

DON'T BE THRU-HIKING; START UHIKINGSM

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Abstract: Our National Scenic Trails help to protect wilderness and rural culture, while at the same time providing benefits to outdoor recreationists. Thru-hiking is an outdoor recreational pursuit that involves hiking "through" the entire length of a National Scenic Trail. A support network exists for hopeful sojourners desiring to thru-hike that captivates their interest, offers incentives, establishes a fraternity, and assists in the planning and implementation of a thru-hike. This has led to thousands of hikers congregating at the same end of a National Scenic Trail at around the same time, out of which only a few complete the journey. The majority of these sojourners drop out, but until they do both natural and cultural resources suffer from overuse and abuse. We need an alternative to thru-hiking which will promote local greenways and trails as a training ground prior to utilizing National Scenic Trails. T.R.A.I.L., Inc. promotes the concept of UHikingSM as an alternative to thru-hiking. UHikingSM would help take the pressure off National Scenic Trails, promote stewardship through increased user interaction with local greenways and trails, and provide a wilderness journey designed to particularly meet the needs of the sojourner. We call for the establishment of a support network for UHikingSM with much of the same elements of a thru-hiking support network.

Our National Scenic Trails are considered part of our natural crown jewels under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service. A National Scenic Trail generally traverses many states over a long distance. Where these trails go through some National Parks such as Yosemite (Pacific Crest Trail), Yellowstone (Continental Divide Trail), or Shenandoah (Appalachian Trail) they receive millions of visitors yearly, mostly as dayhikers. But the long distances these trails cover invite long distance hikers as well. Thru-hiking refers to the outdoor recreational pursuit of hiking "through" the entire length of a National Scenic Trail. Though thru-hiking accounts for only a small percentage of the trail use for any season in most areas along a National Scenic Trail, it accounts for a high percentage at the ends of National Scenic Trails at certain times.

The actual and potential congestion of thru-hikers at the ends of National Scenic Trails creates a natural resource management problem. Regulatory approaches such as user fees, or limiting the number of thru-hikers who can begin their journey each day, have been proposed as solutions. We introduce a new concept for wilderness recreation, UHikingSM, as an alternative to regulation that combines incentives and education as a solution. UHikingSM promotes the benefits for which National Scenic Trails were designed, enhances the benefits obtained from wilderness

journeys, and suggests a new paradigm for land stewardship.

National Scenic Trail Benefits

Benton MacKaye was a forester and regional planner whose vision gave rise to the Appalachian Trail, the first officially recognized National Scenic Trail. MacKaye noticed that development in the eastern United States followed transportation corridors. In his book, The New Exploration, he referred to this development as a metropolitan invasion, and noted that the Appalachian highlands acted as a barrier to normal transportation routes and, hence, a barrier to the invasion. The purpose of our first recognized National Scenic Trail, in MacKaye's view, was to help preserve this existing barrier that could "dam the urban tide."

MacKaye suggested three benefits that would result from instituting a long-distance trail along the length of the Appalachian highlands. These are:

- protection of natural resources;
- protection of cultural resources; and
- opportunities for outdoor recreation.

The first two benefits, the protection of both wilderness and a rural culture, are indigenous to the Appalachian Trail corridor. However, continuing with a plant species metaphor, the third benefit can be considered exotic. As MacKaye prophesied in his vision, the bulk of outdoor recreationists come from the metropolitan areas outside the trail corridor, seeking those indigenous benefits no longer available to them in their own environment. These people are exotics in the sense of being outsiders "invading" the corridor to reap their benefits. Just as with plant exotics, the invasions of outdoor recreationists present a threat to the indigenous resources. Large numbers of people, even as visitors, degrade both wilderness and rural environments. As the recognition of our National Scenic Trails has increased larger numbers of outdoor recreationists have visited them in quest of a wilderness journey.

Wilderness Journey Benefits

A variety of goals lead outdoor recreationists to attempt a long-distance wilderness journey. Many seek to meet a challenge, such as completing the entire distance of a National Scenic Trail. Intangible goals, such as self-discovery, motivate many as well. Some want an adventure, without specific concern as to the journey's end. Also less concerned about the journey's end are those who seek an alternative lifestyle, to simply get away from the "rat race."

Any of these goals can be achieved through more convenient means. There are other ways to tackle arduous challenges without leaving your job. One does not have to acquire a disgusting look and smell, soaked with dirt-caked sweat and little opportunity for bathing, while on a path towards self-discovery. Adventure can be found without doing the same repetitious act of putting one foot in front of

the other, day after day after day, for great many hours each day. One can get away from the "rat race" without requiring a 5000-calorie per day diet.

These are not trivial drawbacks, as evidenced when nine out of ten people who attempt a thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail drop out, most during the first few weeks. Why do so many make the attempt in the first place? The answer lies in the support network established by trail organizations that promote long-distance journeys.

The Thru-Hiker Support Network

Many thru-hikes of the Appalachian Trail have been published. While these accounts may not be as gripping as Shackleton's Antarctica Expedition or Krakauer's climb of Everest, for a similar reason they provide the hopeful sojourner a more probable avenue to pursue a dream. After doing a little research, these hopeful sojourners find that logs are kept and patches given out in recognition of thru-hikes. Directories of hiking organizations are kept with the identifiers of which trail a member has thru-hiked. The hopeful sojourner discovers that he/she embarks not only upon a new adventure, but a new fraternity.

The hopeful sojourner proceeds to obtain planning materials that have been tailored specifically to the needs of a thru-hiker. Trail guides focus only on a particular section of National Scenic Trail, such as the Maine section of the Appalachian Trail. Companion guides provide details for all the services—showers, supplies, even handouts of free food—which can be found along the journey. Data guides provide mileages for the whole trip in one single, lightweight pamphlet.

The hopeful sojourner finally embarks upon the thru-hike and, in the case of the Appalachian Trail, soon finds a trail elaborately blazed—so that even the guidebook or data guide is unnecessary—while shelters exist at frequent intervals. With such a support network encouraging a specific endeavor no wonder thousands of people begin a thru-hike, and no wonder thousands drop out after having unrealistic expectations. Yet before thousands drop out of an Appalachian Trail thru-hike, places such as Springer Mountain, Georgia feel the full brunt of both their numbers and inexperience.

Problems Caused by Thru-Hiking

Something as long as the Appalachian Trail requires more than one season to hike. This suggests an optimum timeframe for completing a thru-hike, one that helps the thru-hiker avoid areas that receive much snowfall during the cold seasons. On the Appalachian Trail thousands of hopeful sojourners converge upon Springer Mountain to begin their thru-hikes in the months of March and April, late enough to avoid heavy snow in the Smoky Mountains yet early enough to avoid snow in the northernmost states. Appalachian Trail lands a few hundred miles north of Springer Mountain suffer from this congestion of thru-hikers. Trash, bootleg campsites, human wastes, and eroded trail are among the litany of natural resource abuses

caused by too many people in the same area at the same time.

Abuses to cultural resources result as well. Some thru-hikers have acted as if the services listed in their companion guides are an entitlement, rather than a gesture of good will offered by locals. The Appalachian Long-Distance Hikers Association (ALDHA) has initiated an Endangered Services Campaign to offset the services now being withdrawn by indigenous people fed up with the antics of thru-hikers rudely taking their services for granted.

Ironically, a problem of neglect also results from the emphasis upon thru-hiking. As more attention and resources become focused upon National Scenic Trails, less becomes available for local greenways and trails. Yet these are the areas most in need of our attention. The health of our environment depends not upon how we treat isolated pockets of preserved wilderness, but how we all learn to care for our own backyards everywhere. While MacKaye had a good idea in conceiving his "dam" to the urban tide, we should not abandon our consideration for the natural resources within metropolitan areas.

Trail organizations are aware of the problems being caused by too many thru-hikers. They also are aware that long-distance journeys provide life-changing experiences for people, who then contribute to the future support and protection of a National Scenic Trail. Thus, the support network for thru-hiking continues. These combined consequences of overuse and protection created a Catch-22 situation that led National Park Service managers toward regulation as a solution. During the spring of 1999 they limited the daily numbers of thru-hikers who could begin their hike from Springer Mountain. Regulation is nobody's favorite means of resolving a conflict. More preferable would be an alternative outdoor recreational pursuit that utilized National Scenic Trails for life-changing experiences, yet avoided the overuse that results from congregating thousands of hopeful sojourners.

Stewardship and Manners

Another argument offered in support of promoting National Scenic Trails and other areas of fine wilderness is that these beautiful places will inspire us to become better stewards of the land. In theory, local trails and greenways benefit as well by the promotion of thru-hiking and National Scenic Trails because the stewardship principles learned by awe-inspired users will be later transferred to these local areas. This premise has a serious flaw, the illogical assumption that becoming good stewards best occurs away from home.

Land stewardship has much in common with good manners. Courtesy and respect provides the foundation for both, and both seek to avoid the negative impacts of being greedy and messy. If we want to provide an experience for outdoor recreationists that encourages stewardship, we can learn much from what we know about good manners.

Most of us do not bring our kids to fine public places with the intent of teaching them good manners. While the atmosphere of a quality restaurant may be conducive towards applying manners, such manners are better learned at home first for two reasons. One, the negative impacts of failing to apply manners at home affect fewer people. Two, the benefits of applying good manners at home provide more direct positive reinforcement to the learner. You can leave your mess behind at the restaurant; you have to live with the mess you create at home.

For similar reasons, National Scenic Trails should not be considered appropriate for indoctrinating stewardship values. Local greenways and trails are better venues for learning stewardship values because the consequences of failure are more dispersed, which decreases the impact in terms of extent and who is affected. The use of local greenways and trails as stewardship training grounds also provides more direct feedback for outdoor recreationists. You can leave your mess behind on a National Scenic Trail for National Park Service employees or regional volunteers to clean up. You have to live with the mess you create on a local trail, or you are more likely to be personally acquainted with the local volunteer responsible for cleaning up after you.

Thus, if we seek an alternative to thru-hiking that still promotes National Scenic Trails, we would be well served if such an alternative promotes local greenways and trails as well, especially as the training ground to acquire stewardship values in prelude to reaching the National Scenic Trail.

The Uhikingsm Alternative

T.R.A.I.L., Inc., as an educational nonprofit organization committed both to providing quality wilderness journeys and protecting the quality of wilderness, proposes Uhikingsm as the alternative needed to address the problems with thru-hiking.

The U in Uhikingsm is a figurative representation of a Uhiker's journey. A section of National Scenic Trail provides the backbone for the U, while local or regional greenways and trails are utilized as approach and departure routes, forming the arms of the U. The U also signifies that YOU, the sojourner, designs a unique journey.

For example, T.R.A.I.L., Inc. will embark upon our first official Uhikesm this summer. Disadvantaged youth and adult mentors will form a community of wilderness sojourners that will canoe the Connecticut River from near the Canadian border down to Hanover, NH. There we will hook up with the Appalachian Trail, the backbone of our Uhikesm, and backpack from Hanover down to Kent, CT. From Kent we will complete our journey by canoeing down the Housatonic River to Long Island Sound. Our journey will help promote the Housatonic Riverbelt Greenway efforts currently underway.

Our Uhikingsm concept addresses several issues. It challenges the notion that National Scenic Trails are

suitable training grounds for stewardship, and alternatively promotes local or regional greenways and trails as the place for hopeful sojourners to learn both the skill and the ethics requisite to their endeavor.

A Uhikesm can be tailored to benefit the particular interests of the sojourner. Springer Mountain, a rather nondescript place, has little significance outside of being officially designated as one end of the Appalachian Trail. One can imagine hundreds of places that could serve as a more meaningful beginning or end to a long distance hike. The Uhikesm can accommodate multiple recreational pursuits, such as a combined canoe and backpack journey. The Uhikesm can be just as long as the sojourner needs. Maybe a journey of 2000 miles is too long, or not long enough.

Yet we chiefly promote Uhikingsm in the spirit of MacKaye's vision for what a National Scenic Trail can provide for society. Uhikingsm would allow the "exotic" outdoor recreationists to "invade" the National Scenic Trail corridor without threatening the preservation of indigenous natural and cultural resource benefits.

One single Uhikesm, of course, does not remedy the problems caused by thru-hiking. Uhikingsm requires a support network as well, to attract sufficient numbers of outdoor recreationists that will alleviate the impacts of thru-hiking.

The Uhikingsm Support Network

Upon the return from our first official Uhikesm, T.R.A.I.L., Inc. will use the journey to help initiate our Uhikingsm support network. We will use trail, wilderness, and/or recreation conferences as forums for promoting the concept, as well as devoting our web site to that cause. T.R.A.I.L. will offer Uhikingsm patches based upon mileage (e.g., a 500-mile or a 2,000 mile patch) and keep official logs of Uhikers and Uhikessm. In the future we will feature a "Uhike of the Year" out of those journeys brought to our attention, and arrange for the journey's account to be published. T.R.A.I.L. will facilitate a Uhiker's Conference, when enough Uhikers exist to make such an event rewarding.

But T.R.A.I.L., Inc. can not act alone in our efforts to promote Uhikingsm. We can work with existing trail organizations, such as the Appalachian Trail Conference, to set up Uhike logs of their own, to further promote the Uhikingsm concept, and to eventually downplay thru-hiking. We will work with the affiliated municipal or nonprofit agencies to draw attention to their greenways and trails used for the purpose of Uhikingsm.

A successful support network will need to go beyond such efforts even further. Trail guides with a specific National Scenic Trail as a theme need to be replaced by guides with a region of trails as the focus. Some of the volunteer labor that goes into constructing shelters with frequency along a National Scenic Trail should be diverted to the local or regional trails, with the effect of making the local trails more attractive, particularly to hopeful sojourners.

Fortunately, only the Appalachian Trail now attracts thousands of thru-hikers to a particular place and time. But the numbers of thru-hikers are increasing for other trails as well. Constructing a Uhikingsm support network will take

time. Now is the time to start, with the intent that in a few years the flood of thru-hikers can be significantly diminished in some places, and effectively prevented in others.