weekend or ight hikers, and day hikers. However, weekend hikers and day hikers are not considered part of the long-distance hiking community by members of this leisure subculture.

In addition to the hiker hierarchy, long-distance hikers (i.e., section and thru-hikers) are further stratified as a group on the basis of their approach to hiking (i.e., purist, white-blazer, blue-blazer, yellow-blazer, pink-blazer, flip-flopper, slackpacker, northbounder, southbounder). While the majority of hikers interviewed characterize their relationships as collective and cooperative, long-distance hikers are not a homogenous group. The social world of long-distance hikers is structured, as well as individualized and competitive. For members of this leisure subculture, membership, identity, and status are not only shaped by one's approach to hiking, but by point of entry and the

direction of one's hike. I offer a rationale as to why individuals may attempt to thru-hike or section hike the Appalachian Trail. First, these individuals who retreat into the wilderness may do so because they feel as if they are becoming products of society and have lost their authentic selves. They go to the Appalachian Trail in order to distance themselves from what they now feel is a false self or selves. Second, they face this new challenge in the hope of awakening emotions that will allow them to have a truly authentic experience away from the confines and influences of society. In this sense, the Appalachian Trail is a tool used by long-distance hikers to redefine themselves. Next, I turn to the limitations of my study.

Limitations

My study has provided evidence that there is an identifiable long-distance hiking subculture and has attempted to understand this leisure subculture through its sociality and social practices. My study, however, is not without its limitations. My study focused exclusively on long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail. As a result, research on the Pacific Crest Trail and Continental Divide Trails may uncover more commonalities among long-distance hikers. By exploring other long-distance hiking trails, themes that emerged using the Appalachian Trail as a case study can be confirmed pointing to the existence of a more general long-distance hiking subculture. Alternatively, the inclusion of other long-distance hiking trails may lead to the conclusion that a long-distance hiking subculture on the Appalachian Trail is place specific.

In addition, my study does not include comparisons across racial groups. While it would have been beneficial to interview members of various racial-ethnic groups, the

possibility of such an undertaking was beyond the scope of this work. Findings indicate a lack of cultural diversity among long-distance hikers. However, the opportunity to interview members of other racial-ethnic groups may challenge findings reflecting a white, middle-class nature associated with long-distance hiking. Another possible critique is that my study does not include a thorough examination of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, clearing house for information on the Appalachian Trail. A textual analysis of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, as well as the Pacific Crest Trail Association and the Continental Divide Trail Alliance, may reveal evidence that such organizations play a large role in the creation and transmission of a long-distance hiking subculture, one which may or may not be place specific. Many of these limitations can and should be addressed in future research.

Implications of this Study

Although limitations are important, qualitative research is good for the information it provides to subcultural studies, particularly Gelder's subcultural perspective. In addition to being of value to subcultural studies, those in charge of developing recreational use surveys and enforcing management policies will also benefit from this qualitative work.

Long-distance hikers represent a distinct social world which is imperative to their value as a subculture. In his study on subcultures, Gelder tends to examine subcultures from an outsider's perspective. If not careful, Gelder's subcultural perspective could be used to objectify subcultures, reducing them to nothing more than a checklist rather than a product of social interaction. Qualitative research, ethnography in particular, supports

and strengthens Gelder's subcultural perspective because it allows the lived experiences of those inside a subculture to be articulated. Through the use of qualitative methods, a long-distance hiking subculture is not only identified, but the nature and extent of their belonging is more thoroughly understood and evaluated.

Gelder's subcultural perspective could be strengthened by broadening two existing characteristics – a negative relation to work and a negative or ambivalent relation to class. For example, occupational subcultures organized around work typically glorify work, and thus, do not have a negative view of work. Leisure subcultures, on the other hand, may be viewed by insiders, outsiders, or both as having a negative relationship to work simply because they are at leisure; however, this assumption is not accurate since many are not opposed to work but rather the structured realms of work. In these instances, Gelder does not adequately account for the diversity regarding a relation to work. Similar to work, Gelder's subcultural perspective also identifies subcultures in terms of a negative or ambivalent relation to class. While the leisure subculture of long-distance hiking is not formed or organized around class, class influences participation in this leisure activity. Although members may be without class consciousness, membership may be determined by one's economic position in that class influences who participates, which should be taken into consideration when identifying and understanding subcultures.

Gelder's framework could be strengthened further by including additional traits or characteristics for identifying and understanding subcultures, including the sustainability of a subculture. Generally speaking, subcultures fall into two different categories: those characterized by diffuseness and those characterized by coherence. While Gelder

discusses fluid and persistent membership within a subculture, he does not specifically address the processes through which a subculture sustains itself. Whereas most subcultures engage in face-to-face interaction, which helps transmit and sustain a subculture, this is not the case for long-distance hikers who are often not in direct contact with one another due to the nature of this long-term recreational activity. Rather than resting primarily on face-to-face interaction, a place referent mediates the subculture that surfaces among long-distance hikers, bringing cohesion and solidarity to members of this leisure subculture. Through participation in this recreational activity, the ritual of pilgrimage, and the shared experiences of sacrifice, transforms long-distance hikers and binds them together.

In addition to extending and strengthening Gelder's subcultural perspective, qualitative research is also important for the information it can provide to recreational and leisure studies. Through qualitative techniques, further insight will be gained into the social and emotional bonds recreationists attach to specific recreational settings like the Appalachian Trail. Such information can be useful for assisting existing questionnaires aimed at understanding recreationists' attachments to specific leisure settings. More specifically, by capturing long-distance hikers' stories and appraisals in their own words, I was able to identify abstract elements (i.e., attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and values) involved in the social and emotional bonds long-distance hikers attach to the Appalachian Trail, which is something previous quantitative research has been unable to provide.

Current surveys concerning recreation on the Appalachian Trail are primarily focused on hiking. Survey research on recreational use and leisure settings, specifically the Appalachian Trail, would benefit by distinguishing between the recreational activities

of hiking and long-distance hiking. Long-distance hiking includes not only physical act of hiking, but camping and backpacking over an extended period of time, which may lead to stronger feelings of attachment to the trail. While current surveys include statements such as “I enjoy hiking along the Appalachian Trail more than any other trail” or “Hiking here is more important than hiking any other place,” including a prompt to answer why would be helpful in understanding recreationists’ motivations and reasons for choosing the Appalachian Trail over other hiking trails. In addition, sites and places frequented by long-distance hikers, as well as a familiarity with trail names, trail magic, and trail journals, should be included to determine the extent to which hikers are immersed in the larger hiking community. A more general area to be incorporated on surveys focusing on attachment to place concerns recreationists’ level of comfort (i.e., general feelings of safety, trust in other recreationists) while in a particular leisure setting, which may be strongly associated with recreational use and behavioral loyalty.

Managers of recreational settings will benefit from this qualitative research for two reasons. First, a more comprehensive understanding of the place attachment-activity involvement relationship is gained providing decision-makers with information concerning how motives underlying recreationists’ leisure experiences connect with their attachment to recreational settings. For some the motives are instrumental (e.g., for the spiritual experience, for the challenge) while for some they are value-laden (e.g., an expression of one’s identity). Second, once managers understand why and how recreationists develop attachments to specific recreational settings like the Appalachian Trail, agencies can better design programs and maintain settings consistent with users’

level and type of attachment (i.e., regulation of long-distance hikers through Great Smoky Mountain National Park).

Directions for Future Research

My study contributes to the emerging body of scholarship on leisure subcultures by identifying and examining a long-distance hiking subculture. Previous research on leisure subcultures focused solely on a particular leisure activity without attention to recreational settings where activities occur. This investigation acknowledges the role of recreational settings in the formation of leisure subcultures and subcultural identities by examining long-distance hiking. Future research on leisure subcultures should be broadened to include those that form around specific recreational settings like the Appalachian Trail. Other long-distance hiking trails (i.e., the Pacific Crest and Continental Divide Trails) should be investigated to determine if the long-distance hiking subculture on the Appalachian Trail is place-specific or if there is a more general long-distance hiking subculture. I would encourage more qualitative research on long-distance hikers to gain a better sense of how long-distance hikers negotiate “re-entry” as they assimilate back into society. Because flows of information are not automatic but channeled and mediated, future research should also investigate the processes through which hikers are introduced and socialized into a long-distance hiking subculture. Textual analysis may help determine if, and the extent to which, various forms of electronic and popular media influence the creation and transmission of a long-distance hiking subculture.

In addition to broadening the focus of research into leisure subcultures and subcultural identities that form around specific leisure settings, it is equally important to broaden conceptions of management policies aimed at providing recreationists with desired leisure experiences. My study questions whether or not managers of natural resource-based recreational settings are currently managing the Appalachian Trail for all user types. Findings from this study indicate the motivations of long-distance hikers are not taken into consideration by the National Park Service, the agency responsible for the section of trail through Great Smoky Mountain National Park. Typically, managers of recreational areas manage leisure settings based on use patterns, which appears to be the current situation in the park. Management for those who develop an emotional bond with a leisure setting is not as clear as management associated with a particular activity and dependence on a specific setting for the activity. This difficulty arises in part because recreationists who use public lands often do so with conflicting needs and goals in mind. However, when the attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and values long-distance hikers attach to the Appalachian Trail are known and understood, those in charge of making decisions can better manage for the recreational setting, the social and emotional bonds, *and* the desired experiences of all recreationists rather than manage solely for a particular activity or user type.

Of course, until these avenues for future research can be pursued, there is much value in learning about the social contours and complex character of the subculture that has been collectively created and sustained by long-distance hikers. Such has been the goal of this study. This study has revealed that the social world inhabited by long-distance hikers is one that both resembles and resists the conventional trappings of

mainstream American society. In the end, hiking entails navigating a complicated landscape. When walking the trail, hikers have one foot in the American cultural mainstream and one foot outside of it.

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APPENDIX

ID Code: _____

Study of Long-Distance Hikers on the Appalachian Trail

1. Hometown: _____
2. Age: _____
3. Race: _____
4. Gender: _____
5. Highest degree received: _____
6. College Major (if applicable): _____
7. Current or most recent occupation: _____
8. Parent or primary care giver's total years of education: _____
9. Parent's current or most recent occupation: _____
10. Previous hiking experience on the A.T.? _____
11. Previous long-distance hiking experience in general? _____
If yes, where did you go? When? For how long? How old were you at the time?
12. When did you begin your hike on the A.T.: _____

General Questions

1. To begin, tell me what it is about the Appalachian Trail that brought you here. Why did you decide to hike the A.T.?

A/ What have other hikers told you about their decisions to begin hiking the A.T.? Were they similar to or different from yours? In what way(s)?

B/ What do you like most about the trail? What do you like least about the trail?

C/ Is there anything in general you would change about the trail? Tell me about this.

PROBE (if needed): regarding shelters, local communities, safety, fellow hikers, trail names, trail magic, physical or emotional challenges

2. Tell me about your trail name.

A/ How did it come about? Who gave it to you? Why? What does this name say about you?

B/ In your opinion, what is the significance of trail names? What does it add or take away from the overall hiking experience on the A.T.?

Now, let's talk about what life is like on the Appalachian Trail.

3. Tell me what life is like on the Appalachian Trail. In other words, describe your average day to me.

A/ What did you expect or imagine this experience would be like? Were these expectations met? If not, why?

PROBE (if needed): regarding shelters, local communities, safety, fellow hikers, trail names, trail magic, physical or emotional challenges

B/ Are there certain characteristics shared by long-distance hikers? If so, please tell me about this.

PROBE (if needed): physically, mentally, emotionally, career-wise, financially

4. Sometimes the A.T. may take you nearby or through a local community.

A/ Describe your experiences in local communities. How did this experience make you feel? What have other hikers told you about this?

PROBE (if needed) in comparison to trail life, similarities and differences in environment, interactions with locals versus interactions with fellow hikers

5. Sometimes hikers speak of something called ‘trail magic.’ Have you heard of this? If so, please describe what this is exactly.

A/ Have you personally been the recipient of or been responsible for bringing trail magic to another? Please describe.

B/ Do you know of any other hikers who have experienced trail magic? What have others told you about this? Please describe.

C/ What is the interaction like with other hikers? What role do other hikers play in terms of your own experience?

Now, let’s talk about some of your most memorable experiences while hiking on the A.T.

6. Thinking back over the time you have spent hiking the A.T., what would you say has been your most memorable experience involving your surroundings or the natural environment? Why this experience?

7. Thinking back over the time you have spent hiking the A.T., what would you say has been the highest point for you? What did you learn from this experience?

A/ What has been your most challenging experience? What did you take away from this experience?

B/ What have you learned about yourself since you began your hike?

8. Is there anything I did not ask that you feel is important in terms of understanding the A.T. experience or your personal experience on the A.T.?