

VALUE, MEANING AND THERAPEUTIC NOTIONS OF  
THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

by

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*For Aiden*

*May you always value nature, friendship, family and yourself,*

*Pursue your dreams and never stop learning.*

*You are my love,*

*Mom*

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Happy Trails to all!

December, 2014



*Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in where nature may heal and cheer and give strength to the body and soul.*

John Muir, 1912

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*

Thoreau, 1854

*“The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances may be. And I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles.”*

Anne Frank, 1944

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## **ABSTRACT**

Scholarship concerning therapeutic landscapes consider multiple dimensions of a therapeutic experience including physical, emotional, social and spiritual renewal. The Appalachian Trail was proposed by forester Benton MacKaye to provide an opportunity for recreation, recuperation and a place to seek physical and spiritual renewal. People who hike the entire 2,180-mile trail in one continuous hike (i.e. “thru-hikers) describe the trail through emotional, cultural, social and spiritual characteristics of their personal experience. The purpose of my study is to discover the meanings that characterize the trail’s landscape and how the thru-hiking experience reveals therapeutic notions of the Appalachian Trail’s landscape. A qualitative approach was utilized through surveys and semi-structured interviews. Results indicate experiential themes illuminating hikers’ perceptions of place and the therapeutic value of the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

*Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.*

John Muir, 1901

As John Muir expressed in his writings, time with nature can renew the spirit, rejuvenate the body and restore the senses. Whether it is a walk in a local park, a weekend camping excursion, or an extended backpacking trip deep into the wilderness, people go to nature to recreate, unwind from busy lives, and gain the therapeutic benefits nature has to offer. In 1948, returning World War II veteran Earl Shaffer, seeking the therapeutic benefits that a season in the wilderness might provide, began his historic Appalachian Trail hike to “walk off the war” and shake the sights, sounds and losses, he experienced overseas (Shaffer, 2004). In the nearly seventy years since, thousands have followed in his footsteps. The purpose of the research is to discover the values, meanings and therapeutic notions hikers form during their interactions with this iconic environmental feature and to illuminate experiential themes drawn from their interpretations of the trail and their hiking experiences.

Appalachian Trail long-distance hikers, also known as “thru-hikers,” attempt to hike the entire trail in one season. Each has their own reasons for hiking the Trail. They might view their thru-hike as a chance to escape their typical daily life, or an opportunity to slow

down and simplify their life as Thoreau did when he went to the woods of Walden Pond. Some seek to test their physical endurance or to improve their health. Some consider their journey a spiritual pilgrimage. As one hiker challenges the adversities of his physical capabilities by becoming the first blind hiker to thru-hike the entire trail (Irwin, 1995), another tests the physical limitations of living with epilepsy, but also seeks to witness God's beautiful creation through nature (Barnes, 2010). Like Earl Shaffer, many war veterans continue to hike the Trail supported by the Warrior Hike organization that sponsors veterans returning from active duty and deployment. By design, the Appalachian Trail offers a chance to leave modernity and urbanization behind and to have a wilderness experience, all within a day's drive from most urban centers in the eastern United States. Thru-hikers experience a wilderness landscape that presents physical and emotional struggles as well as accomplishments, and therapeutic benefits.

Whatever reasons draw a person to the trail, once there, they also realize they are not alone on their journey. The Appalachian Trail is a shared, social experience with each individual being a part of a unique hiking community. The interactions with others in this community can be a significant aspect of a thru-hike. Hikers build lifelong friendships with their fellow hikers and regularly experience human kindnesses and hospitality from other members of the community. This might entail the sharing of food or equipment, rendering first aid to a fellow hiker, or simply offering encouraging words when needed. Interestingly, most of these hikers have no prior relation and few commonalities with each other, save that they set the same goal of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. Hikers come from different social, economic, cultural and professional backgrounds and represent different age groups, genders and nationalities. Thru-hiking the Appalachian

Trail allows them to connect to each other in ways that they might not in their everyday lives. The thru-hiking community exists in a somewhat liminal state that adds a unique and valued aspect of trail experience.

It is through personal experience that place becomes imbued with meaning (Altman and Low, 1992). The Appalachian Trail traverses some of the eastern United States' highest and most breath-taking peaks, and travels through many mountain communities along the way. However, the meaning of the Appalachian Trail extends far beyond the physical landscape. Its landscape is much more significant and meaningful through the emotional, cultural, social and spiritual aspects of the thru-hiking experience. The purpose of my study is to discover the ways in which thru-hikers experience the Appalachian Trail. I explore the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience in order to discover the meanings that characterize the trail's landscape, define its sense of place, its value, and how the experience reveals therapeutic notions of its landscape. Using a qualitative approach, I acquired information through surveys and semi-structured interviews of both current and alumni thru-hikers. The structured survey related to hikers' perceptions of environment, place, and liminal experiences. I administered the survey online (see Appendix A) and in person (see Appendix B) during a popular Appalachian Trail summer hiking event. Additionally, I gathered qualitative descriptions from hikers through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C) administered during the same event. Together, the survey and interview results enable an interpretive analysis of hikers' perceptions and experiences. I develop experiential themes from this analysis illuminating hikers' perceptions of place, nature, and the therapeutic value of the Appalachian Trail thru-hike.

### History and characteristics of the study site

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rapid industrialization and urbanization rendered most large, United States cities crowded, polluted, and devoid of natural landscape features. New York's Central Park, completed in 1873, heralded a new age of urban park planning for American cities and, for many Americans, these large, manicured landscapes would be their closest connection to nature (Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1998). However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the U.S. government had established laws and agencies in support of forest and grassland conservation, the preservation of natural land features, and the protection of wilderness areas (Lowrey, 1981). This in turn opened up vast, public landholdings to adventurous and city-weary Americans seeking therapeutic benefits gained from interactions with wilderness and the intrigue of liminal experiences therein. In 1921, when American forester Benton MacKaye proposed the conservation of a thin strip of land in the Appalachian Mountain Range to "develop opportunities for recreation, recuperation and employment" to "tackle the problem of the 'menaces' of daily life by allowing people access to the wilderness" the proposal was embraced by naturalists and park planners alike (MacKaye, 1921). "MacKay foresaw the Trail as a 'levee' against pressing urbanization, a place where millions of Americans could seek physical and spiritual renewal from increasingly congested cities and suburbs within a day's drive" (ATC, 2012a). The trail opened in 1937 using both public lands and access to private property. In 1968, the Appalachian Trail became a unit of the National Parks System through the passing of the National Trails Act. Various federal and state authorities, as well as numerous volunteer organizations maintain the trail, depending on location. The

Appalachian Trail Conservancy manages conservation, promotion and funding for the trail. The trail spans approximately 2,180 miles through fourteen states, from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mount Katahdin, Maine (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Appalachian Trail Map

Source: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2012a

Following the Appalachian Mountain range, the Appalachian Trail traverses countless mountain summits including the Trail's highest elevation, North Carolina's Clingmans Dome at 6,643 feet. While not as high as the American Rockies, the Appalachian Mountains provide challenging and rugged terrain. Formed over 460 million years ago, the Appalachian mountain range has undergone significant erosion for the past 200 million years, which is evident with the rounded topography of most mountain summits (Birdsall *et al*, 2005). In the southern Appalachians, most summits are vegetated with pine and mixed hardwood, while many of the northern summits are above tree line, particularly New Hampshire's Presidential Range. Although most summits do encounter the weather of four distinct seasons, they seldom require complex technical mountaineering skills (e.g. ropes, crampons, ice axes, etc.). Typically, agile legs, a strong back, determination, and basic backpacking and camping equipment are the only essential tools needed to hike the trail.

Beginning at Springer Mountain, Georgia, The Trail's southern section traverses the Great Smokey and Blue Ridge Mountain ranges and travels through mixed hardwood forests and rhododendron stands, as well as crossing many rivers and reservoirs, including the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. The mid-section, covering West Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey and New York, while lower in elevation, crosses several significant waterways including the Delaware Water Gap and Hudson River. The northern section, which covers New England, traverses through mixed hardwood and deciduous forests and scales the Green Mountains of Vermont before crossing the Connecticut River and entering the Presidential Mountain range of New Hampshire. It then continues through Maine's western mountains, across the

Kennebec River and enters the 100 Mile Wilderness, which leads to the Trail's northern terminus, Mount Katahdin.

The Appalachian Trail has a multitude of scenic, historical and cultural sites along its linear landscape. It passes through eight national forests, two national parks and several state preserves (Fisher, 1972). The southern section traverses through sacred grounds of The Cherokee and navigates through gaps that opened access to the western frontier. The trail passes Civil War sites, as it travels through the cultural landscape of Appalachia. In the mid-Atlantic sections, the trail passes Harpers Ferry, West Virginia and the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah Rivers, the Delaware Water Gap, Hudson River, West Point and traverses within thirty miles of New York City. Entering into the northern section, the trail passes through quaint New England villages that were the setting of Frost's poetry, Emerson's literature, and the chronicles of Thoreau. The trail then takes on the challenging terrain of New Hampshire's Mount Washington, home to the World's highest recorded wind speed. In Maine, the Trail passes through lands heavily logged throughout the twentieth century. Remnants of logging camps still dot the landscape, as do numerous sporting camps. The trail's northern terminus, Mount Katahdin, is significant in the traditions and lore of both the Penobscot Nation and Maine's pioneers.

While hiking the Trail, or visiting the parks and forest along the way, visitors may encounter a plethora of flora and fauna. The trail is vegetated with trees such as maples, oaks, fir, mountain laurel and rhododendrons, wildflowers including columbine, bluets, jack-in-the-pulpit, lady slippers and trilliums. Visitors might also encounter fauna such as white tail deer, moose, black bears, beaver, feral ponies, turtles, salamanders and



snakes. The Trail is also home to avian species such as bald eagles, owls, loons and numerous songbirds.

Upon the writing of MacKaye's Appalachian Trail proposal, the proposed trail would be within a day's drive of approximately fifty percent of the country's population. According to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, ninety million people now live within a day's drive of the Trail, and anywhere from two to three million visitors walk a portion of the trail every year. Many of these people visit the National and State Parks, Forests and preserves that dot the Appalachian Trail, including the Great Smokey Mountain and Shenandoah National Parks, Nantahala, Jefferson, Cherokee, Green Mountain and White Mountain National Forests along with the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. However, the unique visitors to the Trail are its thru-hikers who spend up to seven months on the Trail.

The first recorded thru-hike took place in 1948, with a slow and steady growth in this activity over the following three decades. The numbers of thru-hikers grew more rapidly starting in the 1970's, and is now attempted by approximately two thousand people each year, with an average completion rate of twenty-eight percent (Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2012a). Thru-hikers spend anywhere from three to seven months on the trail, depending on their physical abilities, availability, and the depth of their motivation and commitment. Though thru-hikers come from a variety of age groups, more than half of all thru-hikers are in their twenties. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy also notes that people from over thirty-five countries have completed thru-hikes as well as several persons with disabilities, including two blind hikers and an amputee (ATC, 2014).

A good reference on thru-hiker demographics comes from Kyle's 2003 study that collected 1,879 surveys from hikers along the Appalachian Trail. Of these, 318 identified themselves as "thru-hikers." Of this group, eighty-three percent were male and seventeen percent female. The median age of their sample was thirty-eight, with largest group of thru-hikers being between nineteen and twenty-five years of age (37.5%). At ninety-seven percent, the largest racial group represented was white (Kyle *et al*, 2003).

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy reports that eighty-six percent of thru-hikers follow the trail northbound, though about ten percent set out on a southbound journey. The other three percent have some combination of each direction in order to complete the entire trail within one year. These "flip-floppers" typically need to switch directions, or skip ahead on the trail due to seasonal closures or other time constraints. Regardless of the purpose of hiking the trail, the direction or duration of time spent on it, the trail has indeed become a popular recreational asset on the American wilderness landscape.

The thru-hiking community uses some unique terminology to describe various people and happenings that occur on the trail. Several will be used in my research and require explanation, namely *trail names*, *trail magic* and *trail angels*. Trail names are nicknames that may be of personal choice or bestowed upon hikers by their fellow hikers during their hike. Hikers are identified by these names rather than using their birth names. Trail names are often descriptive of personal characteristics or events that occur to hikers while on the trail. Trail magic describes all the wonderful and unexpected kindnesses that hikers experience by others while on the trail. Trail magic might come in the form of a ride to town, accommodations, or free food. It is a wonderful act of hospitality shown to

hikers. The people that perform these acts of hospitality and kindnesses are “trail angels,” or providers of trail magic (Bruce, 2003).

Several other trail nomenclatures are pertinent to this study, and require clarification. First, I use the term “thru-hiker” throughout this document to represent both alumni hikers (i.e. those that have completed a thru-hike) and for hikers that were in the process of hiking the trail during the undertaking of this research. Some scholars, as well as hiking organizations, have contended that using the term “thru-hiker” means that the hiker has officially completed the trail. Rather, they opt to use the terms “long distance hiker” or “2,000 milers”, but as most hikers currently hiking the trail refer to themselves as “thru-hikers” I found it more appropriate to use this term in both speaking with and writing about my research subjects. I do however classify my subjects by using the terms “alumni hikers” to define a hiker who has completed a thru-hike prior to the time of this research and “current hikers” for were those that were in the process of attempting to complete a thru-hike during this research. I use the term “on-trail” life to describe hikers lived experience while attempting a thru-hike, while the term “off-trail” life describes a hiker’s life in their place of residence while not on the Trail.

## Research Goals

The goal of this research is to explore the Appalachian Trail's thru-hiking experience in order to discover its meanings, as perceived by thru-hikers, which characterize the trail's landscape and define its sense of place and value on the American landscape. The intent of this research endeavor is that the results will reveal therapeutic notions, presented in qualitatively derived experiential themes, of the Appalachian Trail landscape. I focus on exploring the meaning and value of the trail through the experience of its thru-hikers. This allows me to discover characteristics the trail's landscape and the thru-hiking experience that collectively describe its sense of place, and how these experiences reveal therapeutic notions of the Appalachian Trail.

Four themes are prevalent in my investigation of the Appalachian Trail as a therapeutic landscape. Shown in figure 2, they are adventure, nature, community and identity. My intent in using these themes is that they each contribute towards the consideration of defining the Appalachian Trail as a therapeutic landscape. Specifically, I will attempt to answer the following questions to meet my research goals:

1. How is the pursuit of adventure and connection to nature portrayed in the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience?
2. How is the Appalachian Trail's sense of community manifested from the shared experience?
3. What role does personal identity play in the thru-hiking experience?
4. Does the Appalachian Trail reflect the characteristics of a therapeutic landscape through the experience of its thru-hikers?

Through this process, I seek to understand the need for adventure and the importance of connecting to nature, find what benefits hikers gain from the experience and how it might change them. I strive to understand the value of the shared experience through the thru-hiking community. In order to achieve this, surveys and semi-structured interview questions were developed using themes such as escapism, community, identity and site specific experiences that might develop into notions of defining the Appalachian Trail as a therapeutic landscape. I use an inductive research method to find defining characteristics and meaning of the trail's landscape in an effort to gain a picture of the trail's overall sense of place. I conduct this research under the realm of human geography and utilize a phenomenological research approach (Tuan, 1977; Creswell, 2003; Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). I use principles of ethnography due to the shared cultural aspects of the group of participants and the interpretation of their values of the thru-hiking experience and the Trail's landscape.

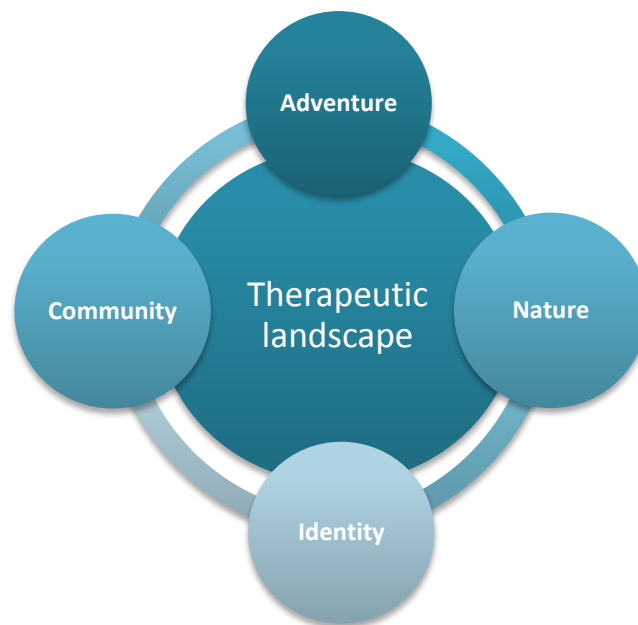


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

### Significance

The primary significance of my study is to expand the scholarship relating to sense of place, particularly in considering meaning making through a shared experience in a wilderness setting. I provide for a furthering of Platt's description of the non-economic value of land, utilizing Tuan's philosophies of meaning making through personal experience and Meinig's use of place and ideology as a concept of landscape interpretation. Secondly, I broaden the notion of the wilderness experience as a therapeutic endeavor, specifically how the Appalachian Trail may be defined as a therapeutic landscape, which will corroborate Gesler's and William's (Gesler, 1993; Willaims, 2007) definition and characteristics of therapeutic landscapes.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Wilderness

Wilderness is “nature in its original state, undomesticated or cultivated by man” (Waterman and Waterman, 1993). The Wilderness Act defines wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain...a place without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions.” (U.S. Wilderness Act, 1964). Using these descriptions, wilderness is a raw form of nature; a place where humans do not have permanence, though, throughout history humans has experienced enough wilderness to form a variety of beliefs and ideals about it.

Beliefs and notions of wilderness are reflective of culture and experience (Cronon, 1995). Judeo-Christian biblical references present wilderness as a place of exile, or a place to be tempted and tested. Moses and his people nearly lost sight of God while in the wilderness; Jesus faced temptation by the devil there. Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden into the wilderness after eating the forbidden fruit. The Bible portrays several meanings of wilderness. Adam and Eve’s wilderness is described as a place of “thorns and thistles”, however, Moses and his people’s 40-year wilderness experience describes wilderness as a “sanctuary from a sinful and persecuting society, and a wild country that came to signify the environment in which to find and draw close to God. It also acquired meaning as a testing ground where a chosen people were purged, humbled, and made ready for the land of promise” (Nash, 1982). These notions of wilderness carried through the exploration and settlement of the new world where

wilderness stood as a place of danger and wickedness, home to only savages (Cronon, 1995), or a place where a person was “likely to get into a disordered, confused or have a ‘wild’ condition” (Nash, 1982).

With the expansion of the new world, and later, with industrialization, wilderness became a resource to fuel civilization. Timber tycoons seized forested wilderness, species in the ocean wilderness were over-harvested, and hunters killed predator species to a point of near extinction. Humans attempted to tame and claim wilderness, making it his domain. This references another fundamentally held biblical belief that God created the world for humans, for man’s use through manifest destiny.

Contradictory to this belief, eastern religion and philosophies, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Shinto, reflected a much different view of the human-nature relationship, one in which humans was part of nature, and wilderness reflected the deity and a place where one could find their unity and rhythm with the universe (Nash, 1982). While Judeo-Christian beliefs were prominent during the expansion and urbanization of the United States, by the mid-nineteenth century some began to have discourse with this ideology and offered a new philosophy on wilderness that was more reflective of Eastern thought.

#### Transcendentalism and the American Wilderness

The transcendentalist movement, with thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir and John Burroughs, began to question societal and cultural norms surrounding the idea of wilderness. Wilderness began to be identified with romantic notions of the sublime. Transcendentalism depicted a parallelism between the higher realm of spiritual truth and the lower one of material objects. Man’s physical existence “rooted him to the material portion, but his soul gave him the potential to



*transcend* this condition” (Nash, 1982). Muir faced this balance between the objective and subjective notions of natural environs, finding it hard to explain the Sierra’s geology without also revering in the immense joy the mountains gave him (Cohen, 1984).

This new philosophy of wilderness considered man’s emotional connections to nature. Rather than seeing the wilderness as a place of evil, wilderness had religious undertones, a place where humans could experience the divine. The sublime landscape paintings of Thomas Cole and Frederick Church, and the writings of John Muir describing mountains as cathedrals further highlights this notion. Wilderness was no longer the home of the devil, but rather a place of beauty and wonder, a temple of God. Nature is as a “symbol of the spirit” (Emerson, 1836). The idea of spirituality in wilderness is evident in Muir’s abundant use of the word “glorious” to describe the wilderness, as “glorious” is an old testament term indicating God’s presence and indicate that wilderness could be viewed as a temple of God (Cohen, 1984). Theodore Roosevelt, though not a proclaimed transcendentalist, had come to believe that the United States was “nature’s nation, that the pristine landscape represented God’s best work.” (Brinkley, 2010).

By the mid-twentieth century, prominent members of the transcendentalist movement were pioneering a new philosophy of the wilderness, defining its value on the American landscape, and advocating for its preservation. Through experience, Thoreau sought to understand the value of wilderness; Muir promoted its value while Roosevelt used his political power to preserve it. Thoreau was perhaps the first to advocate, “to save wilderness for wilderness’s sake” by promoting national preserves “not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation” (Thoreau, 1858). The

Transcendentalist movement defined a new, non-economic value of the wilderness, to preserve it simply because it exists (Muir, 1912). The Roosevelt Administration passed two major legislative acts that preserved and protected the wilderness, the Yellowstone Act of 1872 and the Antiquities Act in 1906. Between these two acts five national parks, 23 national monuments, and more than 148 million acres of national forests came into being. (Melham, 1976; Brinkley, 2010).

While preservationist campaigned to preserve wild places, others sought a balance between responsible natural resource use and sporting and recreational uses of the wilderness through conservation. This started before transcendentalism took root, with New York's aristocratic hunters, who had concerns about over-forestation (e.g. clear-cutting) of the Adirondacks and Catskills, which they thought better to save for aesthetic, sporting and recreational pleasures. Later, Gifford Pinchot, father of the U.S. Forest Service, wanted Americans to avoid the extensive deforestation that he had observed in Europe. Rather, he promoted following the land philosophies such as George Perkins Marsh's, which incorporates a conservationist approach to wilderness with conservative land management practices, rather than the preservationist approaches of Muir (Cohen, 1984; Brinkley, 2010).

Aldo Leopold, who hailed from the same academic heritage as Pinchot and the Yale school of Forestry, studied under a philosophical approach to wilderness centered on conservation and resource management. However, Leopold later branched into ideals of preservation of the wilderness. Like Roosevelt, Leopold was an avid sportsman, and had an extensive knowledge and love of birds. Both of these men observed and reflected upon the rapidly diminishing supplies of wild game, fish and waterfowl in their lifetime.

This was Leopold's catalyst towards his wilderness preservation and habitat conservation ideals that sought to balance American's Wilderness philosophy (Nash, 1982; Brinkley, 2010). This balance that Leopold expounded was later reflected in regional planner Benton MacKaye's plans for the Appalachian Trail and the "balance between preservation, conservation and recreational space" (Nash, 1982), where the use of private land, managed forest and preserved park space were combined to make possible a National Scenic Trail.

The preservation of the wilderness areas continually increased through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and included the development of the footpaths such as the Appalachian Trail, a place where people could connect with wild nature and escape the menaces of the city. At the same time, urban planners and landscape designers such as Frederick Law Olmstead were designing parks that represented wilderness settings in public space. The American culture was latching onto the idea of wilderness as a place of escape from polluted and crowded cities, a place to restore health, and a place to recreate.

In 1913, a "wilderness cult" began with the story of a man who enters the wilderness of the Maine woods naked, and without any supplies, to live off the land (Nash, 1982). Newspapers in the eastern cities published this man's journey and the fascination with the wilderness grows. People start going to the wilderness to recreate, seek adventure and to test their physical endurance and stamina. Outing clubs affiliated with universities such as Harvard and Dartmouth began to organize expeditions into the eastern wilderness (Waterman and Waterman, 1989). Boy and Girl Scouts establish themselves to give children the opportunity to experience primitive experiences in the wilderness, and during this time, plans for the Appalachian Trail formalize.

This new usage of the wilderness, as a wilderness experience, answers the call of the Transcendentalist movement by encouraging people to gain the physical and spiritual benefits nature has to offer. Yet while this new philosophy provides the opportunity to physically and emotionally connect to the wilderness, this new wilderness philosophy is somewhat suggestive of Judeo-Christian notions of wilderness as place of temptation and testing. Appalachian Trail thru-hikers are testing their physical endurance by living and laboring in the wilderness, but for the three out of four hikers who do not complete their thru-hike, they may agree that the wilderness is still a place of testing.

### Escapism and the Wilderness Experience

Also factored into transcendentalist notions of wilderness was a discontent with the high-density populations, pollution and general unattractiveness of the American urban landscape at the time. Indeed, much of the philosophical contributions of both Thoreau and Muir evolved through their quest to escape civilization and experience the wilderness. Each go to the wilderness in an effort to find a depth of knowledge, meaning and appreciation of the natural environment. Thoreau had escaped Concord to his cabin on Walden Pond and for the Maine woods for a “rebirth of vitality and to escape the institutional dourness of Harvard” (Brinkley, 2010). In the case of Muir, he sought the mountains rather than the factory after suffering a nearly debilitating injury to his eyes (Melham, 1976). Muir returned to the mountains often, especially when he felt he was in danger of “being degraded by society” (Cohen, 1984). Theodore Roosevelt initially sought out the wilderness as a remedy to his chronic asthma, which he considered an ugly by-product of civilization’s stresses. He also saw the destruction of nongame birds as “emblematic of industrialization run amok.” (Brinkley, 2010).

In his journals, Muir describes his forays from civilization as “*escaped* to the woods”, “*escaped* to the fields”, “*escaped*...to the generous bosom of the woods”. Muir is a lifelong escapist, fleeing city grime for the “wildest, leafiest, and least trodden way” (Melham, 1976). Simplification is a part of escapism, as was the theme of Thoreau’s experience depicted in *Walden* (Thoreau, 1854).

The idea of escape from a person’s everyday life is a common theme in the wilderness experience. A common premise of escapism is one of leaving the stresses, complexity and uncertainty of everyday life (Tuan, 1998). Tuan furthers the notion of escapism, by exploring how nature provides a reality that “implies accepting one’s essential powerlessness, yielding or adjusting to circumambient forces, taking solace in some local pattern or order that one has created and to which one has become habituated” (Tuan, 1998). The wilderness experience of the Appalachian Trail may be characteristic of Tuan’s description of escapism; leaving one’s home and the attachments of thought and behavior to experience wilderness that might bring on a “heightened sense of self, and a feeling of aliveness” (Tuan, 1998). The Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience is one which might provide a “promise of a more confident self and a return to a bodily essence, replete with fantasies about getting back in touch with one’s nature” (Luxenberg, 1996).

### Solitude

Solitude often coincides with the motive of escapism, and is a characteristic of wilderness experience (Fisher, 1971; Tuan, 1976, MacLennan, 2005). As Tuan states; “in solitude a person creates his own world; safe from another’s gaze he seems to sustain the existence of all that he sees” (Tuan, 1976). Solitude allows time for reflection and thought. For example, in times of solitude, Muir pondered answers to questions essential

to America's future. He knew what it meant to be reborn in the wilderness (Cohen, 1984). More specifically, cognitive dimensions of solitude are found to include natural environmental factors (e.g. an environment free of man-made intrusions and noises, and the tranquility and peacefulness of the remote environment), intimacy (e.g. small, intimate group experience, isolated from all other groups, being able to limit your attention to only a few chosen people) and individualism (e.g. being relieved from rules and constraints of society) (Hammit, 1982). Transcendental experiences are accessible by times of solitude in the wilderness, by freedom of distractions of outside influences (Olsen, 1945).

Benton MacKaye developed the Appalachian Trail with the idea that it would allow for solitary time. MacKaye felt it was in humanity's best interest: "The first thing to understand is not the wilderness but the human". He began his own understanding by labeling two tendencies: the "gregarious" and the "solitary". These categories applied not to two groups of people but to "two human states of mind". At times, the individual craves the society of his fellows; on the other occasions, he seeks solitude (Nash, 1982). The Appalachian Trail, being a wilderness, yet in close proximity to civilization, and having a unique community provides both. As well, the Trail can provide solitude and a shared experience.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 characterizes wilderness as a place of "solitude and naturalness", however, one has to consider what characterizes solitude. Often depicted as true isolation from any other human being: it can also be characterized in having a sense of solitude during a shared experience. As found in a study of pilgrims of the Camino de Santiago de Compostella, solitude, as opposed to loneliness, is predicated on sociality and

can take the form of being with oneself while also walking beside others (Slavin, 2003). This opens an idea of solitude benefits, which are present under various social conditions. The realities are that many wilderness experiences take place in small social groups. It is a situation that harkens to the psychological concept “freedom of choice” explains this balance between privacy and solitude (Hammit, 1982) and is characterized by “being alone, together” where they have some control over the information they must process and the attention required of them to process it. In the case of long distance hiking, where true solitude intertwines in the shared experience, or is non-existent, it might be possible to have a positive experience where rewards and achievements are, in part, due to relationships that develop with other hikers (Breejen, 2007).

### Sense of Place

By definition, place is a physical environment in space (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Environment is a specific geographical location with boundaries. Location includes physical features, such as soils, rocks, vegetation, etc. However, a place is more than a space with a physical environment; it is a “physical space imbued with meaning” (Altman and Low, 1992). Humans live and interact with physical places. They have influence over the physical landscape; they build structures on it, cultivate it and developing their culture on it (Sauer, 1925). Observing the cultural geography of a landscape can provide a means to uncover the meanings that humans assign to landscape. The physical environment sets limits on human development. Geography is the study of how the physical environment affected or even caused human culture and activities.

Through cultural identity and cultural connections a strong sense of place, also known as *topophilia* [gk: “place” and “love of”], can emerge which provides meaning to

a particular place, affectively, the bond between people and place (Tuan, 1972). It is through this concept of sense of place that humans identify themselves with places and form emotional attachments to specific places based on their experiences. These experiences define the values and realities attached to place (Tuan, 1977). This sense of place maybe brought about through unconscious thought. As Relph states “Place is experienced without deliberate and self-conscious reflection, yet is full of significance” (Relph, 1976, 55).

The academic study of sense of place commonly revolves around the idea of place attachment, which can be broken down into two dimensions; place identity and place dependence (Williams and Roggenbuck, 1989). Place identity considers what a particular place means to an individual and how strongly they identify with that place, whereas place dependence relates to how a specific place compares to another, or if another place can substitute for it (Kyle *et al*, 2004). Place identity can provide an emotional or symbolic level of meaning between person and place (Proshansky *et al*, 1983). Place dependence perceives a place that supports a person’s activity, behavior and goals better than the alternative (Stokals and Schumaker, 1981). Place identity and place dependence have been the primary means which researchers investigate place attachment and to identify the relationship a person has to a place. Overall, the concept of place attachment symbolizes a person’s bonding to a setting (Low and Altman, 1992).

#### Place and social theory:

The term “place” signifies a “spatial entity that is experienced and perceived as meaningful by one person alone or by a group of people” (Canter, 1997). This definition



exhibits the social and cultural dimension used to describe place. The understanding of place is composed of an intertwining of social and cultural interactions and relations between people and the landscape (Hummon, 1992; Gustafson, 2001). The means by which place is understood is through a “dynamic; constructed, and continuously reconstructed social and political processes that assign meaning” (Cheng *et al*, 2003). The social processes that develop emotional bonds and attachment to place fall under the social and behavioral sciences (Gustafson, 2001). Thus, the theoretical concept of place takes on a humanistic perspective to describe the connections between humans and their environments.

Sense of place is a body of research that does not render easily definable variables or simple answers. The human concept of place is from a phenomenological perspective (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). Phenomenology steps away from classic scientific hypotheses of positivism and theory building and focuses more on how people experience their own milieus (Trentelman, 2009). Place takes on an iconic quality, which motivates people to view places as “benchmarks of experience, memories and values” (Chang *et al*, 2003). The theme of experience is the focus of much of Tuan’s philosophy of place in which he investigates the meaning of the lived experience (Tuan, 1977). Phenomenological approaches are appropriate for place-based studies as they center on investigating human subjects and the meaning of their lived experiences (van Manen, 1990; Creswell, 2003; Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012).

Place-based research is inherently an exploratory exercise. In being such, it is well suited for inductive research. Interpretive research’s goal is to “develop an understanding of social life and discover how people construct meaning in natural settings” (Patterson *et*

*al*, 1998). The interpretive paradigm considers the subjectivity of lived experience and posits that meanings that individuals attach to their experiences constitutes their reality (Pred, 1996). Place-based research is also a hermeneutic exercise in that a researcher attempts to interpret meaning from emergent experiences of place (Patterson *et al*, 1998). The interpretive researcher seeks to learn what is meaningful or relevant to an individual's experience in daily life by investigating a particular social setting and seeing it from the point of view of those in it. Humans attach different meanings to place based on their experiences. In order to discover these meanings, researchers perform inquiry and interpretation of a person's experiences. Inductive research begins with a general topic and is then refined into more exact theoretical concepts (Neuman, 2006).

### Landscape Interpretation

Land has multiple definitions and values. Platt describes land as having physical properties, real value, capital value and non-economic value (Platt, 1996). By describing land's physical properties, one considers tangible properties such as soils, vegetation, ground water and geology. Real estate gives land its value based on economic markets, potential development and use, but land's non-economic value is where the less tangible aspects of the landscape are considered. Non-economic value is more interpretive in nature than something that based on markets and potential use. The question of why humans value a landscape, beyond its monetary value, is often the focus of sense of place research, and the argument for wilderness preservation.

Some geographers focus on the subjective nature of landscape in a similar fashion to the interpretation of text, searching for conceived and perceived meanings derived

through the human experience (Williams *et al*, 1998). Human geographer's interpretations on the subjective meanings of landscape emphasize humanistic philosophical approaches (Meinig, 1979; Ley, 1985; Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987). Two of Meinig's landscape interpretations resonate specifically to the study of the sense of place. First is interpretation of landscape as *place*. Meinig states "focus should be concentrated on the landscape character and related phenomena, as well as psychological feel, spirituality and uniqueness". Secondly, interpretation of landscape as *ideology* is also relevant to sense of place research in that "the underlying consciousness, philosophies and self-perceptions should be considered" when interpreting the landscape (Meinig, 1979). Lewis further explores axioms for reading the landscape, with the understanding that "Landscapes carry many meanings. It is important to communicate multiple 'open-ended' landscape observations" (Lewis, 1979).

#### Sense of Place in wilderness recreation

Wilderness recreation experiences involve direct connection and experience in the wilderness environment. Patterson *et al* (1998) found that these experiences have four distinct dimensions built around the human experience in nature; challenge, closeness to nature, decision making not faced in everyday environments and stories in nature. They found that challenge and stories of nature defined the meaning of the experience and allowed a recreationist to recount and share their experience through stories with others. Closeness to nature was determined via encounters with nature (e.g. wildlife, site conditions) and decisions made in wilderness not encountered in everyday environs were typically based on way finding and facing the unknown (Patterson *et al*, 1998).

Sense of place and place meaning develop through a combination of biophysical, social and spiritual connotations that contribute to the overall meaning of a wilderness landscape (Frederickson and Anderson, 1999; Hutson *et al*, 2010). The combination of physical, social and spiritual attributes allow notions of sense of place in recreational settings to manifest themselves in emotional and symbolic ties to the natural environment through recreational experiences (Williams *et al*, 1992; Kyle et al, 2003; Kelly and Hosking, 2008). In a study of Whitewater River excursionists, participants signified special places that offered challenges, interesting landmarks, and unique natural features that contribute to their description of sense of place. The study revealed described places which included environmental or landscape characteristics (e.g. aesthetics, wilderness, remoteness, reverence, protection, preservation and signs of degradation), human-social dimensions (e.g. gathering places) and places of recreation activity (e.g. starting place, rapids) and places of heritage or history (Bricker and Kerstetter, 2002).

Interactions with the environment that contribute to the description of sense of place involve sensory modes that can be more passive or direct than others (Tuan, 1975). Wilderness recreation allows participants to be fully engaged in the outdoor setting and to have direct sensory and physical involvement with natural surroundings. People who connect to the natural environment in this way report feelings of psychological rejuvenation, independence and escape to the outdoors (Hutson *et al*, 2010). Recreationists also report that it is the collection of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and kinesthetic cues that made the place setting itself come 'alive' (Frederickson and Anderson, 1999).

In recreational activity, the attributes of sense of place can manifest themselves through the shared experience. “The bonds made through the shared experience have been found to be more prevalent than the physical attributes of a setting and are often rendered in personal narratives which are spatially anchored and shared with others over time” (Kyle and Chick, 2007). These can help to explain the social construction of place meaning. Recreation participants form bonds based on particularly difficult or challenging experiences they experience together which might involve teamwork or camaraderie where friendships are forged (Bricker and Kerstetter, 2002). People find that experiencing and remembering relationships of personal significance that form or refine themselves in a particular place can assign meaning to that place, and that group and cultural engagement are a significant component of the recreation experience (Hutson *et al*, 2010).

It is rare for a person to acquire a sense of place in a brief or fleeting experience. To know a place well requires deep involvement (Tuan, 1975). As the individual becomes more familiar with the particulars of a place, one becomes part of the place itself, “moving from a position of being ‘outside’ the biophysical and social dynamics that characterize a particular place to that of being on the inside” (Buttimer and Seamon, 1980). It is conceivable that the longer a person’s recreational experience in the wilderness, the more robust their sense of place may be. For instance, long distance hikers who experience a wilderness landscape for an extending length of time develop a progression of sense of place over their time in the wilderness. Their sense of place may differ greatly in the casual day hiker or weekend backpacker.

Appalachian Trail thru-hikers may have a stronger bond with the trail and more emotional description of sense of place, as they are able to recall sites of significant meaning that contribute to their notions of sense of place on the trail through their own experience. Additionally, there is the possibility that through a strong attachment to place, hikers become more involved with the preservation of the trail, its landscape and the wilderness experience of hiking. This harkens to Meinig's concept of non-economic or intrinsic values of land (Meinig, 1979). Emotional attachment to places can be an important component to incorporate into recreation, land management and conservation plans (Eisenhauer *et al*, 2000). One such plan is the United States Forest Service's Recreational Opportunity Spectrum, which focuses on managing recreation opportunities with a combination of physical, biological, social and managerial factors that are reflective of sense of place attributes (Clark and Stankey, 1979).

### Therapeutic landscapes

Wilderness and nature have come to represent a place to escape crowded cities and the busyness of life (Tuan, 1998). Wilderness and nature can provide environs that have restorative properties for both mind and body (Hoyez, 2007; Lea, 2008). Muir states that "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is a necessity" (Muir, 1918). The planning of accessible wilderness landscapes has kept this in mind. Indeed, the notion of wilderness and nature providing physical and mental health benefits is part of Benton MacKaye's original plan for the Appalachian Trail:

*"The oxygen in the mountain air along the Appalachian skyline is a natural resource (and a national resource) that radiates to the heavens its*

*enormous health-giving powers with only a fraction of a percent utilized for human rehabilitation. Here is a resource that could save thousands of lives. The sufferers from tuberculosis, anemia, and insanity go through the whole strata of human society...Many of these sufferers could be cured. But not merely by "treatment". They need comprehensive provision made for them. They need acres not medicine."*

(MacKaye, 1921).

Thompson provides a summary of the history of natural landscapes and their correlation to human health and well-being, noting that they encourage people to be more physically active and may benefit mental health. The earliest views of therapeutic landscapes stem from the biblical reference of the Garden of Eden as being a "paradise" and "heavenly". Greek, Roman and Medieval time periods viewed the countryside as providing physical health benefits and as a place where the sick could benefit from restorative and preventative health. English gardens and the urban parks movement in the United States were able to provide an escape from the unsanitary conditions of high-density urban living and promote health and outdoor activity that could refresh and rejuvenate the spirit (Thompson, 2011). Aesthetics and recreation play a large role in these landscapes and ultimately characterizes a landscape that people can recover from mental fatigue (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). Tuberculosis, which was "widely regarded as a disease of civilization and its treatment was deemed to require a return to nature" (Kearns and Collins, 2000).

Most scholarship on therapeutic landscapes stems from the fields of environmental psychology, behavioral geography and medical geography. Scholars in each of these fields appear to be under a consensus that a therapeutic experience will fit into a combination of physical, mental or spiritual renewal (Gesler, 1992; Kearns and Gesler, 1998; Williams, 1998). Gesler defines therapeutic landscapes as "place settings,

situations, locals and milieus that encompass both the physical and psychological environments associated with treatment or healing and the maintenance of health and well-being” (Gesler, 1996). To consider what may be achieved through experience in therapeutic landscapes, Palka adds that “therapeutic landscapes are a place of health which promotes wellness by facilitating relaxation, restoration and enhancing some combination of physical, mental and spiritual healing” (Palka, 1999). The study of therapeutic landscapes considers multiple dimensions of landscape, such as the physical environmental, cultural, emotional and social elements that play a role in healing and well-being (Hoyez, 2007).

Both Gesler’s and William’s research in therapeutic landscapes consider several philosophical concepts. Gesler’s work in therapeutic landscapes finds themes borrowed from “cultural, humanist and structuralist geography and the principals of holistic health” (Gesler, 1993). His work centers on four themes borrowed from humanistic geography that are pertinent to the definition and study of therapeutic landscapes; sense of place, interpretations of cultural landscapes and the importance of symbols in creating landscapes, as well as the role of everyday life in landscape creation (Gessler, 1993).

Williams incorporates the humanistic concepts of symbolic landscapes, importance of meaning, value and experience, sense of place, landscapes of the mind and hermeneutic interpretation as part of a holistic model of therapeutic landscapes. These landscapes provide healing, as well as the maintenance of health and well-being (Williams, 1998). A holistic health approach provides for multiple dimensions of therapeutic landscapes including physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, environmental and social factors (Deliman and Smolowe, 1982).



Landscape's symbolic meanings can come from the "construction of cultural images, meanings and signs" (Ley, 1985). "Culture provides for systems of belief, values and traditions that tie symbolism of landscape to the human experience" (Wilson, 2001). The symbolic nature of long-distance trails on the wilderness landscape can be tied to the 1968 National Trail System Act, which provided a federal policy to recognize and promote trails through financial assistance, support for volunteers and coordination with state agencies to promote and recognize the National Scenic Trails. Providing for public access to, travel within and enjoyment and appreciation for open air, outdoor areas and historic resources of the nation the Act provides designation and value to footpaths such as The Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail and Continental Divide trail (US Government Document, 1968). Through the provisions of this Act, Americans have come to celebrate and value these wilderness spaces for their symbolism and therapeutic aspects.

With regard to sense of place, particular sites can acquire a spirit or personality through the lived experience, which contributes to the meaning of place (Tuan, 1977; Pred, 1983). Williams states, "It is through lived experience that moral, value and aesthetic judgments are transferred to particular sites which, as a result, acquire a spirit or personality. It is this subjective knowledge that give subjective places significance, meaning and felt value for those experiences them". (Williams, 1998). If these experiences are positive, they can contribute to therapeutic notions of the experience and the landscape (Jackson, 1989). Landscapes that provide networks of interpersonal concern and caring environments can provide authentic or caring properties of the place (Relph, 1976).

### Restorative experiences and environment

Environmental psychologists use the notion of “therapeutic landscapes” to understand how and why people react to landscapes. This field of inquiry is concerned with the relationships between human behavior and the physical environment (Heimstra & McFarling, 1974). Environmental physiologists incorporate experimental and empirical study of how people respond to landscapes in order to gain an understanding of the healing potential of landscapes (Pranikoff and Low, 2007). Factors for these types of study, include stress responses, diastolic blood pressure, pulse rate, skin conductance and muscle tension (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan and Kaplan 1989; Ulrich, 1983).

Psychological research observes experience in therapeutic landscapes through the analysis of directed attention and restorative theory (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). Kaplan’s study explains that in order for a person to solve a problem, they need to be able to provide directed attention at the problem in order to solve it, but the fatigue of a hectic, busy lifestyle, and the stresses related to it prohibit a person from solving problems. Kaplan entertains the idea that an alternative, “involuntary attention”, might indirectly solve problems. This type of attention is possible within a wilderness or natural experience, as one of the Kaplan’s studies found with the emotional and cognitive changes occurring in participants of outdoor challenge programs. Wilderness landscapes provide for this type of recovery by having the “special advantage in terms of providing an opportunity for reflection, which can further enhance the benefits of recovering from directed attention fatigue” (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989).

Using Kaplan and Kaplan's attention restoration theory, people who participated in a wilderness backpacking vacation were more likely to benefit in terms of attention capacity in comparison to people who had a vacation in an urban setting, or no vacation at all (Hartig *et al*, 1991). Hartig compared psychological stress recovery and directed attention restoration in natural and urban field settings using repeated measures of ambulatory blood pressure, emotion and attention. Walking in a nature reserve initially fostered blood pressure change that indicated greater stress reduction than afforded walking in an urban environment. Herzog found that natural environments were more likely have potential to support an individual's ability to focus on personal problems than were sports and entertainment and urban settings (Herzog *et al*, 1997). Herzog also found that students had higher restorative potential with natural settings as opposed to urban settings after a stressful experience (Herzog *et al*, 2003).

Restorative effects of viewing real forest landscapes versus urban landscapes considers both physiological and psychological relaxation effects. There is influence on viewing visual images of natural scenes and the production of restorative experiences (Chang *et al*, 2008), such as participants felt more comfortable, soothed and refreshed when viewing a forest landscape than an urban one (Lee *et al*, 2009). Another study found that there is an increase in positive affective responses to the forest setting over time, accompanied by increased trust, exploratory activity and social cohesion, dimensions linked in the literature with well-being (Roe and Aspinall, 2011).

Physiological and emotional changes while viewing the natural environment encompass factors of the natural environment and the built environment, particularly with the location of mental hospitals (Hoey, 2007) or the landscapes utilized for health

spas/health camps (Kearns and Colins, 2000). Psycho-evolutionary theory which was postulated by Ulrich, considers the notion that a person's reaction to the environment is automatic, or without cognitive mediation. The initial response to the environment is affective, emotionally and psychologically, rather than cognitive, and the natural environment has a calming effect because it is a "non-taxing stimulus that elicits positively toned emotional states" (Ulrich, 1983).

Ulrich's research involved two groups of hospital patients who were recovering from the same surgery; one group were placed in a hospital room with a window that viewed the natural environment (e.g. trees, plants, sky), and the other the built environment (e.g. walls, building). The patients with the nature view were found to spend one less day in the hospital, had fewer negative comments on their care and needed less pain medication (Ulrich, 1984). Research findings of this type is why many hospitals have begun to incorporate more natural elements in their building design to facilitate a healing, therapeutic environment (Hoey, 2007). Healing gardens are an example of these types of design elements, which have been found to help in the healing process, particularly where the healing gardens facilitates social relations (Pranikoff, 2006). Other experimental research has included measured improvement after a stressful experience from preferences of viewing natural environments over the built environment (van den Berg *et al*, 2003).

Kaplan and Talbot developed a framework for the characteristics that make an environment restorative. This framework includes four themes. The first, that a restorative environment much possess the aspect of "being away" from one's usual daily scenes and activity, both conceptually and physically. Secondly, that the environment

must have “extent” into a whole other world beyond the immediate setting, and thirdly, that there should be “compatibility” between the environment and one’s purposes and inclinations. Finally, an aspect of “fascination” should be present. This aspect asserts that certain objects or processes capture and hold attention that would allow involuntary effort to indirectly solve problems (Kaplan and Talbot, 1983). Several of these themes describe the “lived experience” in wilderness (Fredrickson and Anderson, 1999).

Kaplan and Kaplan’s attention restoration theory holds that the final phase of a restorative experience is a period of self-reflection where individuals can think about their lives and priorities in a clearer, rational manner. One interesting result that Ulrich’s research found was that the period immediately following a wilderness experience may be properly characterized as one of mixed feelings. Although people may feel rejuvenated, they may also experience negative thoughts and feelings about returning to their usual setting and situations (Ulrich, 1983).

The concepts and descriptive elements of therapeutic landscapes fall at the intersection of geography and health. Medical, or health, geography might include the study of the existence of physical characteristics that have healing properties; therapeutic health centers locations, or the patterns of disease and treatment. As Gesler states, “There is a long tradition that healing powers may be found in the physical environment, whether this entails materials such as medicinal plants, the fresh air and pure water of the countryside, or magnificent scenery (Gesler, 1992). Gesler also notes that while biomedical properties exist in nature, such as medicinal plants and mineral waters, medical geographers may also incorporate ideas from social theory in order to address such issues as what makes place truly therapeutic (Gesler, 1993).

The concept of therapeutic landscapes in medical geography often encompasses the therapeutic aspects of spa and retreat centers. Here, nature is an “active participant” in the therapeutic landscape (Lea, 2008). For example, in yoga practice, the ashram provides the ideal therapeutic environment. Ashrams are a place where “humans and nature are united and which provide natural elements such as “mountains, rivers, and a pleasant climate”. They have environmental, cultural and social elements that all play a role in the healing and well-being of a person (Hoyez, 2007). Popular yoga retreats in India exhibit these properties, specifically for their proximity to the Himalayas and The Ganges. Retreat centers around the world emulate these properties, via representative landscapes and photographs, to produce a similar therapeutic environment (Hoyez, 2007).

Medical geography might also consider the availability of healing agencies on the landscape such as health camps, treatment and rehabilitation centers (Kearns and Collins, 2000; Romig and Feidler, 2008). Therapeutic use of place to promote health and well-being in the realm of mental asylums and rejuvenating landscapes of the over-urbanized middle class (Hoey, 2007). In a study that investigated the relationship between public open space and mental health, quality public open space provided positive psychosocial factors such as social support and a sense of community. Thus, residents of neighborhoods with high quality public open space had higher odds of low psychosocial distress than did residents in neighborhoods with low quality public open space (Francis *et al*, 2012).

Another characteristic of therapeutic landscapes includes religious or traditional sites of healing. These are often sites having a natural water source. France’s Pyrenees Mountains and the site of Lourdes’ is a site of miraculous healing powers as told in the

religious experience of the healing powers of its natural spring. Pilgrims experience the site as having characteristics that promote physical, mental and spiritual transformation (Gesler, 1996). The Grecian location of Epidaurus, another site for healing from historical accounts of these locations healing climate, water quality and scenic environ (Gesler, 1993). On American soil, one might consider Hot Springs, Arkansas as a therapeutic landscape.

In another therapeutic sense, wilderness and nature experiences may, for some, have a spiritual quality. Wilderness and natural landscapes can offer a setting for reflection, prayer and solitude. Frederickson and Anderson found that solitude experienced in a wilderness setting provides time to contemplation of some of life's biggest concerns, which can have an overall positive effect on the spiritual, mental and emotional well-being of groups of women. The study also cited that time in the wilderness allows participants to become more aware of the power of nature has to provide spiritual inspiration (Fredrickson and Anderson, 1999). While solitude is one characteristic that might allow a spiritual experience in nature, Frederickson and Anderson also found that social interactions and shared experience could contribute to the effects of a meaningful spiritual experience. Social interaction happens to be a significant part of hiking long distance trails, can provide a sense of community and shared goals.

The dynamics between wilderness recreation participants and the environment play a major part in interpreting the wilderness place setting as spiritually inspirational in that it can put people in a state of mind that potentially evokes spiritual contemplation. Frederickson and Anderson, 1999). Those who subscribe to the spiritual view seek to

unity with nature and that the outdoor setting can evoke spiritual beliefs (Hutson *et al*, 2010).

Many who participate in outdoor recreation long to benefit from connecting to the natural world, to wilderness or to green space. “The desire for outdoor recreation in more open, greener surroundings is perhaps an understandable response to the confinement and pressures of living in an urban environment. Rural landscapes can evoke the fascination of a lost domain, somehow ‘left behind’ in the modern race for progress” (Aitchison *et al*, 2000). This reflects the components of a restorative experience penned by Kaplan and Kaplan.

The therapeutic aspects of recreating in wilderness space were the subject of Palka’s work in Denali National Park. Visitors perceived Denali to be a therapeutic landscape, combining the effects of the tranquil setting, pristine environment, particularly air, water and extended sunlight, undisturbed flora and fauna and the harmonious social relationship, which people develop while in Denali (Palka, 1999). This reflects Wilson’s *biophilia* hypothesis and Tuan’s *topophilia* where the park’s landscape inspires a feeling of affection and a bond between people and place (Tuan, 1972; Wilson, 1984).

#### Walking as a Therapeutic Activity

Recreation participants proceed into nature and wilderness with specific goals and expected outcomes in mind, of which therapeutic benefits are often sought (Hutson *et al*, 2010). The cohesion of body and spirit is a topic that has been entertained in the experience of long-distance hiking, particularly to sites of religious pilgrimage such as Spain’s Camino de Santiago de Compostella. Religious and non-religious people alike



are drawn to journey through this 800-kilometer route every year. For each pilgrim, the act of walking, is a phenomenon of the spiritual experience; “the central reason for walking a pilgrimage is to engage in a meditative practice. One focused upon the journey and the self as opposed to the destination” (Slavin, 2003).

This kind of walking Thoreau calls a “return to the senses”. Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago de Compestella commented that in comparing bicycling or walking the Camino, that it must be very difficult to be meditative at 40kph (Slavin, 2003). The point of one’s walking is to bring oneself back to the present moment, also a component in yoga and meditative practices.

The act of walking a pilgrimage attained prominence with the emergence of historical religions (Turner and Turner, 1978). Jews are led to the Western Wall; Muslims complete their pilgrimage to Mecca and Christians to Jerusalem. The pilgrimage encompasses one of the basic modes of walking, “walking in search of something intangible” (Solnit, 2000) Pilgrimage is an act of transformation being that “a pilgrimage entails a journey from one place to another, from one aspect of one’s life to another” (Gesler, 1996). Pilgrimage entails the idea that religion has physical properties:

*Pilgrimage is premised on the idea that the sacred is not entirely immaterial, but that there is a geography of spiritual power. Pilgrimage walks a delicate line between the spiritual and the material in its emphasis on the story and its setting: though the search is for spirituality, it is pursued in terms of the most material details-of where the Buddha was born or where Christ died, where the relics are or the holy water flows.*

Solnit, 2000

Pilgrims often try to make their journey harder, recalling the origin of the word travel in *travail*, which also means work (Solnit, 2000). Pilgrims who climb Croagh

Patrick in Ireland do so barefoot, many pilgrims of Santiago de Compostella finish their journey on their knees, while other pilgrims make journeys to religious sites carrying crosses. “There is a symbiosis between journey and arrival in Christian pilgrimage, as there is in mountaineering. To walk there is to earn it, through laboriousness and through the transformation that comes during a journey” (Solnit, 2000). The transformative experience involves pilgrims’ perceptions of the world. They develop a changing sense of time, a heightening of the senses, and a new awareness of their bodies and the landscape (Frey, 1996).

Anthropological approaches to pilgrimage generally take into account the work of Victor and Edith Turner, which centers on the notion of liminality. The Turners investigated how pilgrimage produced liminal identities in pilgrims and liminoid social spaces in relation to surrounding society. Pilgrimage can be akin to a rite of passage, which goes through three phases. First, the pilgrim leaves everyday life. Second, the pilgrim undergoes a period of liminality when the pilgrim is in an ambiguous state. Thirdly, the pilgrim returns to a society (i.e. everyday life) where customary relationships approached under new conditions (Turner and Turner, 1978).

The liminal state of the pilgrimage is evident in the interactions between pilgrims, who rarely engage in issues of personal histories. Few or none of the attributes of the past or future matters. However, they are very social with each other, sticking to concrete and shared experiences (Slavin, 2003). Upon returning to the ‘real world’ of everyday life, pilgrims can sometimes enhance their mundane status through having made the journey (Turner and Turner, 1978).

The Appalachian Trail, while not known as a true religious pilgrimage, often takes on a spiritual significance to some of its thousands of hikers every year though the process of time for solitude and reflection (Deeds, 1996; Sandul, 2003; Stutzman, 2010; Dean, 2011). Many wilderness experiences are not static, but rather a journey, where one moves through a wilderness environment, perhaps by foot as with the Appalachian Trail, where the wilderness is experienced at three miles per hour (Solnit, 2000). With this speed of travel across the landscape, the activity of walking is not just an act of physiological movement, but also one with psychological effects.

Early notions of incorporating walking and thinking are evident in Greek architecture design in the agora and other public spaces, which accommodated for walking as a social and conversational activity. Early philosophers took to their feet; Aristotle lectured and taught while walking and Nietzsche declared that solitary walks out in landscape were a favorite form of recreation (Solnit, 2000). These early philosophers give credence to the term ‘thinking on your feet’. Rousseau reflects the symbiosis of walking and thinking poignantly:

*“I can only meditate when I am walking...when I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs...never did I think so much, exist so vividly, and experience so much, never have I been so much myself as in the journeys I have taken alone and on foot. There is something about walking which stimulates and enlivens my thoughts. When I stay in one place I can hardly think at all; my body has to be on the move to set my mind going”* (Rousseau, 1953).

In long distance hiking, the act of walking as a daily activity starts as conscious physical activity with some reluctance. However, this initial “physical” phase gradually becomes so rhythmic that it becomes a semiconscious physical effort as the mind becomes meditative as the body falls into a rhythm (Slavin, 2003). Thus, walking can

provide a rhythm to life and a chance for thought and meditation. Over a time, long distance hikers maybe more readily able to benefit from the rhythm of walking that leads to a more meditative and reflective experience rather than those of short distance hikers whose experience may be more emergent, then taper (Rogenbuck, 2001).

The other important factor in the activity in walking is the landscape that one travels. It contributes to both the physiological and psychological effects of walking. Solnit states that walking is “a state in which the mind, body and world are aligned” which “allows us to be in our bodies and in the world without being made busy by them”. This leads to “a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts” (Solnit, 2000). In a study of long-distance hikers in the English Countryside, and the act of walking and thinking were found to evolve from a physical act to a practice that achieves a “reflexive awareness of the self, and particularly the body and senses where walking produced an embodied practice that was interpretive of space and place” (Edensor, 2003).

Long distance hiking, biking, ultra-marathons or any other extended recreational activity that one might commit to for a long duration of time might strike some as a somewhat addictive behavior. There is some scholarly attention to extensive or excessive exercise and the mental effects of such commitment. Coined as “positive addiction” this theory resonates well with the idea of therapeutic aspects of recreational activity (Glasser, 1976). A positively addictive activity is an activity that is non-competitive and voluntarily and one that an individual holds some value in, either physical, mental or spiritual. It is an activity where “persistence and improvement is only self-measured and is accomplished without criticizing oneself”, and an activity that allows a person to enter

“a zone” where the brain is able to enter a mentally relaxed positive state that provides an extremely optimal condition for a therapeutic experience (Glasser, 1976). Examples of benefits seen through positive addiction activities including giving up bad habits, mental alertness, increased sense of confidence, increased self-awareness, physical feeling of well-being and becoming more tolerable of others and less angry (Gassler, 1976).

Meditative properties of walking come about through physical movement, but also through the landscape one traverses. The landscape is a key component in the therapeutic aspect of pilgrimage and other journeys. The elements of the physical environment, scenery or expansiveness found in landscape might provide for inspiration, meditation and comfort. In one study, participants spoke of the expansiveness of the landscape and an awareness of the sheer powers of nature as contributing to a meaningful experience, which thereby acted as spiritual inspiration. Moreover, positive interpersonal interactions combined with complete immersion in a wilderness setting seemed to influence one’s proclivity to perceiving elements of the landscape as possible sources of spiritual inspiration (Fredrickson and Anderson, 1999).

### Identity

The review of therapeutic landscape literature broached the idea that therapeutic experiences in nature have profound effects on personal identity. “People assign importance to places just as they do to objects or possessions, and places help them to identify themselves” (Williams and Roggenbuck, 1989). Experience in special places can allow for deliberate and self-conscience reflection, which is full of significance (Relph, 1976). The following excerpt is an example of this reflection of self from an Appalachian Trail thru-hiker:

*“Was this a man much given to a lot of hugging and weeping back home? Somehow I doubt it. My guess is that Chief’s sentimental side is a surprise even to himself. That’s what coming face-to-face with the thought of six months in the woods will do to you: as soon as you realize you have the chance to be a different person, you become one. You can forget who you are. This is no accident when you’ve spent miles wondering, with every labored step, Who is the person who has decided to try this?-wondering who you are. You have nothing but time to answer the question, to give a new account of yourself. Your only witness might be a blanket of cool moss on a sunny day, or a panorama of endless mountains, or a young doe grazing by the Trail. You’ve yet to discover that the journey is the destination. So you lose yourself, then you find yourself again, farther along.” (Porter, 2009)*

William’s work in therapeutic landscapes also contemplates this. “Extended time in wilderness can provide for measures of self-identity and physiological rootedness which is usually achieved through long-standing and possible ongoing relationships with a certain place. Findings of self-identity and security are characteristic of physiological rootedness” (Williams, 1998).

Connection to nature can facilitate reflection on identity. “Some people need to connect with nature at a deep and personal level, even to redefine themselves in way that includes the natural world” (Clayton and Opatow, 2003). Place plays a key role in how an individual define themselves in relation to external environment (Proshansky, 1978). Place can be an identifying factor for people, such as being from a certain place, or experienced a particular landscape. This is how places factor into relational factors between place and identity (Hutson *et al*, 2010).

Identity is a product of social behavior (Clayton & Opatow, 2003). The people we associate with all assist in providing feedback into our identities. “In the course of our daily lives we encounter many people who contribute to our sense of self (Bruhn, 2005).

Leisure is quite central to the developmental requirements of the life journey. “Many of the crucial elements of being and becoming human through the changes of life are found, expressed and worked out in leisure” (Kelly and Godbey, 1992). Leisure activities can contain several elements that contribute to identity. This may include issues of competence (i.e. asking oneself “can I do it?”), frequent and direct measures of skills and presentation and validation of identities through leisure roles with others (e.g. leadership). In addition, there more materialistic signs of identity through leisure including T-shirts, patches, stickers or license plates (e.g. “I’d rather be hiking/surfing/flying”) letterman jackets, hunting gear) all are symbols of one’s identity or a particular facet of valued aspects of self that are acted out in leisure activities (Kelly and Godbey, 1992).

### Community

The thru-hiking community holds great significance and meaning to the total Appalachian Trail experience, providing a source of support, companionship, belonging and shared identity. The strength and loyalty of this community is evident in many published anecdotal narratives (Ross, 1982; Luxenberg, 1994; Setzer, 1997; Rubin, 2001) and academic research that investigates this phenomenon (MacLennan, 2005; Ketterer, 2011). The Appalachian Trail community is composed of current hikers, alumni hikers, trail related businesses, trail volunteers and the many people that help or assist hikers known as “Trail Angels”. The interactions within this community can be some of the most valued experiences during one’s thru-hike. Definitions and theory of community will help to reveal the concepts of the development, identity and significance of the

Appalachian Trail community and provide an understanding of the importance of the communal and social aspects of the Appalachian Trail experience.

Most textbook definitions of community include three components; locale, relationship and a shared sense of belonging (Sampson, 1999; Bruhn, 2005; Blackshaw, 2010). Territorial notions of city, town, neighborhood and the like easily explain locale. Relationships between humans can take different forms. While a group of people might share space within geographical bounds, the relational characteristics of a group are by membership in an organization, association or any other form of social network without reference to location (Gusfield, 1975). A shared sense of belonging of community present itself in common goals, values, and way of life, commitments and like-mindedness of the persons within the group. The idea of these shared characteristics provides members a way of reinforcing each other with positive feelings of mutual commitment and responsibility (Bruhn, 2005; Blackshaw, 2010) and allows for the identification of each other as members of the group (Mason, 2000).

### Imagined and Utopian Communities

The traditional origins and modern meanings of community fall under the realm of sociology and anthropology. From a practical standpoint, the earliest origins of community come from the pre-modern era when groupings of humans might provide protection from predators, formation of hunting parties, and overall cooperation and communication that improved chances for survival (Bruhn, 2005). Uncovering the modern meanings of community is more of a hermeneutic exercise where community is a concept or narrative between reality and imagination (Blackshaw, 2010). Imagined



communities long for a utopian sense of community where bonds between people are pure and social harmony and stability exists, but in reality modern communities may not reflect this (Wegner, 2002).

Sociologist Tönnies's study of social groups provides an ontology of community under the theory of 'gemeinschaft and gesellschaft'. Gemeinschaft, which translates to 'community', refers to a singular community (i.e. 'humans') based on "simple, intimate social relations of familial ties and kinship bound together by traditions and language in a village type setting". In comparison, gesellschaft, translated as 'society' is "the idea of community has become filled with impersonal and contractual relations of a more calculated kind, served by self-interest, competitiveness and formal relationships" (Tönnies, 1955). The latter paints an un-utopian view of community, which suggests that "societal changes erode the traditional conceptions of community" (Berger, 1988).

#### Communitas and the liminal state

Introduced by anthropologist Victor Turner's research in rituals and rites, the concept of *communitas* is reflective of a utopian community. Simply defined, *communitas* refers to an "unstructured, egalitarian community with a strong sense of community, solidarity and togetherness, reflecting homogeneity and comradeship" (Turner, 1969). Relational bonds formed through *communitas* are "anti-structural, direct, extant, non-rational, existential" and "not shaped by norms" where "identities are liberated from conformity of general norms" (Turner, 1974). Turner contends that *communitas* occurs in a liminal state where participants in ritual are on a threshold

between societal norms of identity, roles and community and that these are alternatively defined, dissolved or ignored in ritual:

*Communitas is considered a transient condition as society continues in an orderly fashion at the same time as individuals experience communitas, in many instances being “only a moment in time out of secular social structure which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties” (i.e. caste, class)” (Turner, 1974).*

When and where *communitas* is experienced varies, though it is observed in groups of individuals sharing a common experience and occurs through the “readiness of the people to rid themselves of their concern for status and dependence on structures and see their fellows as they are” (Turner, 2012). These common experiences might be spiritual ritual, disasters, oppressed peoples, social movements, near death experiences and rites of passage. They might occur through work situations, times of stress, disaster, revolution, festivals, music, and in nature (Turner, 2012).

As Turner’s theory suggests, *communitas* is present in leisure settings and can extend into wilderness recreational experiences (Kemp, 1999; Sharpe, 2005 and Varley, 2011) and pilgrimage (Eade, 1992). The nature of wilderness experiences, such as the Appalachian Trail, or other long distance trails or pilgrimages, fits into *communitas* as it is a community where participants share an experience that exists on both a symbolic and physical threshold of escape from normative society (Cohen and Taylor, 1976; Solnit, 2000).

The social aspects of wilderness recreation experiences can often resemble the temporary, dionysiac communities that Turner describes (Varley, 2011). Liminoid states

describe situations in which “group solidarity is organically rather than mechanically developed” (Lett, 1983). This is often the case in outdoor recreational experiences where the experience “occurs on the margins of civilized life, encouraging the pursuit of authentic being via transcendental moments, part of which is achieved through the liminoid character of the activities experienced beyond the bounds of the mainstream everyday world” (Bowles, 1994)

Kemp explores the competitive sport of dog sled racing as *communitas* prevailing in a liminal state. While a competitive environment, it was observed that the community of competitors had “multiple, coexisting social processes” that including characteristics of *communitas* based on their shared compassion and concern for dogs, both their own and other teams. “Societal norms of revealing the most competitive performer (i.e. winner) are reversed in that the most revered mushers in sled dog competition were found to be those that treated their dogs well and would sacrifice their race position for the sake of others, rather than the winner of the race” (Kemp, 1999).

#### Identifying characteristics of community:

The field of psychology approaches the study of community with theories that concern perception, understanding, attitudes and feelings that a person has in relationship to those around them. This harkens to the relational nature and quality of community rather than its structural dimensions (Gusfield, 1975). The term “sense of community” delves into one’s feelings of belonging, interdependence and commitment to a social group. Sarason describes sense of community as “the perception of similarity to others and a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what

one expects from them and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure. It is the “sense that one is part of a readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend and as a result of which one did not experience sustained feelings of loneliness that impel one to actions or to adopting a style of living masking anxiety and setting the stage for later and more destructive anguish” (Sarason, 1974, 1). McMillan and Chavis describe a “feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group and a shared faith that members needs will be met through the commitment to be together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Studies of sense of community provide indicators of strength of community. One study, which observed community ties in an Israeli Kibbutz; found that the characteristics of strength of community were length of residence, number of residents that an individual could identify by name, and the ability to function competently in the community (Glynn, 1981). Social bonding factors identify sense of community. These include ability to identify neighbors, length of residence or residential roots and degree of social interaction with neighbors (Riger *et al*, 1981) along with feelings of satisfaction with the community, agreement with the values and beliefs of the community and feelings of being an important part of the community (Bachrach and Zautra, 1985).

The psychological approach of sense of community seeks to identify and understand the characteristics which contribute to an overall sense of belonging and commitment to a social group. Doolittle and MacDonald compiled a “sense of community” scale based on behaviors and attitudes of urban dwellers. Their scale analyzed interactions with neighbors, participation in neighborhood activities and matters

of privacy and safety (Doolittle and MacDonald, 1978). McMillian and Chavis later extended these to include elements that work together to produce the warmth and intimacy that people experience in a community, including membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connections (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

Membership provides boundaries through identification via language, dress and ritual that allow emotional safety and group intimacy to develop, giving one a feeling of acceptance and a willingness to sacrifice for the group. Influence takes into account individuals making a difference to the group and the group having an influence on its members, allowing for closeness of its members to emerge. Integration and fulfillment of needs provide reinforcement, which allows a group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness:

*When people who share values come together, they find that they have similar needs, priorities, and goals, thus fostering the belief that in joining together they might be better able to satisfy these needs and obtain the reinforcement they seek. Shared values, then provide the integrative force for cohesive communities. (McMillian and Chavis, 1986).*

McMillian and Chavis's study identifies strong communities as "those that offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share and ways to resolve them positively, opportunities to honor members, opportunities to invest in the community, and opportunities to experience a spiritual bond among members" (McMillian and Chavis 1986).

Elements of McMillian and Chavis's construct of "sense of community" were applied to a recreational setting in Lyons and Dionigi's study which examined meanings

of community as they developed among older adults who participated in masters sports. Four themes of sense of community emerged that corroborate McMillan and Chavis's descriptions of sense of community, a shared interest, comrades in continued activity, relevant life purpose, and giving back. The sense of connectedness and establishment of friendships with other like-minded individuals is a valued and cherished aspect of their sense of belonging to the group. Membership in the community also meant that the participants identified themselves as a sports persona and viewed themselves with a sense of achievement, which fulfilled their needs and reinforced feelings of relevance and purpose. Participants also experienced volunteering in sports as an act of "giving back" which had personal significance as well as acting as a mechanism of influence to others (Lyons and Dionigi, 2007).

The Lyons and Dionigi study also found that sense of community in leisure settings is not necessarily episodic as previously thought and that the experience of *communitas* in recreational groups is more significant than a fleeting moment (Lyons and Dionigi, 2007). Another study found that a lasting sense of community is of upmost importance in leisure activity that promoted social bonding through intense and ongoing relationships (Kelly and Godbey, 1992).

A shared emotional connection is the product of "shared history, common places, spending time together, and sharing similar experiences. Community provides an emotional attachment to place and offers ideal guidelines for human relationships" (Braun, 2005). This follows the hypothesis that the more people interact with one another, the more likely they are to become close. The more positive or important the experience and the relationships, the greater the community bond. For example, there

appears to be a tremendous bonding among people who experience a crisis together, perhaps under the guise of hard work, challenge and pushing themselves to their limits. In postmodern culture, community is understood from an experiential rather than place perspective (Bender, 1978), where community more often found in groups sharing a common experience, interest or emotion (Rojek, 1995).

Marsh explores sense of community based on shared experiences by exploring the strong community bonds in Pennsylvania. The Anthracite towns of Pennsylvania thrived from the riches of the resource extraction industry through the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which have since suffered from economic stagnation and instability. These towns were places where immigrants of different cultures, religions and traditions shared the experience of integration into a new world, and the blood, sweat, toil and tears associated with the mining industry. While these local economies now struggle, there remains a strong sense of community because of the shared experiences of the region's residents. This strength of community manifests itself in residents remaining in the region, or returning to the region after having careers afar. Although the region can no longer provide a stable, viable economy, the members of its communities remain connected to the landscape due to their shared emotional experiences (Marsh, 1978). Marsh contends that while individuals may be different in many ways, diverse communities can find solidarity in their shared experiences.

#### Decline of community

As Marsh's study suggests, communities can undergo decline over time. While the communities in Marsh's study managed to maintain a strong sense of community

through shared experience, scholars have contended that there is an overall decline in a sense of community in the United States. Causes in decline include the rapid growth, size, density, heterogeneity and anonymity of modern cities (Tönnies, 1955).

Dramatic change to sense of community and community structure began first with industrialization then the information age. Each of these eras brought greater mobility, suburbanization, growth of media and the internet, which resulted in fewer social, recreational and civic activities (Putnam, 2000). These factors lead to decline of civic life and deterioration of local neighborhoods (Sampson, 1999). This does not necessarily indicate that there is a void in sense of community, rather, that the nature of community has changed. These changes reflect communities that are “loosely grounded, sparsely knit networks of specialized and privatized ties” (Bruhn, 2005) and are “Social ties that have become impersonal and segmented which creates social disorganization” (Wellman and Leighton, 1979). These theories are reminiscent of Tönnies’ theory of *gesellschaft*, which reflects observations of post-industrial and urbanized European cities (Tönnies, 1955).

Modern, urbanized communities may have a variety of characterizations and conditions that reflect decline. Modern communities may be defined through personal connections that are transformed beyond family and kinship (Heller, 2005), and may experience more psychological disorders and anti-social behavior (Simmel, 1905). In general, the effects of modernization and urbanized society are a threat to the traditional sense of community (Simmel, 1905; Tönnies, 1955)



## The Appalachian Trail

Research pertaining to sense of place and the Appalachian Trail has taken on several paths: symbolic meaning, place attachment and place meaning through spiritual aspects of experience. Inquiry of symbolic meaning highlights the production of culture and symbols. The Trail is a symbol of the frontier spirit, of wilderness, and a symbol for other regional trails as well as other long distance trails (Freed, J. 2004). The trail is an artifact of the American culture, symbolizing philosophical, economic, land use and recreational values (Lowrey, 1981). Through several studies, the idea of place attachment encompasses place identity, perception and dependence (Kyle *et al*, 2003, Kyle *et al*, 2004; Regula, 2011). Prediction of place identity and dependence is shown through activity involvement through attraction and self-expression (Kyle *et al*, 2003). Place attachment is a cause of how people react to the social and environmental conditions of the trail (Kyle *et al*, 2004).

There are multiple user groups of the Appalachian Trail. Typical categorizations of these are day hikers, overnight hikers, section hikers and thru-hikers (Kyle *et al*, 2003). The identification of these sub-groups is indicative of the multiple meanings, identities and experiences of the Trail (Regula, 2011). Many studies have focused specifically on the experience of the thru-hiking community (Rush, 2002; MacLennan, 2005; Ketterer, 2011; Regula, 2011). This community is seen as a “close knit group of generous likeminded individuals” (Regula, 2011), but this does not necessarily mean that their reasons for hiking the trail and their experiences are alike. However, similarities exist, particularly the characteristics of escape, physical challenge, and experiences of wilderness (Regula, 2011).

Sense of place research of the Appalachian Trail typically falls under the disciplines of geography or recreation. However, there is a growing field of research stemming from the fields of psychology, sociology and theology (Coburn, 2006; Spyker, 2004, MacLennan, 2005; Ketterer, 2011). Regarding the connection between the trail experience and spirituality, Spyker articulated themes that emerged from thru-hikers experiences and their spiritual dimensions. These included simplicity, transparency, community, identity, velocity (i.e. a slower pace of life), connectivity, liberty and boundaries (Spyker, 2004). This expands the findings from Slavin's study of the characteristics of the physical act of walking (e.g. rhythm, sociality, and time) as a spiritual practice (Slavin, 2003). Coburn's study delves deep into the psycho-spiritual transformation of female thru-hikers from the thru-hiking experience and the act of journaling and other artistic/creative activities (Coburn, 2006). Ketterer's study focused on psychological change among thru-hikers and MacLennan focused on the social processes of the thru-hiking experience. Overall, hikers identified themselves as deeply changed from their experience. Hikers reported the reduction of stress, anxiety, selfishness and depression while having an increase in feelings of competence, self-reliance, sensitivity, empathy, independence and empowerment (Ketterer, 2011).

Similarities exist in these studies, particularly with the themes that were uncovered through the research. Themes included wilderness connection, connection with self and the environment and acceptance (Coburn, 2006). Hikers also found meaning within their relationships formed with other thru-hikers and reported that their outlook on humanity had been improved (Ketterer, 2011).

Nash reflects “wilderness was the basic ingredient of American civilization. From the raw materials of the physical wilderness Americans built a civilization; with the idea or symbol of wilderness they sought to give that civilization identity and meaning” (Nash, 1982). In the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience, hikers experience reflections of the history and philosophies of the American wilderness. The Trail offers an example of multiple land management uses: private land, managed land in U.S. Forest Service land, and preserved land in National and State parks.

Wilderness experience studies, while not necessarily specific to the Appalachian Trail, do focus on the wilderness experience during a recreational pursuit. Wilderness experiences might allow for focus on self, others, task and environment and offer a combined oneness, primitiveness, humility, timelessness, solitude and care (Borrie and Roggenbuck, 2001).

“He feels a relational closeness to the Appalachian Trail through his experiences with friends and family. It appears that the ritual of returning to these relationships with the setting drives his recognition of the Appalachian Trail as meaningful” (Hutson *et al*, 2010).

### Summary

While there is substantial scholarship on place attachment and place identity of the Appalachian Trail (Lowry, 1981; Kyle *et al*, 2003; Freed, J. 2004; Regula, 2011), there is limited scholarship on interpreting the trail as a therapeutic landscape. Therapeutic landscapes have characteristics of physical, emotional and spiritual healing while experiencing a natural landscape (Ulrich, 1984; Gesler, 1992 and Williams, 1998). A holistic approach also incorporates social elements of the therapeutic landscape (Hoyez, 2007). Scholarship on therapeutic experiences suggest that activity in a natural

environment might indirectly solve problems and allow for self-reflection (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). Self-reflection during leisure activity might also validate crucial elements of self-identity such as competency and leadership skills (Kelly and Godbey, 1992). Along with these therapeutic attributes of a recreational experience, the physical act of walking can engage a participant in a meditative state which might also be therapeutic (Solnit, 2000; Slavin, 2003).

Investigations into sense of community in recreational experiences exists in a liminal state (Turner, 1969; Kemp, 1999; Sharpe, 2005; Varley, 2009). Liminal experiences allow for a community which is unstructured, egalitarian, and which might have utopian characteristics (Tönnies', 1955; Turner, 1974). Scholarships also suggests that shared experience inhibits bonds based on sharing difficult or challenging experiences in a recreational setting (Bricker and Kerstetter, 2002).

The phenomenon of sense of place overarches scholarship of therapeutic landscapes, restorative experiences, recreation and community. The bonds and attachments people form with place are derived through personal experience that provides meaning and value to place (Tuan, 1972). These experiences might include biophysical, social and spiritual connotations (Frederickson and Anderson, 1999; Hutson *et al*, 2010). My study uses the phenomenological approach of sense of place to investigate the therapeutic notions of the Appalachian Trail, including the role of personal identity, community and connection with nature inside a recreational experience. This will extend scholarship of the therapeutic notions of the Appalachian Trail and provide support to the role of leisure as a therapeutic endeavor.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

The literature review revealed that there is limited scholarship on landscape interpretation of the Appalachian Trail as a therapeutic landscape. Although several articles do consider the spiritual aspects of the hiking experience, there has been limited inquiry to the therapeutic notions of the thru-hiking experience. Insight was gained from the significant amount of literature on restorative properties of nature from the field of environmental psychology, however, investigation on therapeutic landscapes from a geographic perspective has been limited to medical geographers' inquiries concerning the therapeutic properties of sacred and healing sites such as yogic retreats, meditation centers and religious sites, rather than expansive or linear landscapes.

The majority of inquiries into the sense of place of the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience has focused on place attachment, place identity and place dependence. There has been limited scholarship on the role of sense of community on the Appalachian Trail or of personal identity while on the trail, although the significance of each has been documented in published memoirs and anecdotal narratives (Ross, 1982; Setzer, 1997; Porter, 2009). There was also a lack of identification of particular sites or sections along the Appalachian Trail that were conducive to meaning making via challenging or meaningful moments experienced on them, and how those experiences might lend themselves to the notion of the Appalachian Trail as a therapeutic landscape. To further study and understanding on these topics, the research questions of this study are as follows.

1. How is the pursuit of adventure and connection to nature portrayed in the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience?
2. How is the Appalachian Trail's sense of community manifested from the shared experience?
3. What role does personal identity play in the thru-hiking experience?
4. Does the Appalachian Trail reflect the characteristics of a therapeutic landscape through the experience of its thru-hikers?

In order to answer these questions, I used a qualitative approach. First, I administered a survey to obtain data from hikers. The survey allowed participants to share their reflections and experiences in an open, written response, which provided the means for qualitative analysis to uncover the narratives and characteristics of meaning making of the thru-hiking experience. In addition, semi-structured interview questions extended the inquiry of the survey. Both the survey and the interview questions were cross-sectional of the current hiking population as well as alumni hikers. The survey and interviews were conducted in May 2013. The research proposal was approved by Texas State University's Office of Research Compliance's Institutional Review Board in December 2012 (see Appendix E).

### Survey Instrument

I utilized a survey instrument to gain information about the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience directly from the hiking community. I designed the survey to gain insight regarding the experience of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail and the overall therapeutic aspects of the experience, specifically investigating characteristics of

connection to nature, identity, community and site specific experiences that characterized the thru-hike.

Inquiries concerning the general experiential aspects of an Appalachian Trail thru-hike included questions related to motivations for thru-hiking, benefits received and the life-changing aspects received. I requested that participants share specific on-site experiences such as their most challenging moment and a most meaningful moment on the trail. My investigation into the sense of community came in the form of questions regarding experience with trail magic, encounters with other hikers and acts of hospitality. Questions regarding trail names, their meaning and origins were used to inquiry on the role of personal identity inquiry. Other questions concerned how alumni hikers stayed in touch with the trail after completing their thru-hikes. The survey also included some basic demographic data. I developed and tested the survey on a small group of alumni thru-hikers before launching the on-line and in person surveys.

Meinig's "*Ten Versions of the Same Scene*" postulates that individuals may have different interpretations of the landscapes they encounter. Following this theory, it is conceivable that each person that visits the Appalachian Trail interprets the landscape differently. While day hikers, section hikers and thru-hikers all may experience the same terrain, scenery and landmarks of the Trail, their interpretation of the landscape may vary greatly (Meinig, 1979). For the purpose of gaining a thorough understanding of the meaning, value and therapeutic notion of the Appalachian Trail, I believe the richest data will be from those that have the most extensive experience with the trail. Appalachian Trail thru-hikers may provide a stronger bond with the trail and more extensive description of sense of place, as they are able to recall sites of significant meaning that

contribute to their notions of sense of place on the trail through their own experience. Therefore, they are the targeted population for this study.

I stratify survey respondents by alumni and current thru-hikers. This was based on the forethought that several questions might render significantly different responses based on the hiker's length of experience on the trail, and may warrant further analysis. Hikers who had completed a thru-hike answered two additional questions regarding how their life had changed since hiking the trail and how they have stayed connected to the trail. I asked participants to identify themselves as "alumni" or "current" hikers. These classifications are common nomenclature in the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking community. For this study "alumni" hikers were defined as those persons who had completed a thru-hike before May, 2013 when the on-line and on-site surveys were administered. The "current" hikers were those that were in the process of attempting a thru-hike in the 2013 hiking season, which roughly falls between March and October each year. Two hikers identified themselves as "section hikers". These hikers may have split or spread their thru-hike over several or many years. These hikers completed a "current hiker" survey form, with the status of "section hiker" denoted on their forms. On-site surveys were color coded to signify the classification of "alumni" or "current" hiking status. On-line participants designated their status through the initial question on the survey. The only other identifying marks used for the surveys were that of where the survey was collected "QL" from the on-line Qualtrics© survey software or "TD" from Trail Days on-site surveys.

I administered the survey in two parts. First, I launched an on-line version with the purpose of soliciting responses from alumni thru-hikers (Appendix A). The



Qualtrics© software platform was utilized for the on-line survey. A news forum announcement on the independent WhiteBlaze ([www.whiteblaze.net](http://www.whiteblaze.net)) solicited on-line survey participants. WhiteBlaze had 50,421 members at the time of the survey launch. Qualtrics© software was used for the collection and initial tabulation of on-line surveys, though final tabulation was performed in SPSS software so that the on-line responses could be combined with the survey data that was collected from on-site surveys.

The second administration of the survey happened on-site in Damascus, Virginia during the annual Trail Days festival held on May 17-19, 2013. Trail Days is a popular event that draws up to 25,000 people (Collier, 2006). Visitors consist of both past and present hikers, neighbors and friends of the Appalachian Trail as well as locals. While the majority of hikers attending Trail Days are current hikers, alumni hikers attend the event to have reunions with their fellow hikers from the year that they hiked the trail. A variety of events are associated with the festival including lectures, workshops, “thru-hiker” alumni gatherings, a hiker parade, vendor booths and non-profit group exhibits. A canopy, table and chairs were set up in the hiker campground during the two-day event. Refreshments were available to hikers while they filled out surveys or interviewed. Alumni hikers filled out a hard copy of the on-line survey. Current hikers used a modified survey that omitted questions that specifically pertained to reflections of a completed thru-hike (Appendix B).

### Semi-structured interviews

As a method of extending the findings of the survey instrument, I used semi-structured interview questions at the on-site location. Through previous personal

experience with thru-hikers, I knew that these hikers readily want to share their experiences of the trail in conversational format. When this occurred, I asked the participant if they would mind if I take notes and record our conversation as a semi-structured, informal interview. If the individuals agreed, I invited them to a suitable space to perform the interview, usually to the side of the research canopy, away from others filling out the survey. I had several questions prepared for these instances (see Appendix C). While initial interview questions came from the list of prepared questions, in most cases these questions served as prompts to an interview of a more unstructured, organic nature. In addition, I documented comments and observations from casual conversations held between research participants and myself during the data collection.

### Data Analysis

SPSS software handled recording, tallying, and storage of survey data. Microsoft Excel software produced graphs and charts of survey data, as well as the organization and storage of qualitative data. I initially tabulated data from the on-line responses in the Qualtrics© software platform, then later transferred the data directly from Qualtrics to SPSS statistical software. This data, combined with the on-site surveys, was manually entered in SPSS software. I then ran frequency tables for each variable of survey question responses within SPSS software. I tabulated summary tables from this data in Microsoft Excel in order to build graphic representation of the results. I built a separate Microsoft Excel workbook to store all the qualitative responses to the survey. Analysis of these responses used the same variables in the survey responses (see Appendix A and B) or characteristics and emerging themes found during the data analysis. I transcribed

recorded interviews from digital data recorder into Microsoft Word. These interviews used codes from the variables used in the survey, characteristics and themes.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The on-line survey launched on May 1, 2013, with 103 responses, however, only 60 of these responses were at least fifty percent complete. All but one of the on-line responses were from alumni thru-hikers. There were 104 on-site surveys collected, 73 by current thru-hikers, 27 by alumni thru-hikers, and 4 section hikers. I discarded section hiker surveys from the results. Seventy-two percent (72%) of survey respondents were male, twenty-six percent (26%) were female. The highest percentage of survey respondents (48.6%) fell within the 20-29 age group (see figure 3). Together, on-line and on-site surveys rendered 160 responses (see Table 1).

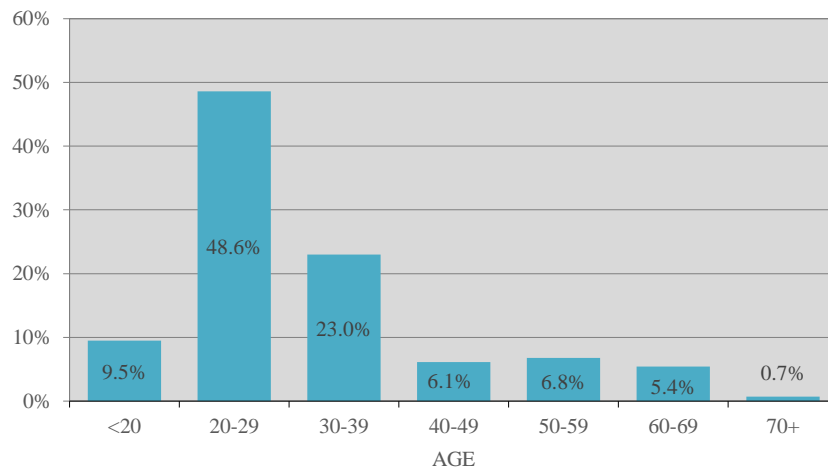


Figure 3: Age of survey respondents.  
N=160

Table 1: Survey response rate

Responses	On-line survey	On-site survey
Alumni hikers	102	27
Current hikers	1	73
Section hikers	0	4
Subtotal	<u>103</u>	<u>104</u>
Discarded	43	4
Total	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>
Response Rate	58.3%	96.2%

Combining the total valid responses from on-line and on-site surveys, there were 85 alumni and 75 current hiker responses. Participants in the on-line survey took an average of 12 minutes to complete the survey. On-site survey participants took anywhere from 15-90 minutes to complete the hand delivered surveys. The disparities in time are most likely due to the environment at Trail Days, which is a very social event where hikers come together to connect with each other and celebrate the trail. Many participants visited with each other while filling out the survey at the research station (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: On-site survey collection. Trail Days, Damascus, VA. May 2013.

## Survey Results

### Motivations

The first survey question asked hikers what their motivation was for thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. The most popular motivations were adventure and personal challenge, with over ninety-five percent (95%) of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing that these were their motivations for thru-hiking (see Figure 5). Other popular motivations were connecting with nature, getting away from everyday life, exercise and physical conditioning and slowing down/simplifying life, with seventy-five percent (75%) or more of survey respondents either strongly agreeing or agreeing to each of these motivations. The least popular motivations were meeting new friends and spending time with family, friends or a spouse; a result that may be situational in nature as not all hikers are hiking with their spouses, family members or previously known friends.

The question regarding motivations had a write-in response option. Several notable responses reflected more spiritual motivations such as “allowing the trail to rejuvenate my faith in humanity”, to “be with God” and “meditation, silence and peace of mind.” Other comments centered on self-care such as “a chance to live each day at my own pace while balancing priorities and self-care,” “rediscovering myself after raising a family for 25+ years” and “to get something more out of my life.”

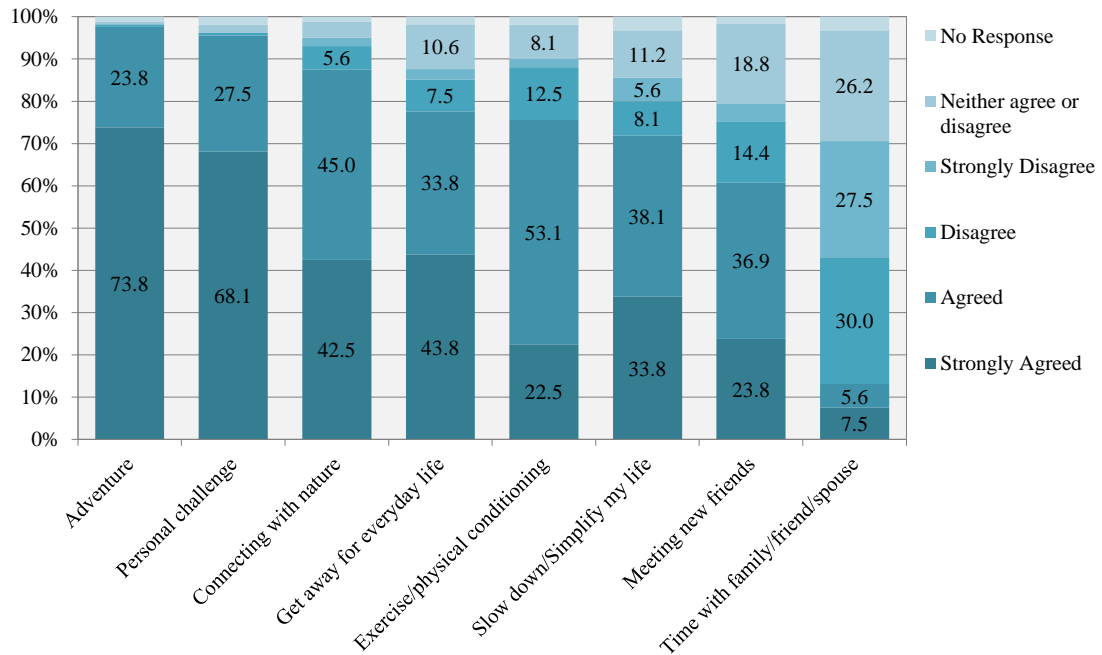


Figure 5: Motivations for thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail.  
N=160

### Benefits

Alumni hikers responded to what benefits they *received* from their thru-hiking experience, while current hikers responded to what benefits they *anticipated* they would receive (Figures 6 and 7 respectively). Both alumni and current hikers' top three benefits were mental health, physical health and building self-confidence, although the order of these varied. Over eighty-five percent (85%) of both groups of hikers strongly agreed or agreed that connecting to nature was a benefit they had received or anticipated. As with the motivations question, the benefits of making life-long friends and strengthening personal relationships are situational in nature due to current hikers' progress on the trail and not hiking with spouses, family or previously known friends.

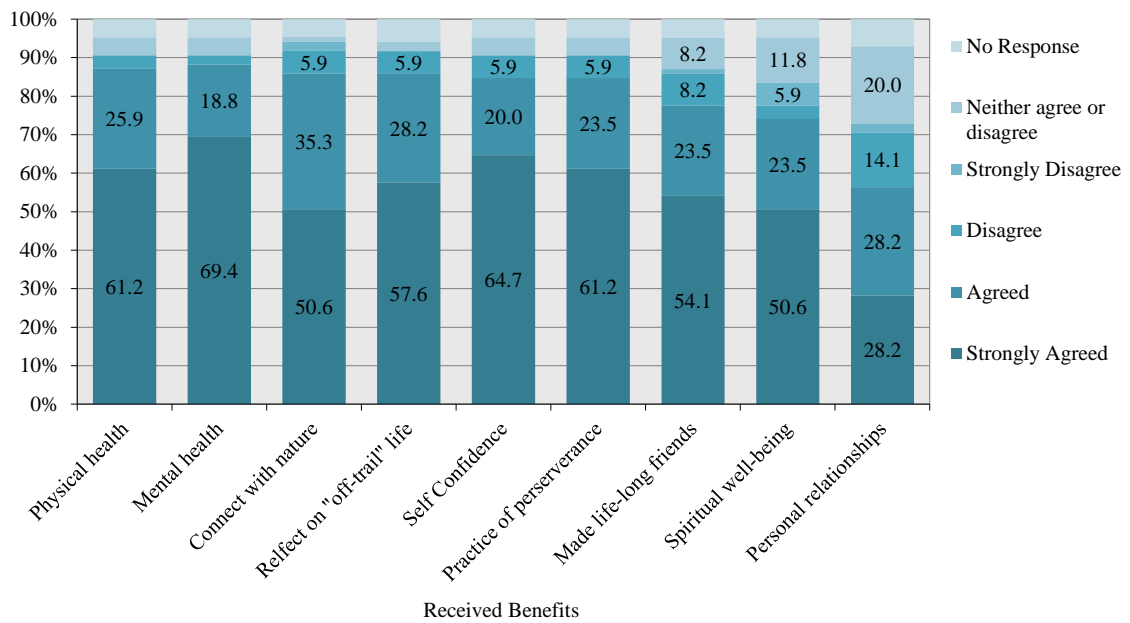


Figure 6: Benefits alumni hikers received from the thru-hiking experience  
N=85

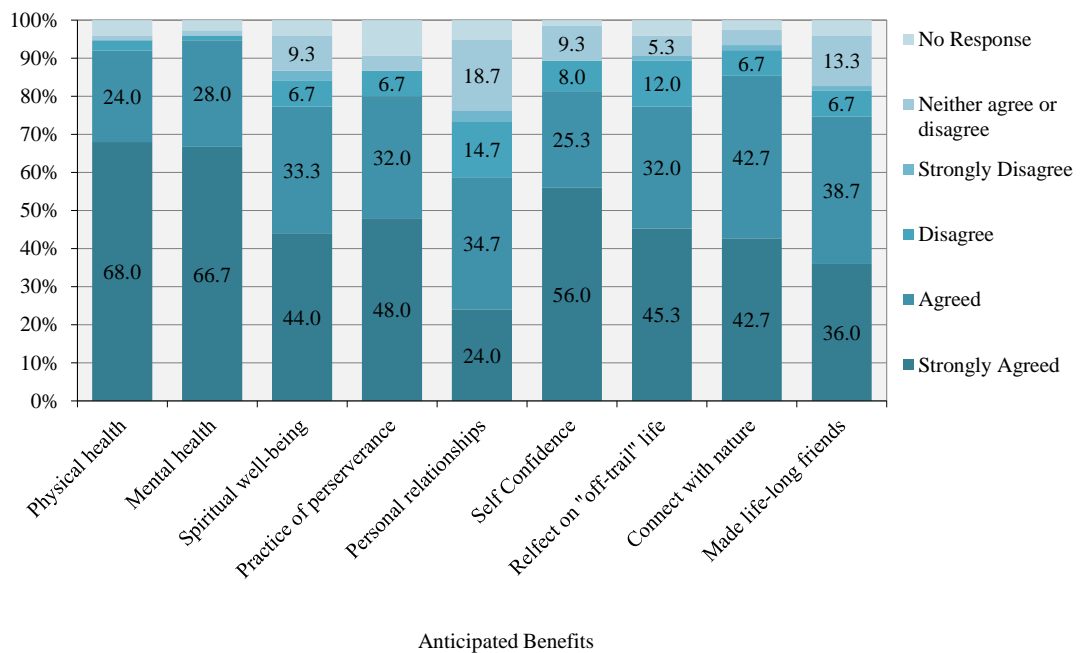


Figure 7: Benefits current hikers anticipate from the thru-hiking experience.  
N=75



## Life changes

Alumni hikers responded to how their thru-hiking experience changed their off-trail life. The most agreed upon variables were that they were more confident in personal abilities and capabilities, more connected to nature and now go to nature more often when they need to escape their everyday life. Another popular choice was that they had simplified their life (Figure 8). Most alumni hikers took the opportunity to elaborate upon their answer to this question, and the responses provide rich qualitative data for this inquiry (see qualitative results).

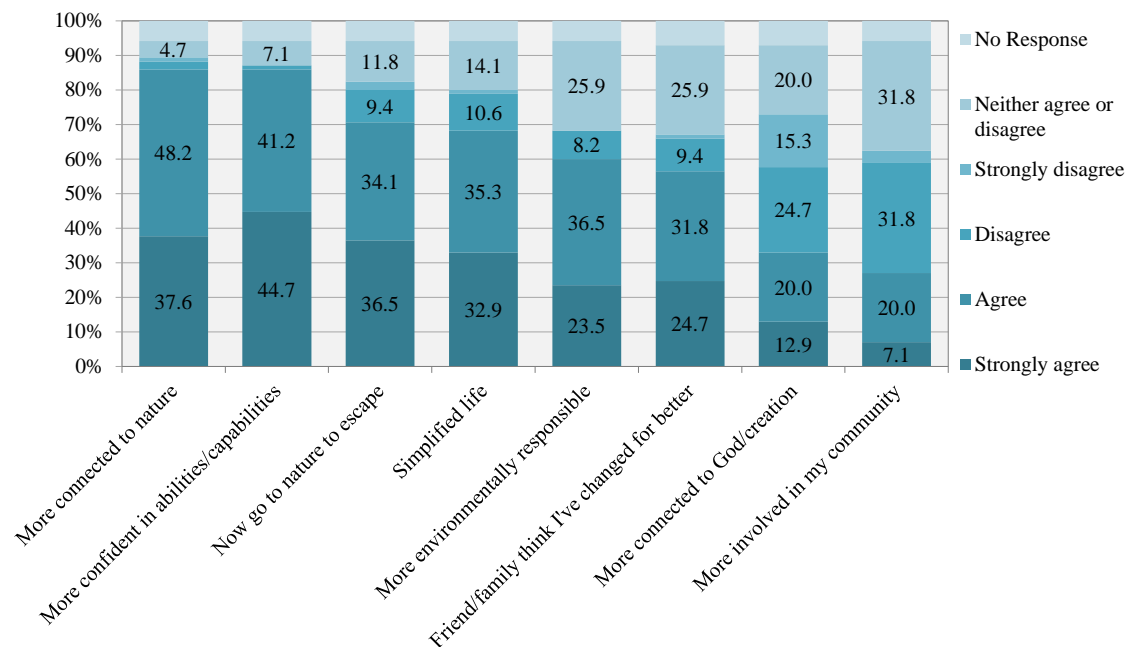


Figure 8: How the thru-hiking experience changed alumni hikers “off-trail” life.  
N=85

## Challenging experiences

The questions regarding site-specific experiences with challenges and meaningful moments rendered different results based on the hiker’s time and experience on the trail.

This was discernable by their classification as alumni thru-hiker or current hiker. At the time of the survey collection, most current hikers had only hiked the southern 1/3 of the Trail (+/- 500 miles) from Springer Mountain, GA. Alumni Thru-hikers have experienced the entire Trail: therefore have more sites, and experiences, to include in their response. The most frequently selected challenging experience from both groups was weather, although this and other challenges such as injury, solitude and perseverance overall percentages varied between the two (see Figure 9).

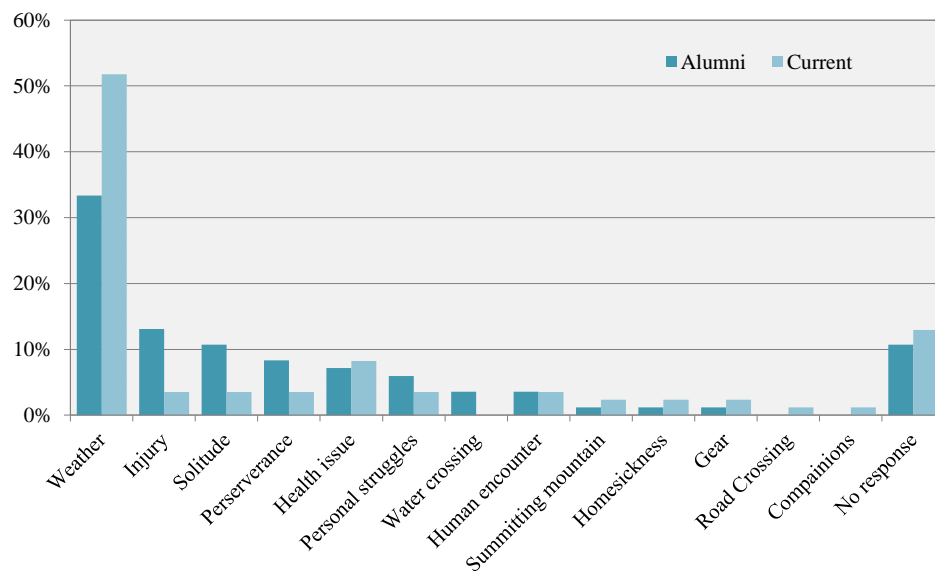


Figure 9: Hiker's most challenging experience.  
N=160

Weather was the most frequently selected challenging experience. There was a far greater percentage of current hikers (51.8%) than alumni hikers (33.3%) that chose weather. Sites that were frequently associated with weather challenges were in the Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina; however, New Hampshire was also a frequently mentioned site of weather challenges (see Table 2). The location of these weather related

challenges, weighing heavier in the southern sections of the Trail, often coincides with the season that hikers encounter the Southern Appalachians, in March and April, when this region is still experiencing wintery, snowy conditions.

Table 2. Locations of weather related challenging experiences

Location (South to North)	Alumni		Current	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Georgia	3	10.7%	13	29.5%
North Carolina/Tennessee	7	25.0%	21	47.7%
Virginia	2	7.1%	4	9.1%
Maryland/West Virginia	0	0.0%	1	2.3%
Pennsylvania	1	3.6%	0	0.0%
New Jersey/New York/Connecticut	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Massachusetts	2	7.1%	0	0.0%
Vermont	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
New Hampshire	4	14.3%	0	0.0%
Maine	1	3.6%	0	0.0%
Southern Section	0	0.0%	1	2.3%
Middle Section	2	7.1%	0	0.0%
Northern Section	1	3.6%	1	2.3%
Entire Trail	1	3.6%	1	2.3%
Not Specific	0	0.0%	1	2.3%
No Response	4	14.3%	1	2.3%
Total	28		44	

### Meaningful experiences

Survey participants shared where they had a particularly meaningful experience on their Appalachian Trail journey. Again, these results varied between alumni thru-hikers and current hikers based on their time on the trail. While survey participants quantified why they found the site to be significant (e.g. scenic beauty, physical challenge, encounter with nature, etc.) the Likert Scale that was used to rank these multiple factors was cumbersome and difficult to analyze, and the qualitative answers elaborating on the meaningful experience rendered much richer data (see qualitative results section).

The sites where alumni hikers had a particularly meaningful experience were spread out over the entire length of the trail. Table 3 reports the five most frequently selected sites mentioned by alumni thru hikers.

Table 3: Top five ranked sites of meaningful experiences for alumni thru-hikers  
N=60

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Site</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Mile (S→N)</b>
1	12	White Mountains	New Hampshire	1,812 - 1,887
2	6	Mt. Katahdin (northern terminus)	Maine	2,185
3	4	100 Mile Wilderness	Maine	2,711 - 2,171
4	4	Great Smokey Mountain National Park	Tennessee & North Carolina	166 – 238
5	4	Wind Rock	Virginia	657

As seen in Figure 10, hikers ranked scenic beauty and physical challenge highest in the reason they found the White Mountains so meaningful. Most of the mountain summits in this mountain range are located above tree line and provide extensive 360 degree views as well as steep and craggy terrain to traverse.

Current thru-hikers' most meaningful moments were weighted towards the southern sections of the Trail because many of them have on average, only hiked the first third of the trail. Table 4 reports the top five sites where current hikers had a particularly meaningful experience.

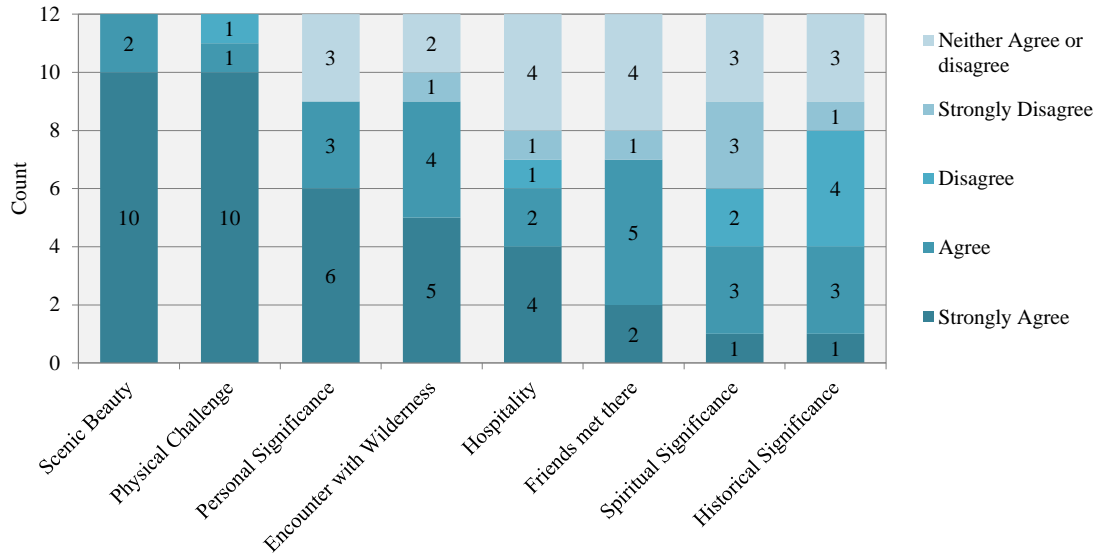


Figure 10: Reasons the White Mountains were meaningful to alumni thru-hikers.  
N=12

Table 4: Top five ranked sites of meaningful experiences for current hikers.  
N=87

Rank	Count	Site	Location	Mile (S→N)
1	21	Great Smokey Mountain National Park	Tennessee & North Carolina	166 – 238
2	9	Roan Highlands	North Carolina	375 - 386
3	8	Grayson Highlands	Virginia	494 - 500
4	4	Hot Springs, NC	North Carolina	273
5	4	Max Patch	North Carolina	254

While current hikers noted scenic beauty as a top reason for the Smokey Mountains to be meaningful, they also were likely to cite the physical challenge, personal significance, encounter with wilderness and friends they met there as why this section was so meaningful (see Figure 11).

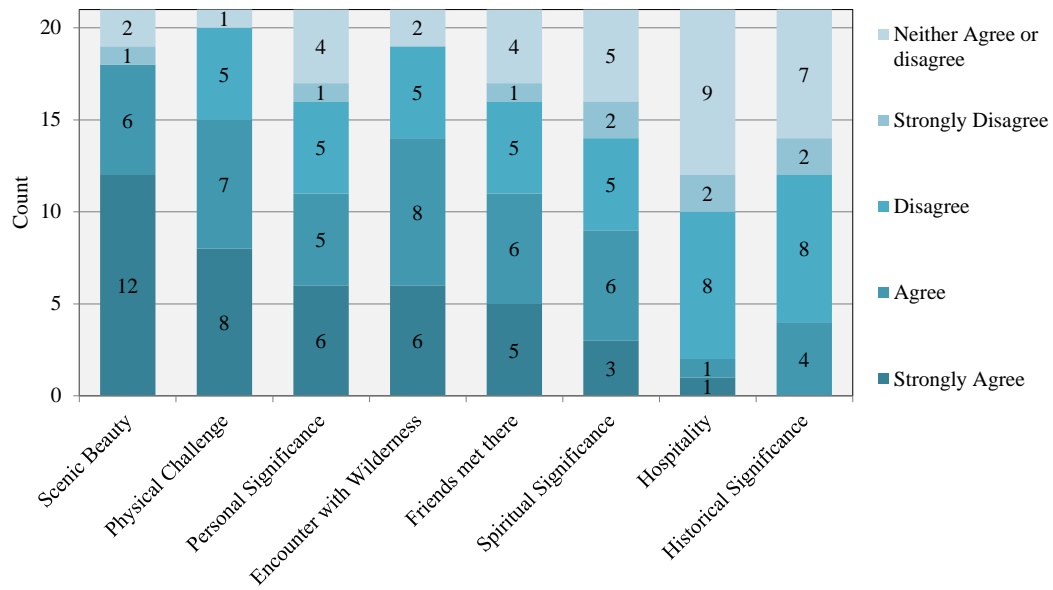


Figure 11: Reasons the Great Smokey Mountain NP was a meaningful experience for current hikers. N=21

### Spiritual experiences

Sixty percent of hikers claimed that their thru-hike was a spiritual experience. The highest percentage of hikers either strongly agreed or agreed that the trail's landscape provided spiritual inspiration, while other more religious or mission based factors ranked much lower (see Figure 12).

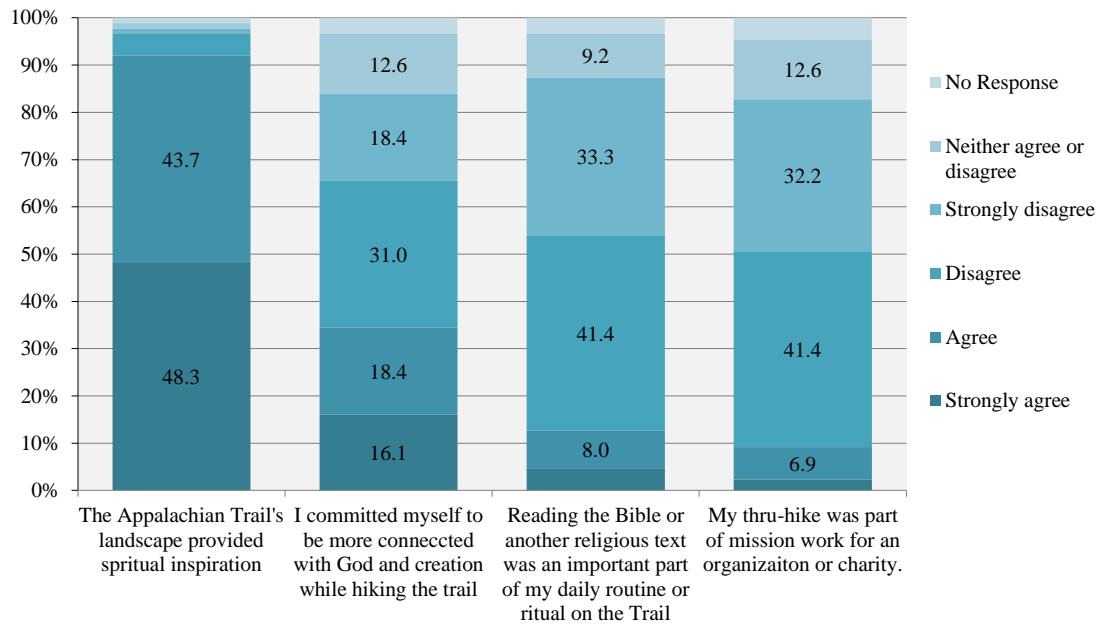


Figure 12: Characteristics of spiritual experience on the Appalachian Trail Thru-hike  
N=87

### Trail magic

All survey participants (100%) reported receiving trail magic. When asked how significant the experience of trail magic was, there was very little disagreement in any aspect of receiving trail magic. As Figure 13 shows, over eighty-five percent (85%) of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the experience made them want to provide trail magic in the future or motivated them to help others while on the trail. In addition, these acts of kindness and hospitality renewed their faith in humanity.

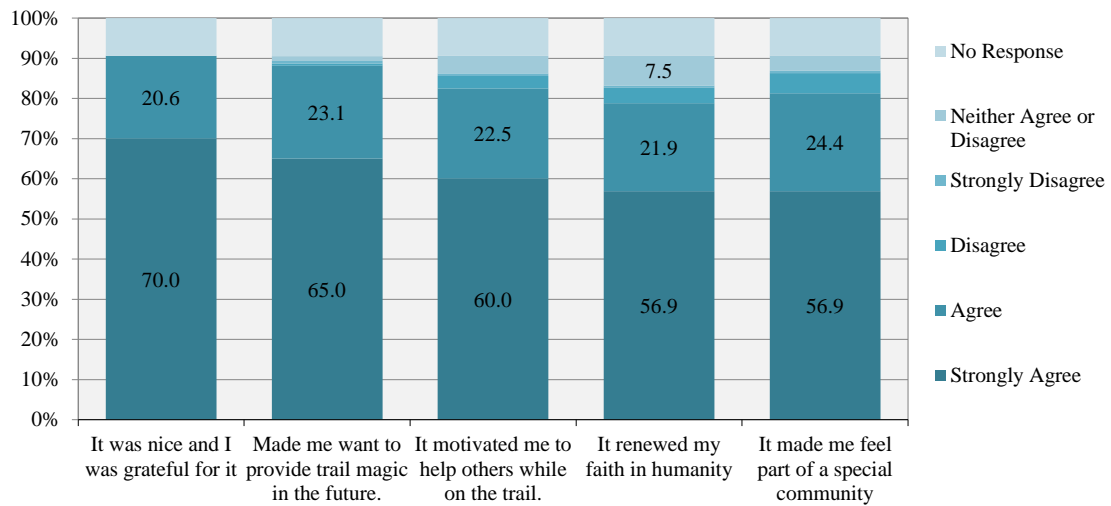


Figure 13: Significance of trail magic.  
N=160

### Trail names

Ninety-six percent (96%) of survey respondents reported adopting a trail name during their Appalachian Trail thru-hike. As figure 14 shows, a combined seventy-eight percent (78%) of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the use of a trail name made them feel part of a special community, while trail names being symbolic of a hiker’s escape from everyday life was found to be less significant with fifty-three percent (53%) either strongly agreeing or agreeing. This question did allow for a write-in response. Several respondents shared that the use of a trail name was significant to them as it allowed them to have an alter ego, for example “It allowed me to adopt an alter ego...true freedom.” While several other hikers used this space to elaborate on how their trail name allowed them to discover something new about themselves, such as “It allowed me or made me feel I could more easily reinvent myself.”



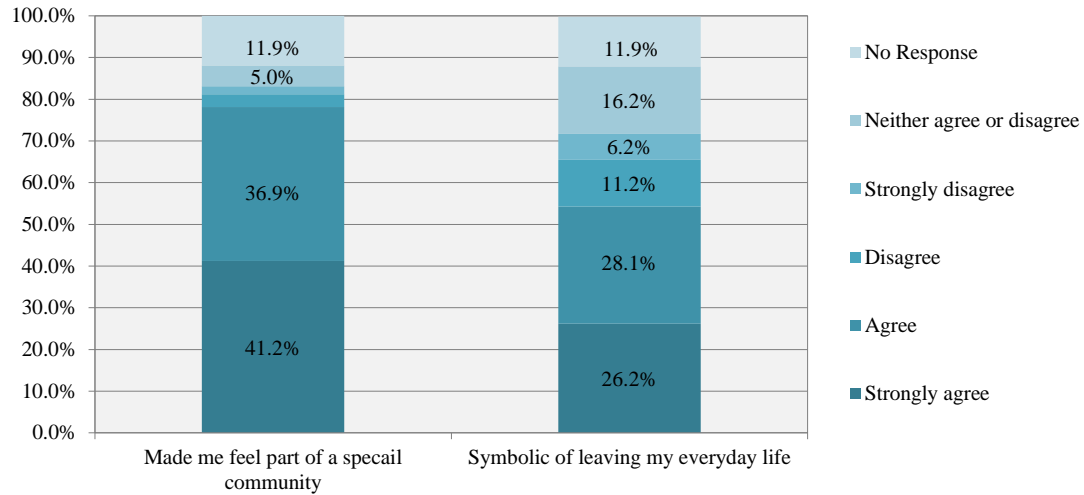


Figure 14: Significance of adopting a trail name.  
N=141

As table 5 shows, the most popular meanings were names that alluded to some characteristic of on-trail or off-trail personality or identity. In comments shared under the “other” option there were some interesting write-in responses such as trail names that were derived from physical characteristics (e.g. “Thunder feet” for a hiker with large feet), unique clothing or gear (e.g. “Bamboo” for a hiker who uses bamboo hiking poles), symbolic animals (i.e. totem animals) and names derived from lyrics to songs.

Table 5: Meaning of trail names  
N=141

Meaning	Count
Alludes to some characteristic of my on-trail personality/identity	79
Alludes to some characteristic of my off-trail personality/identity	60
Alludes to some event from my on-trail experience	51
Represents a character or story from literature or mythology	19
Other	16
Has spiritual meaning	12
Alludes to a special place on the Appalachian Trail	7
Represents a biblical reference	2

## Personal journals

Just over fifty-percent (50%) of survey respondents reported keeping a personal journal while hiking the Trail. When asked the significance of journaling nearly all respondents reported that it provided them with a memoir of their experience, while rewarding and therapeutic aspects ranked lower (Figure 15).

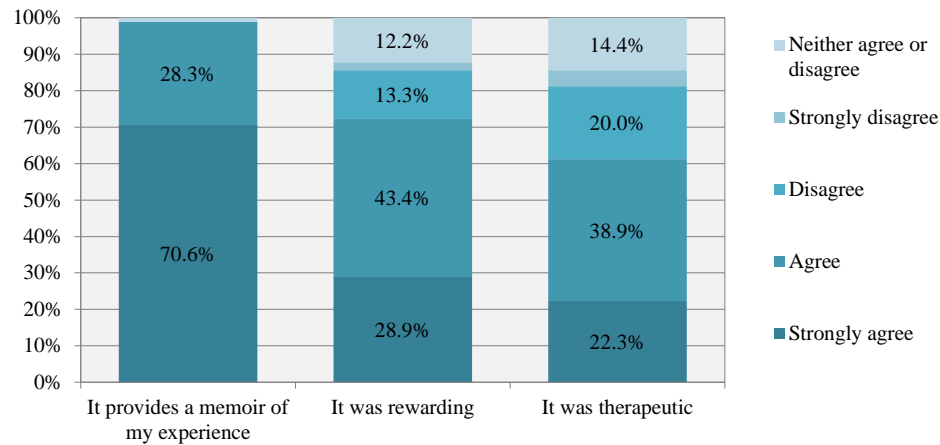


Figure 15: Significance of keeping a personal journal  
N=90

## Encounters with others

When asked about encounters with other hikers on the trail, most responses were positive. As the results in Figure 16 illustrate, over seventy-five percent (75%) of respondents reported positive outcomes of these encounters, finding that these encounters were “always” or “most of the time” ones that provided a sense of community, were helpful, offered a time of companionship, and were comforting. Rarely did respondents report that an encounter with another hiker(s) was an annoying experience.

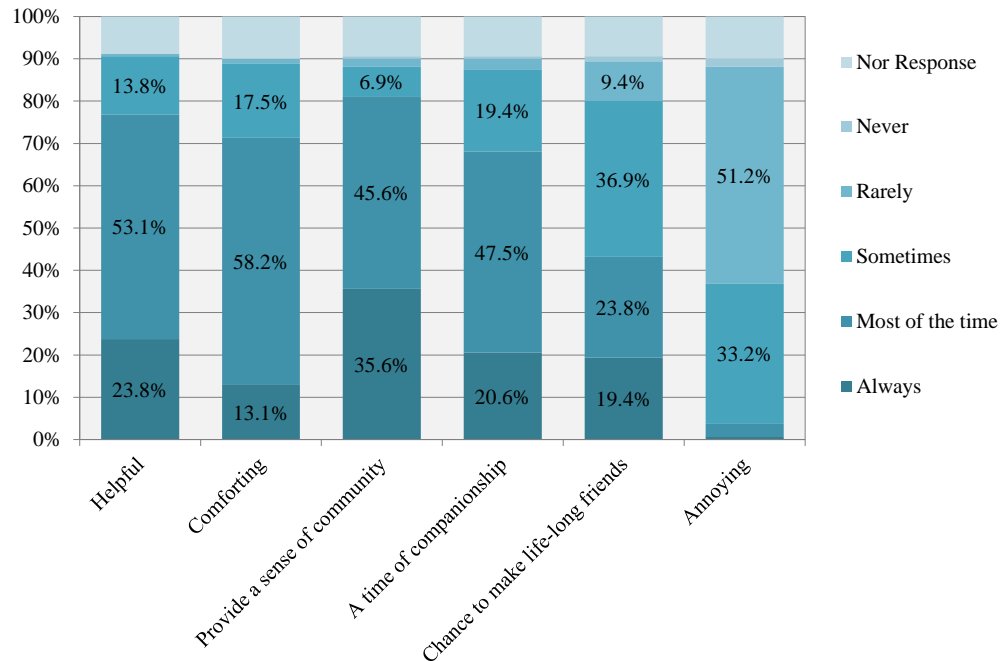


Figure 16: Encounters with other hikers.  
N=160

### The shared experience

As figure 17 shows, while about one-third (38%) of hikers claim to hike the trail as a solo venture, other hikers are grouped in pairs (27%) or in small groups (35%). Shown in figure 18, over eighty-five percent (85%) of survey participants either strongly agreed or agreed that the shared experience with a hiking partner(s) provided encouragement and support and strengthened the relationship with their hiking companions. While these reflect a positive experience, a portion of survey participants did report that they had significant challenges to relationships (60.5% agreed or strongly agreed) but that this shared experience also allowed them to work out difficulties in their relationships (51.7% agreed or strongly agreed).

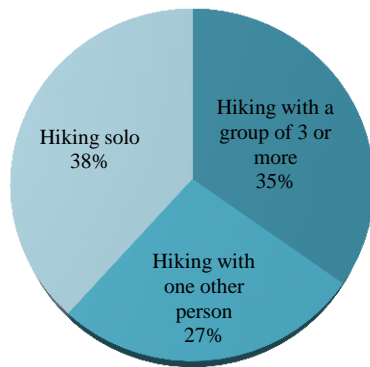


Figure 17: Appalachian Trail thru-hiking party size  
N=160

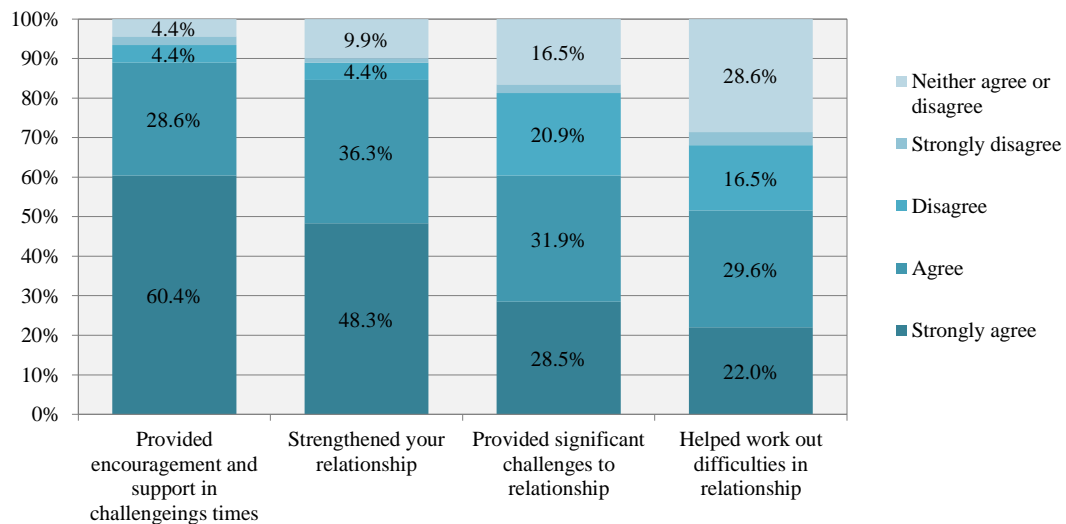


Figure 18: Reflections of the shared experience.  
N=91

### Staying connected

he most frequent way alumni hikers stay connected is through providing trail magic, as sixty-five of alumni hikers responding to this survey reported to have done, while another thirty-three percent plan to provide. As figure 19 illustrates, a large amount

of alumni hikers had also provided trail maintenance, or planned to provide this service to the trail community as a way to stay connected. Other frequent methods in which alumni hikers stay connected to the trail was providing support for other thru-hikers and sharing their story with others through publication or presentations of their experience.

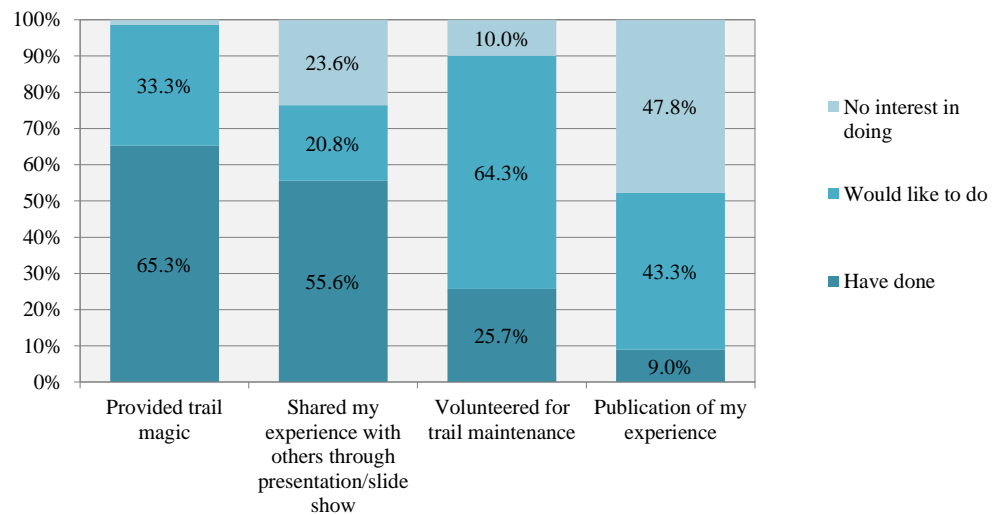


Figure 19: How alumni hikers stay connected with the Trail  
N=85

Interestingly, as seen in figure 20, many alumni thru-hikers often return to the trail for day hikes and longer section hikes, and a large percentage (68.1%) reported that they would like to attempt another thru-hike.

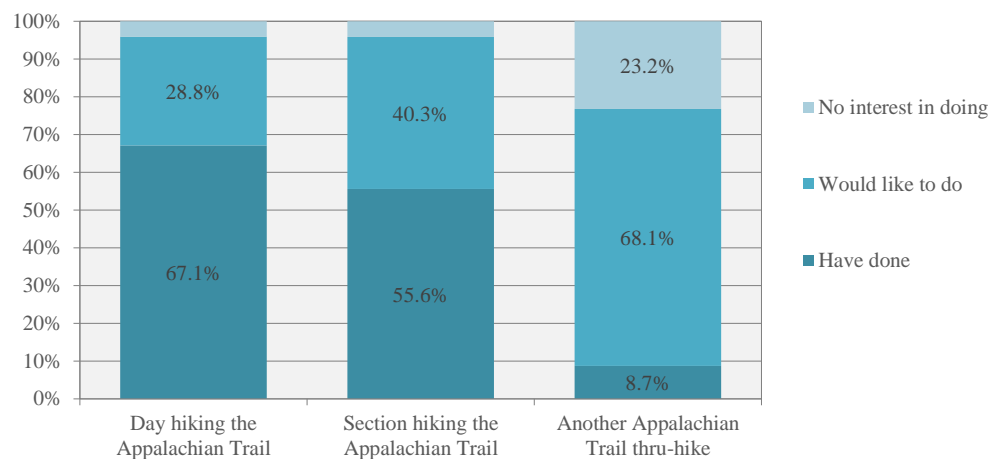


Figure 20: Likelihood of alumni thru-hikers returning to the trail.  
N=85

### Summary

The statistical results from the survey indicate that the top motivations of the thru-hiking experience included themes of adventure and connection to nature as well as slowing down and simplifying life. It also revealed characteristics of identity during challenging experiences such as perseverance and solitude. Hikers reported the use of alias identities (i.e. trail names) to be a significant aspect of making hikers feel part of a special community. Hikers agreed that the thru-hiking community was a source of help, comfort, sense of community and companionship. Foremost to the sense of community was the benefit of trail magic, as well as the commitment to extend this kindness and hospitality to other hikers while on the trail and in the future. Statistical results begin to reveal notions of the Appalachian Trail as a therapeutic landscape. The results of how alumni hikers' lives had changed were indicative of therapeutic experiences, particularly in that over eighty percent of survey respondents claimed to have become more connected with nature, and more confident in their abilities. Hikers also agreed that the

trail provided spiritual inspiration. Qualitative responses will provide greater depth into these notions of the Trail's landscape.

### Qualitative Results

The survey provided plentiful qualitative data to enrich the statistical data. Particularly, the questions regarding hiker's most challenging and meaningful moments supplied robust data. Initially, these questions solicited a list of significant sites along the length of the trail; however, upon review the results of these inquiries were much more reflective of the experience, rather than the uniqueness of a particular site along the trail. While this section will discuss several sites frequently mentioned by hikers, the review of this inquiry is more appropriate in discussing characteristics of the specific experience. The challenging experience section includes characteristics of weather, injury and health issues, solitude and perseverance, while the meaningful experiences section includes characteristics of personal significance, community, hospitality, reflection and awaking.

Other questions that rendered qualitative responses were the spiritual aspects of hiker's thru-hikes, encounters with trail magic, the shared experience and how alumni hiker's lives have changed since hiking the Trail. Space for open comments at the end of the survey rendered many interesting additional insights to the thru-hiking experience.

### Challenging experiences

The survey inquired of hiker's most challenging and meaningful moments, and asked hikers to indicate where specifically these moments occurred. Therefore, each comment used in the following results summary will include specific locations as indicated by the survey participants. Some of these comments were not specific to

location. Rather, they were more generalized to regions of the trail (e.g. “northern section”), an entire state (e.g. “Virginia”), or in some cases noted as “entire trail.” If no location was cited the quote will be labeled as “not site specific.” Comments are direct quotes from hiker’s comments and not corrected for grammar. In some instances, hiker’s quotes include unique terminology used by thru-hikers. A reference list of hiker terminology is included in Appendix D.

### Weather

Survey results show that weather is the most challenging of experiences for both alumni thru-hikers and current hikers. Notably, weather challenges were more prominent in the southern section of the Trail than the north. This is most likely due to hikers traveling in this section while winter conditions persist. The following are comments that reflect the weather related challenges and dangers faced in the Southern Appalachians with specific sites noted.

*There was freezing rain and bitter temps. Everything I was wearing was soaked through and cold. I had no energy and could not feel my hands. I was so cold I just wanted to stop and set up but the winds were high and throwing ice off the trees so it was not safe to set up in the high elevation. Ice was flying off trees at our heads. My friend stopped and took a snickers bar out and forced me to eat it which helped a lot. Once we got to low elevation shelter we set up and stayed in our tents for almost 24 hours. (Great Smokey Mountains National Park)*

*Two feet of snow came out of the blue with no warning late in the afternoon. Obliterated the trail, got lost. Could not find the trail. Set up camp and waited it out for 1 day and 2 nights. (Great Smokey Mountains National Park)*

New Hampshire was also included in weather related challenges likely due to the elevation of the White Mountains, and the weather patterns that move through the area.



The White Mountains, in particular, Mount Washington, is the location of converging weather patterns from the Atlantic, Canada and the Midwest. These converging weather patterns reveal themselves in rapidly changing weather, high winds and other extreme climatic conditions. The following are several comments regarding extreme weather in the White Mountains:

*“Hiking in New Hampshire in remnants of a Hurricane. 9-11 inches of rain in a single day.”* (White Mountains, New Hampshire)

*“Being trapped at Lake of the Clouds Hut for three days in July with wind gusting to over 160 miles per hour. It was the longest time I spent in one place during my whole hike.”* (Mount Washington, New Hampshire)

Some hikers wrote about specific storms and weather events, and the dangerous and often life threatening conditions they encountered:

*“I got caught in a violent thunderstorm just a few days after a deadly tornado killed several people elsewhere in Massachusetts. With no access to radio or news, I had no way of knowing whether this storm was something similar. When the sky turned black and I saw the wind barreling down the mountain towards me, I dove behind a rock and truly wondered whether I was experiencing my last moments alive. I crouched there shivering for nearly an hour wincing at the lightening and crashing trees. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so certain that death was near.”* (Vermont)

*“It was constantly raining. One week of constant rain coming into Adkins. Terrible thunderstorm crossing Whitetop Mountain-60mph winds, 35 degrees, rain. Almost had hypothermia.”* (Whitetop Mountain, Virginia)

*“The day started out beautiful, we got to first campsite early and were drawn into the idea of a home cooked meal at the Homeplace. As we continued on a strong thunderstorm rolled in. We were too far up the mountain to stop or set up a tent so we kept going. It was pouring rain and simultaneous thunder and lightning. It was an extremely scary and miserable experience. There was absolutely nothing else to do or think about except putting one foot in front of the other as fast as possible. After all that we got to town after the restaurant closed.”* (Dragon’s Tooth,

Virginia)

*“As the rain increased the entire trail turned into an ankle deep stream rendering me soaked through from head to foot, and being on the mountain meant winds that brought the temperatures into the high 30’s. Shivering, worried about hypothermia, and trying to make it to the next shelter, I finally saw sanity and tented where I was changed into warm, dry clothes and huddled in for the night”. (No specific site).*

Some hikers talked about the mental struggles they felt with weather related challenges:

*“It took us 5 hours of post holing in knee-deep snow to travel only 3 miles. It was painful, excruciating and discouraging to not get far for the amount of effort and pain endured.” (Georgia)*

*“The weather was rainy and dreary and not only affecting me physically but also emotionally. It was very demoralizing.” (Tennessee/North Carolina)*

*“It’s harder to hike in the rain, plus everyone is miserable when it’s raining, so it’s more mentally and physically strenuous those days when it never lets up. Very discouraging.” (Maryland, West Virginia and Virginia)*

*“The weather during the first 25 days of our hike was miserable. I never wanted to get out of my sleeping bag in the morning. Frozen shoes were so painful to put on. Doing dishes was the biggest chore next to getting water. Everything was more difficult. My boyfriend and I were cranky, getting on each-other's nerves and thinking we'd rather just go home than be so miserable. On day 26 the sun came out and it was just in time to improve moral!!” (Georgia)*

Some hikers viewed weather challenges as character building experiences:

*“Cold, wet weather on consecutive days-was not able to dry my clothes. It was difficult to get going in the morning, but was able to endure for the day. Many hikers decided to take a zero day, but I wanted the mental and physical challenge of hiking in these conditions, it was the marathoner in me.” (Great Smokey Mountains National Park)*

*“Thick fog afforded poor visibility. The winds were violent and consistent, easily 60 mph+. It was disheartening to say the least. I had to lean into the*

*wind to keep from being blown over. It was challenging, yet very rewarding.” (Roan Highlands, North Carolina)*

One hiker explained that the physical challenges of hiking the trail as only half the battle. “Going in I knew it would be more mental than physical, and it was. But the physical challenges of the heat and rock climbing can't be ignored.” Some hikers were particularly descriptive of how facing physical challenges could build up confidence, for example, the hiker who encountered harsh winter weather in the Smokies.

*“I was able to push well beyond what I thought my endurance level was capable of. The trail around Clingmans Dome was covered with hard packed snow and ice. I had no spikes for my shoes, the hike was strenuous, and if I stopped my feet would slip out from under me. I twisted; fell, it was cold, and seemed near impossible at many sections. And yet I pushed and pushed and beyond exhausted I made it to the shelter. This was a day I know many will never experience and I look back, amazed that accomplished such a tough day.”*

Another hiker shared his thoughts on how physical challenges fit into his purpose for hiking the Trail:

*“When people at home ask me what the trail is like, I think back to my favorite graffiti on a shelter. It said "Everything is cold and wet and terrible." I think that is an incomplete thought and I reply to questions about the trail by saying "everything is cold and wet and terrible, and that's why I'm here!"*

### Injury and health issues

Following weather, injury and health issues led the causes of hikers' most challenging moments. Trail conditions caused some injuries, while others were not necessarily dependent on location, as hikers had particular pre-existing health issues or injuries. The first group of comments will cite specific incidents on the trail that resulted in injury.

*“I got a spider bite on my foot in the White Mountains. My foot turned black and I had to hobble 17 miles to the nearest road crossing to seek medical attention.” (New Hampshire)*

*“I fell in New York and hurt my shoulder. I carried on for another week, but fell again in Connecticut. The following morning I couldn’t move my arm or shoulder my pack. My partner and I had to camp out for two more days before I could muscle out to a road to recover. It was mentally challenging, that thought and feeling of loss of the trail, loss of accomplishment, terrifying. I cried all night.” (Connecticut)*

*“I woke to 20-inches of wet heavy snow and only 2 days of food left and incredibly intense and painful neck muscle spasm of my life...I was in so much pain that I had to stop about every 10 steps to do deep breathing exercises or to roll my neck and shoulders against a tree. My hiking partner carried my pack for 15 minutes before I could take it back. It took us 5 hours of post holing in knee deep snow to travel only 3 miles. It was painful, excruciating and discouraging to not get far for the amount of effort and pain endured.” (Gatlinburg, Tennessee to Damascus, Virginia)*

*“I hurt my left foot-tendinitis like crazy. Took 3 zeros in Damascus, but it wasn’t enough. Had to go home to California to recover.” (Virginia)*

Of the incidences of injury and health issues, hyperthermia was the most frequently mentioned cause of concern.

*“I walked in a freezing rain storm to get to the next shelter and when we got there it was completely full. While stuck in the freezing rain, I proceeded to enter a hypothermic state and probably almost died, some other hikers saved my life. It took me a few weeks to recover from it because I never went to the hospital.” (Damascus, Virginia)*

*“Hiking in rain is tolerable, and hiking in the cold is tolerable too, but not rain and cold together! I was dangerously close to hypothermia and needed the help of fellow hikers to get my wet gear off and get dry and warm.” (Big Bald Mountain, North Carolina)*

*“Hiking through driving rain with 60mph winds is not fun! On several occasions I was blown 5-10 feet off the trail. With temps in the low 40’s it was the closest I’ve ever been to hyperthermia.” (Buzzard Rock, Tennessee).*

*“The trail was so icy that 4 of us hiking together had 19 falls in one day- and that doesn’t even count the times we went down to one knee. There were lots of rescues for hypothermia and injury while I was there.” (Great*

Smokey Mountains National Park)

On the topic of injuries occurring on the Trail, most hikers not only mentioned the incident, but the lasting effects of the injury. For some, this meant abandoning or postponing the completion of their thru-hike.

*“I had bad blisters on both heels within 3 days of starting at Springer, and continued with blisters on my heels, toes, and bottom of my feet throughout my hike. I once hiked for a week in bandages and crocs while my blisters healed a bit.”* (Not place specific)

*“On the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the hike (southbound) my right IT band strained and I limped for the next 300 miles.”* (Maine)

*“I got a stress fracture in my foot. I took two weeks off, and with the help of an orthotic insole, I finished the Trail, sometimes in pain. I was in a cast for one month after I finished.”* (New York, New Jersey section)

*“Through the Smokies I had to deal with knee pains that grew worse through the Smokies. In Gatlinburg it grew difficult to walk and I had to take 5 zero days. Luckily the knee held. Shortly after the Smokies I got sick and took another week off. Moral was low and I was very close to calling it quits. Luckily I didn’t.”* (Gatlinburg, Tennessee)

*“Knees started to go bad in Pennsylvania. By Vermont they were useless. Had to quit. Went back the next spring and finished the Trail”.* (Virginia to New Hampshire)

Health issues related to physical health, however, there were a considerable amount of issues related to mental health, as the following comments highlight.

*“Suffering from chronic depression made some days very hard to stay motivated, especially when there were less hikers around.”* (Not site specific)

*“The biggest challenge has been in dealing with my depression while on the Trail. Navigating relationships with others and trying to get close to others while also growing yourself...finding balance. Sometimes I have felt overwhelmingly sad and craving deep connection.”* (Not site specific)

*“The depression that comes with poor weather; the monotony of hiking all day, every day; listening to nothing but your own thoughts all day. I*

*completely believe what they say about it all being a mental struggle after the first week or two.” (Entire trail)*

*“After several months on the trail my body was starting to feel the toll. Then the Whites presented a new level of difficulty that further weakened my body. This also drained on my mental reserves.” (White Mountains, New Hampshire).*

While injuries and health issues were often debilitating or caused hikers to abandon their dreams of completing a thru-hike, some hikers were able to work through the pain, overcome difficulties and see the positive aspects that being on the Trail could provide.

*“I now have arthritis in my left toe joint and plantar fasciitis in both feet. It has been very painful to walk for about a year. The challenge was to finish my hike with this pain. Even though I was in pain, somehow the AT made every day worth it.” (Not site specific)*

*“Knee injury slowed progress. But a bad day in the woods is better than a good day at work anytime!” (Southern Section and New England)*

### Solitude

Solitude was a common response for hikers’ most challenging experiences. Hikers commented on the difficulties associated with solitude. This was most often associated with feelings of loneliness and contemplation of abandoning their quest for completing a thru-hike.

*“It is hard to think about the trail as a whole. 6 months. Over 2,000 miles. The loneliness is incredible. Sometimes I have to focus on moments instead of days.” (Entire trail)*

*“I was having difficulties with solitude anyway, and was tired, so I wanted to quit myself.” (Salisbury, Connecticut)*

While many hikers found times of solitude to be beneficial and positive, some found it to be a challenging time, and cited solitude as being one of their most challenging times on the trail. Several examples follow.

*“When alone the mind wanders and occasionally becomes slight depression. The depression that comes with poor weather; the monotony of hiking all day, every day; listening to nothing but your own thoughts all day. I completely believe what they say about it all being a mental struggle after the first week or two.”*

*“Both times I found myself hiking solo I skipped ahead to meet others, and returned later to fill in the gaps. It showed me the importance of sharing meaningful experiences with others.”*

*“It was the first time on my hike I was truly alone. My hiking partner had gone home and I was scared that I wouldn't be able to finish alone. I hiked my strongest day on the trail there, and felt the most comfortable in my own skin I had ever felt before.”*

Other hikers shared that times of solitude were opportunities to build strength and confidence, as the following quotes illustrate:

*“For the rest of the journey, from VT on, I would hike by myself, bouncing between groups from time to time, eventually joining up to finish with some of my original second group. Those times hiking solo allowed me to reflect on my time on the trail and take myself out of my safety net. It allowed me to push myself and understand my capabilities. It also made every rain shower, cold day and lonely day many times more powerful.”*  
(Northern Section)

*“I realized that being so far ahead of the bubble, very few people were around and I would spend a lot of time alone. After 4 or 5 days alone, I realized that only thing that could keep me from reaching Katahdin was the solitude. Eventually, I adapted and now feel comfortable in solitude.”*

Times of solitude might have allowed a hiker to appreciate the value of the shared experience. One alumni hiker reflected on the experience of solitude throughout the trail experience.

*“Both times I found myself, based on the trail logs, a week or more behind the nearest hikers, and someone I was hiking with had just gotten off the trail. In both cases I skipped ahead to meet others, and returned later to fill in the gaps. It showed me the importance of sharing meaningful experiences with others.”* (New Hampshire)

### Perseverance

Maintaining motivation to continue hiking everyday can be a daunting occupation. Comments such as “Hiking becomes a job. The novelty wears off when you do it every day”, “The mental challenge of walking when you are sore every day” and “The overall "mental game" is tough” is an indication the challenge associated with perseverance. One alumni hiker sums this up quite well:

*“It's not the monotony that gets you, but rather the unforgiving physical and mental exertion. Walking 20 miles a day is hard! It's even harder when you do it for months straight without any substantial breaks.”*  
(Virginia)

Alumni thru-hikers reported more instances of perseverance related challenges as did current hikers. Over half of these instances took place in the middle section of the Trail, in either Virginia or Pennsylvania. Virginia has the most trail mileage between its state lines. In addition to this, many people refer to this area as the “long green tunnel” due to long sections of the Trail being covered in vegetation rather than balds or summits above tree line (see Figure 21). One hiker specifically mentioned this in their comment “Walking the green tunnel for three months was challenging”.

The other factor many hikers encounter in this region is the summer heat. The bulk of thru-hikers enter and hike through this region in June and July, when humidity



and temperatures are high. One alumni hiker shared that “persevering through the heat and monotony of the summer months” was a challenging phase of their thru-hike. Several other comments related directly to issues of perseverance in the middle section of the Trail.

*“Pennsylvania was really challenging for me, due to the extreme heat, rocks, lack of water and bugs all hitting me at the same time. I really struggled with making myself hike, day in and day out, through the summer heat. This was a struggle for me until I got to Vermont, where I started loving the trail again.”* (Pennsylvania).

*“I wanted to quit from day 1, but I knew I couldn't do that because I needed to actually finish something. I got into Damascus, VA and it took me a week to get up the motivation to leave. I call it my quarter-trail crisis. Friends and family and trail family helped talk me into continuing.”* (Southern Section).

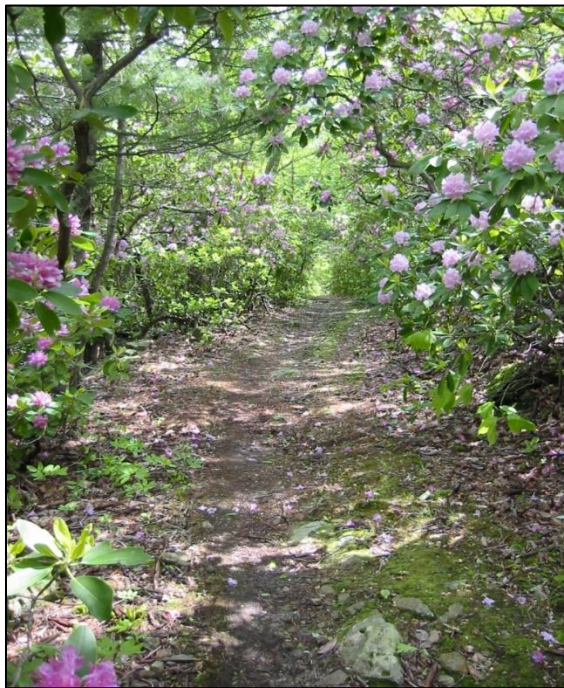


Figure 21: Rhododendrons and other vegetation in Virginia “The long green tunnel”  
Photo source: Ken Beach

Homesickness relates to perseverance as several hikers noted leaving family and significant others behind was a difficult aspect of being on the Trail for four to six months:

*“I missed my girlfriend. At first it was not an issue, but before Franklin I went a long stretch without being able to communicate with her and in Franklin debated getting off the trail because I missed her. We were able to make plans to see each other and that made it easier to cope with the distance.”* (Franklin, Tennessee)

*“On beautiful days I feel like I should be at home with my daughter. Bringing her to the park or beach.”* (Not site specific)

### Emotional Challenges

Several hikers were courageous enough to share some very personal stories regarding emotional challenges that either brought them to the trail or were a healing aspect of their thru-hike. One hiker’s story was quite poignant in taking on the challenge of mending his mental health. He had suffered a great tragedy, an accident that claimed the life of his wife and child, followed by several years of legal battles, depression and hopelessness, yet his plan to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail had been a light through this darkness. He stated; “My wilderness excursion is my attempt at healing my soul, finding a new motivation in life, and regaining the mentality I once possessed.” Another hiker discussed the recent loss of her mother from whom she was a caregiver. She shared:

*“I found that it took about 3 months of hiking to start unraveling personal issues in my mind. Both relationship matters and issues of grief. How has my life changed? I now feel more comfortable taking risks and really accept that not everything in life needs to be figured out and solved in one day. That finding a path in life can be a process of trial and error and that is ok.”*

### Other challenging moments

One challenging experience that bears mentioning, which was site specific is river crossings in Maine. Rivers in this area are often fast moving, rocky, cold and sometimes deep. One river crossing in particular, the Kennebec, presents a serious hazard as the Trail's crossing is just down river from a dam on Maine's largest lake. Water releases from this dam can be heavy and unpredictable. While hikers' comments often did not indicate rivers by name, their comments support the idea that Maine river crossings do pose a significant challenge.

*"I slipped on a rock while crossing the river. I got swept downstream a bit and then completed my crossing. At the other side I discovered I lost my wallet and camera in the river. I had 37 cents to complete my thru-hike."* (Big Wilson River in Maine).

*"We had to cross even "small streams" as a group, sometimes sending someone over with just an anchor rope that we'd all hold on to as we very cautiously crossed high volume rushing water."* (River ford in Maine).

*"I fell in a creek on the day before I summited Katahdin. When I got to the last campsite before the final day, I just didn't want to go on. I had nothing to prove, I was tired and cold and didn't want to go on."* (Baxter State Park, Maine).

Other comments regarding a challenging moment were not necessarily site specific, but also are worth mention. One current hiker commented on overall challenges by sharing that "Every day I would wake up hungry, sore and homesick. The only thing that kept me on the trail was knowing that returning would be a worse fate". Others commented on challenges that relayed into positive aspects of their Trail experience. For example, one hiker shared that slowing down to accommodate her kids slower pace

allowed her to the trail from their point of view and that through this she was able to see and hear a lot more because of the pace.

### Meaningful experiences

Hikers noted the place of a most meaningful experience and classified why the site was so meaningful (e.g. scenic beauty, physical challenge, encounter with nature, time with friends, hospitality received, spiritual, historical or personal significance). The Great Smokey Mountains National Park, the southern Highlands (Grayson and Roan), New Hampshire's White Mountains, Maine's 100 Mile Wilderness and Mount Katahdin were most often mentioned as places where hikers had a most meaningful experience. There was also a collection of similar classifications of meaningful moments that were less site-specific. These were personal significance, time with friends, hospitality and moments of reflection and awakening.

#### Great Smokey Mountains National Park

The Great Smokey Mountains National Park is a site that both alumni and current hikers shared in their top five sites for a meaningful experience. Alumni hikers typically cited the scenic beauty of the Smokey Mountains, along with the challenges of weather as the following quote illustrates:

*"It was so beautiful. Me and another hiker afterwards would say anywhere up the trail 'It's pretty, but it sure ain't the Smokies!' I loved hiking in the fog and the first two days were socked in. The third day it broke, and the earth was just steaming from all of the moisture. Sun rays coming thru the steamy trees. Just beautiful. The next three days were total sunshine and the vistas were breath taking".*

Several comments regarding the Great Smokey Mountains National Park gave an indication of reaching a turning point. The first came from a hiker who had encountered his first time of solitude on the trail, saying, “I hiked all day by myself and it felt very empowering that particular day”. Another hiker who experienced a personal turning point said, “I feel like I entered the Smokies a boy and left them a man. I really got my “trail-legs” around that time.” Hikers shared the significance of establishing meaningful friendships while in the Smokies or a special time they had with their hiking partners. As one hiker commented:

*“It was meaningful because of the people that I met there. They have turned into my closest friends on the trail”.*

Others hikers commented on friendships formed or cemented in the Smokies:

*“The Smokies were nuts. The weather was up and down, freezing and hot, muggy and muddy, rainy, windy, foggy and we almost always woke in a cloud. The last thing I wanted to do was sleep in the shelters-ugh-snorers!! It ended up being incredible. We met so many people and our strongest friendships formed there. Every night felt like a slumber party”.*

### The Southern Highlands

As the second and third most meaningful sites, Grayson Highlands and Roan Mountain/Roan Highlands were frequently noted for their scenic beauty. Each of these sites are “balds”, which can best be described as grazing land on summits which feature grasses rather than large trees or shrubs. In particular, Grayson Highlands allows hikers a unique connection with nature through the experience of encountering wild ponies that graze on the highlands (Figure 22). Four out of eight hikers that listed Grayson Highlands as the most meaningful site mentioned the ponies as the reason why it was so meaningful.

Comments included “The ponies were awesome to see”, “the ponies just made it calming” and “My time there was even better because of the smells, animal encounters and plant life”.

Some hikers also commented on personal struggles in these sites. As one hiker shared about his experience at Roan Highlands:

*“The previous week was very difficult for me, so when we got to the top of the balds and saw the sunset and views, it just made us appreciate this journey even more, it was very reaffirming. It was also spiritual”.*

Another hiker added his experience of solitude while at Roan Highlands:

*“I truly accepted solitude as a benefit to myself. I was surround by natural beauty and it was absolutely amazing”.*



Figure 22: Wild ponies and hikers interact at Grayson Highlands, Virginia.  
Photo source: Ken Beach

## New Hampshire's White Mountains

Among alumni hikers, New Hampshire's White Mountains were the most frequent place of meaningful experiences. This mountain range was most often associated with scenic beauty and physical challenge. Nearly the entire range of mountain summits are above tree line and have very craggy terrain to traverse.

*"Being above tree line and seeing forever. The 360 views were amazing. Also at times being above the clouds and seeming as though you could walk across them"*

*"There were a lot of sections that were meaningful and beautiful but these mountain sections were the first time I had been above tree line and they simply blew me away".*

*"It was an iconic challenge, after a long 1,700 miles of preparing".*

Several hikers also commented on the hospitality they received in the White Mountains. This mountain range is home to a series of high huts operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club (see figure 22). The huts offer lodging to hikers through a 53-mile span of the Appalachian Trail. Lodging includes a bunk, bathroom, as well as a full breakfast and multi-course dinner served family style and prepared by a hospitable staff. Lodging rates can range from \$80-\$100 per person, per night in the high season, however, the AMC offers Appalachian Trail thru-hikers free lodging in exchange for work. Many thru-hikers commented on their experiences with the Huts and staff:

*"The encounters I had with staff of the AMC huts were extremely friendly".*

*"I hung out at Lonesome Lake Hut for days as an honorary "Hut kid" and partied with the staff. Then I did the Hut Traverse (all 8 huts-53 miles-in one day with one of the AMC dudes). That was crazy!"*



Figure 23: Lake of the Clouds Hut. Mount Washington, NH.  
*Photo source: WhiteBlaze.net*

### Maine's 100 Mile Wilderness and Mount Katahdin

Two of the top three sites of alumni hikers' most meaningful moments, Mount Katahdin and the 100 Mile Wilderness, fall within in the last segment of a north bound journey, which ends at the Trail's northern terminus, the summit of Mount Katahdin. Maine's 100 Mile Wilderness begins in Monson, Maine and ends at a road crossing just before reaching the boundaries of Baxter State Park and the final ascent of the Trail: Mt. Katahdin. While several abandoned logging roads run through the 100 Mile Wilderness is truly a wilderness area, with no other signs of modern civilization. Hikers spend approximately ten days hiking through this area. The comments shared by alumni hikers of these sites illustrate a time of reflection for northbound hikers, and the deep emotional and spiritual nature of the completion of their thru-hike:



*“I loved the beauty and wilderness of the 100 Mile Wilderness. It was also the end of my hike, so I was really trying to enjoy every moment with my hiking family”.*

*“This was the last stretch before summiting Mount Katahdin. I became aware that within the next week that I would probably never see many of the people I have been hiking with ever again. That was a depressing thought because of all the friendships I had made. I was very anxious to get home but I was not looking forward to the journey ending. I wished it could have lasted forever.”*

*“The completion of my thru hike was the most rewarding moments of my life to that point. The night before my summit I thought of all the people I had meet and all the great experiences and I couldn't believe that it was about to end. I made a promise to myself that my life would always contain some adventure and challenges so I would live a life instead of merely being alive”.*

Mount Katahdin was by far the site of thru-hiker's most meaningful experiences.

Katahdin was highlighted for its scenic beauty, personal and spiritual significance.

Alumni thru-hikers reflected on the personal and spiritual meaning of the moment they felt while summiting Katahdin.

*“Big K was the absolute climax of my adventure. It's very physically challenging but I was so elated that day (and in such good shape) that I practically floated to the top. I felt like the mountain belonged to me just for a moment. It's hard to describe. I'm an atheist but I could feel the presence of something greater there. The gods of Katahdin are real”.*

The following quote is from a hiker who had to abandon his thru-hike from a previous year due to injury, and was finally able to finish.

*“After my injury I had to get off the trail for three years. The trail and finishing consumed my life... We finished last year leaving from the same spot we got off and completed Connecticut to Katahdin in 47 days. When we reached the summit it was like (I'm crying) this immense weight was lifted from my life. That I was free to move forward. I know that sounds negative, but it's not. I have never not finished something I started in my*

*life, it was the only goal I had worked towards for three years”.*

### Personal Significance

With regard to reasons of personal significance, several hikers noted that crossing into their home State, sections they had hiked before, or sections that they helped to maintain provided meaningful moments, while others shared previous experience or family memories at particular sites. For instance, one hiker commented on honoring his grandfather's legacy:

*“My grandfather started a trail club at the school he taught at. Some of the guys who were in his club were still in contact with my Uncle and he let them know that I was hiking. They came to meet me and gave me a 10 pound rock that they had engraved in honor of my Grandfather with the instruction to place the rock somewhere along the trail. Annapolis Rocks was my Grandfathers favorite spot on the trail, so I carried the rock 40 miles and placed it there in honor of him.”*

Hikers that commented on large sections of the trail that were personally significant usually cited whole states or regional areas. The following two comments are examples of these:

*“I live and hike in the Northeast. I didn't know what to expect of the southern part of the Appalachian Trail. I was stunned by the beauty (The Smokies, the Balds, Roan Mountain) and the hospitality of small southern trail towns (Hiawassee, Hot Springs, Roan Mountain) and the people who live there. Catching rides in the back of pickup trucks and unexpected trail magic are just two examples.”*

*“Maine was the last State of my hike. The last few weeks it became more obvious that I would complete my hike and have to return to the ‘real’ world. This did cause many conflicting emotions as I was VERY ready to stop hiking, but at the same time, I did not want to give up the trail life or have to part from my trail friends. It was also a time to reflect on what I had achieved. The scenic beauty of Maine, certainly added to the strength of my memories of this part of my hike.”*

*“I hiked Shenandoah in 2008 and again in 2012 with a friend who was thru-hiking and 2 others who came out from home to see what the trail was like. I was able to share an important piece of my life with several people who matter to me.”*

*“My cousin thru-hiked in 2007. I was in high school and met him in the Delaware Water Gap area. Going through the same area 5 years later as a thru-hiker myself was a great feeling.”*

## Community

Some hikers’ deemed significant their moments spending time with other members of the hiking community, as the following comments illustrate.

*“I had hiked the Whites before. My friend (who I’d hike the section with previously) came to join me. My sister and her friend drove all the way out from Wisconsin. I was so happy I could share the experience with them and the White Mountains are SO beautiful. They felt like the reward for making it through the rain, heat, bugs and rocks. It was also the time I knew I’d make it all the way. I was going to make it to Katahdin and my sister and friends were going to help me get there.”*

*“My boyfriend and I decided to join a ‘group hike’ for the day instead of pressing on and trying to have a ‘high mileage’ day. Slowing down, forgetting about mileage, and enjoying the company of friends and the beauty of nature was just what we needed.”*

Several hikers chose the connection of friends over an evening campfire as providing a most meaningful experience:

*“These were beautiful and amazing people. We all sat around a fire and not one person was missing or away doing something else. Everyone at camp that night was ‘present’.”*

*“I had been with the same group for a while and was just having a great conversation with the group. Then, before we went to bed, one of the others led us in a song as we all held hands. Opening up with that group of friends has been the best part.”*

One alumni hiker was particularly reflective on the topic of the thru-hiking community and making personal connections:

*“It's comforting interacting with complete strangers. On the trail you depend on strangers every day...It seems almost a shame that people off the trail spend so much time in crowded places and rarely interact with one another. On the trail, if you happen to pass within 50 feet from someone else you're almost obligated to say hi and maybe ask how their hike is. We live in a big world, but depending on strangers every day makes you realize that our big world is still just another community.”*

### Hospitality

Some hikers' highlighted meaningful moments with friends and the hospitality shown to them. The following are responses from three hikers who shared how trail magic played into where their most meaningful experience occurred:

*“I celebrated my birthday at the shelter and it was one of my best days on the Trail. I received trail magic in the form of a ride and later from ladies making sandwiches and snacks. Later some hikers made me a huge bonfire and I shared a tub of Cool Whip with everyone at the shelter as my ‘cake’.”* (Fontana Dam, North Carolina)

*“I enjoyed this site not only because of the beauty, there are nicer places on the Trail, but I and my partner encountered our first real trail magic. We got to know a couple of section hikers who bought us dinner and breakfast the following day. Forming a bond was nice to get away and take a break from the Trail.”* (Iron Mountain Shelter, Virginia)

*“As we were hiking up we were commenting on how pretty it would be to camp there so we could see the sunrise and sunset. But we hadn't put in enough miles. At the top we met a weekend hiker who had lost his wedding ring. We took off our packs and helped him look. Eventually we found it. He convinced us to camp there and ended up serving us cheese, red wine, stock, kielbasa, ramps and grilled green peppers. We had a great time sitting around the fire with him.”* (Little Rock Knob, Virginia)

The fascinating thing about trail magic is that it perpetuates good. When asked the significance of trail magic, there was overwhelming response for plans to pay it forward.

One hiker shared that he received great benefit reciprocating the favor:

*“For me the chance to help a couple starting a hostel by doing work on their shuttle van will stick with me. Being a mechanic back home I was in the right place at the right time to help. It felt good to give to a nice couple that gives so much to hikers.”*

Many hikers specifically used the term “renewed faith of humanity” in their reflections of their Trail experience and encounters with others in the trail community.

*“It was my first day on the trail and my faith in humanity was non-existent. That day was very hot and I was unprepared, as I started on the trail I ran into someone who wanted me to take a picture for them and pray with them. After that I started up the stairs and realized I was out of water. By the time I got to the falls my vision was blurry and I practically collapsed, then the couple came up and gave me some water and some food and helped me up the stairs. Once at the top they helped me cool down and get rehydrated. That was the start of the revival of my faith in humanity”.*

*“I have more faith in the world, that the trail provides and the world provides. Also, sometimes you need to give the person the gift of opportunity to help you.”*

*“I did make lasting friendships, which I never thought would happen. It was a real bonus. It really increases your faith in humanity when you see all the good things that people do out there.”*

### Reflection and awakening

The last collection of meaningful moments can be classified as moments of reflection and awakening. Some of the following quotes have spiritual and natural/wilderness connotations.

*“We arrived for sunset. Camped up there and rose for sunrise. It was beautiful and made you feel insignificant and yet connected all at once. It’s my favorite spot so far.”* (Cheon Bald, North Carolina)

*“The couple who ran the hostel brought a group of us to church. The minister there gave a great sermon. I was raised Catholic and stopped going to church 17 years ago. This was my first time to a southern Baptist church. The preacher was amazing and I still remember what he said. He challenged us to be “better men”. This is what I needed to hear. And has completely change my life...I wish I could thank him now.”* (Blueberry Patch Hostel, Georgia).

*“I had one of the most enjoyable days of my whole life on that day. No particular reasoning, just a blissful “epiphany” where I realized how lucky I am.”* (Atkins, Virginia)

*“Blisters on feet were brutal and pain was horrible. I had no choice but to keep going. Learned a life lesson that I could endure anything and that the brain can overpower the body”.* (Standing Indian Shelter, North Carolina)

*“I truly accepted solitude as a benefit to myself. I was surrounded by natural beauty. It was absolutely amazing.”* (Roan Mountain, North Carolina)

As final input on the subject of meaningful sites, one unique comment was made by hikers who encountered supposedly familiar landscapes, but in a new, unexpected way.

*“I had always experienced New York and New Jersey as a bustling city environment. I was complexly ignorant of the beautiful countryside in both of these States.”*

*“I’ve lived in North Georgia my whole life and never been up to there. Awesome seeing where I grew up from that perspective.”* (Blood Mountain, Georgia)

Also of mention are comments from two hikers whose meaningful moments involved acts of giving.

*“I came across a family camped along the trail. The mother had spilled boiling water in her lap. 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> degree burns. Was able to assist with*

*medical needs and directing rescue crews to location to get her to hospital. Still stay in touch with them and have attended her kid's graduations."*

*"There have been several beautiful places, but for me the chance to help a couple starting a hostel by doing work on their shuttle van will stick with me. (I'm only 420 miles in, this might change later). Being a mechanic back home I was in the right place at the right time to help. It felt good to give to a nice couple that gives so much to hikers."*

#### Notes on site-specific experiences

According to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the majority of hikers, approximately 65%, journey northbound from Spring Mountain, Georgia as opposed to southbound, starting at Mount Katahdin, Maine (Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2014). This is notable because the challenging aspects of the southern sections were more physical (i.e. Smokies present the first real weather challenge, due to snow and ice on high elevations. Some hikers complained about the approach trail to the AT, strenuous climbs-Roan Mtn, Blood Mtn). The northern sections more mental and emotional (other hikers leaving the trail, solitude, perseverance, homesickness), as seen from the results of alumni hikers.

New Hampshire's White Mountains ranked the highest in sites of particularly meaningful experiences for alumni thru-hikers. The White Mountains are noteworthy in that they lie along one of the longest stretches (75 miles) of trail above tree line and are particularly strenuous to hike. Hikers, who normally log 15-20 miles per day, only log 10 miles per day through this section. The terrain is very craggy, steep and the weather can be particularly harrowing, with quick pattern changes and high winds. Mount Washington, as part of the White Mountain Range has some of the worst weather in the world, and holds the highest wind speed recorded on the earth. As much as the Whites are

notorious for weather and terrain, they are renowned for their scenic beauty. With most mountain summits above tree line and 4,000 foot elevations, the views are expansive and inspiring. Not surprisingly, alumni hikers ranked scenic beauty and physically challenging as the reasons why the White Mountains were so meaningful (see Figure 9).

The comments current hikers used to elaborate on the meaningfulness of the Smokey Mountains National Park revealed that this section of the trail represents somewhat of a turning point. This represented hikers' commitment to their thru-hike, the establishment of friendships, camaraderie, and overcoming hardships and challenges with regard to weather. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy reports that, for northbound hikers, the 30-mile mark at Neels Gap, GA sees anywhere from seven to ten percent of hikers dropping out of their quest for a thru-hike. Upon entering the Great Smokey Mountains National Park at Fontana Dam, NC (160 miles) can see up to another thirty percent of hikers abandoning their thru-hike attempt (See Appendix E). These dropout rates may signify that by the time the remaining hikers reach the park boundaries, they have reached a significant milestone in the commitment to their thru-hike.

### Spiritual experiences

Most comments hikers shared regarding the spiritual nature of the thru-hiking experience specifically addressed how they would define a spiritual experience. For many, it did not include the beliefs or practices of organized religion. For example, "Connecting with nature is very spiritual for me though I do not identify with organized religion" or "I am not affiliated with a church or religion, but I find a personal spirituality on the Trail". "It was a personal spiritual adventure, no relation to traditional Judeo-



Christian spirituality”, “I am not Christian, however, I feel more connected with nature and how everything and everyone are connected”. As several of the previous comments mentioned, spirituality is often in conjunction with a connection to nature. One hiker extends this relation between nature and spirituality, and as with the previous comments challenges the idea of religion versus spirituality.

*“This all depends on your definition of spiritual. To me it means a deep recognition of our connection to nature and to each other. In that sense my hike was deeply spiritual.”*

Two survey respondents were able to incorporate the act of walking into the spiritual aspects of this hike.

*“I had a lot of time to meditate and clear my mind just from the sheer process of walking. It helped renew my spirit.”*

*“When you slow life down to 2-3 mph you experience the best, you see, feel and believe in more. The people you meet also make you realize life is beautiful! When nature is your religion every moment outside is spiritual.”*

Other comments regarding spiritual experiences included mention of good will and hospitality that hikers received from religious missions. Such comments included “I have appreciated how much church groups have opened their hospitality to me” and “The goodwill I have experienced, with nothing asked in return is very spiritual to me”, and “I hike with a friend who showed me Christianity through experience and actions, not words”.

### Shared experience

Survey participants commented on their encounters with other hikers and thru-hiking as a shared experience. As the results confirmed, sixty-two (62%) of hikers share their hike with at least one other person (See figure 17). First, the survey asked about encounters with people on the trail. Three comments under this question revealed a sense of security that the hiking community provided.

*“Rarely was it a fearful or concerning experience, but on those rare occasions someone ‘spooked’ you, it was negatively impactful. There is also a strong protective element among thru-hikers when encountering odd people or things.”*

*“I got rides, meals, conversation and invited into houses from complete strangers. I never felt nervous or afraid of other hikers. Growing up in the city your always on your guard when you see a dirty stranger...the trail was a game changer.”*

Survey participants were then asked if the shared experience provided encouragement, support, strengthened relationships, presented challenges or helped work out difficulties (See figure 18). There were a few interesting comments left under this question. Several comments recognized that over the course of a thru-hike companions can change, but that the support and camaraderie continues. Even when partnerships disband, it is not necessarily a negative experience, as it is often just a case of setting different paces or an unfortunate injury or illness rather than parting on bad terms. Hikers seem to understand the goal at hand and carry on. As one hiker stated:

*“I hiked 200 miles with close friend and the last 300 pretty much solo. My friend told me to go on because he had to slow down because he had knee issues. He told me to hike my own hike. What a wonderful friend.”*

The idea of identity is not exclusive to an individual's sense of identity. With nearly a third of hiking parties being partnerships (see Figure 17), as can be seen with the following quote, the identity of relationships is also present. In one instance, a hiker spoke of how experiences on the trail actually helped to define his relationship with his spouse, who hiked the trail with him.

*"The trail allowed me to see the most significant person in my life, and our commitment to each other. She was there with me on Katahdin and it proved to me that we can get through anything together. Fear, pain, heat, cold, arguments that can wake the countryside, lightning which seemed bound and determined to kill us, pouring rain, snow, bears, snakes, any and all challenges. Nothing can stop us."*

Additional comments from the survey fell under the subject of the shared experience. Many of these highlighted the connectives of the hiking community and the support it provided.

*"The AT is the only experience that I ever had in which people cared for each other without knowing each other. It was a stronger feeling than empathy and it was more intense than brotherhood. We treated each other as if we were the other. It was the greatest moment of my life and I was the best me that I ever was."*

*"Hiking the AT is a life altering experience. One gets in touch with oneself and joins the AT community. There all kinds of people out there and you can associate with who you want. I associated with those who helped me in my sojourn and I in theirs."*

*"You get so close to people in such a short period of time (there is no hiding who you are out there), it is very hard when people leave the trail - devastating, in fact. The diversity of people with whom you become close is a fascinating part of the trail. I don't know where else a 32 year old college professor, a 21 year old college student, a 65 year old artist, a 26 year old coal miner and a 33 year old machinist would be "close" friends."*

*"Ironically, I hike the AT to get away from people, but the people hiking on the AT were the best part of the experience for me...go figure."*

### Connection to nature

The following quotes are additional responses of hikers' most meaningful trail experiences that highlight solitude and connection to nature:

*"I found a nice secluded spot with falls in every direction. Found some crawfish hanging out under some rocks. I watched them for a while. I took a few zeros (i.e. zero mileage days) there. I saw no people for 2 1/2 full days until I left that spot."*

*"I had lost my buddies because they stayed back at a bar to drink, and I was able to sit alone and reflect. I talked with a chipmunk, failed to make my own fire and called to owls. Early the next morning an owl answered back."*

As an alternative reflection on the connection to nature, one hiker's comment was particularly expressive of a realization of their natural surroundings. At points in New York and New Jersey, the trail skirts around the New York City metro area. The trail actually comes within 30 miles of New York City and on a clear day, hikers might catch a glimpse of the Manhattan Skyline. The trail also has a station on the New York City Metro North Railroad commuter rail line, which hikers can take to the Grand Central Station (see Figure 24), and while the City is in close proximity, the trail in this area continues in its natural, wilderness landscape. The following comment is this hiker's reflection of the natural environment when encountering this region of the trail.

*"I had always experienced New York and New Jersey as a bustling city environment. I was completely ignorant of the beautiful countryside in both of these States."*



Figure 24: Appalachian Trail Station near Pawling, New York.

### Changed lives

Alumni hikers were specifically asked how the thru-hiking experience changed their off-trail lives. Survey results revealed that they were more confident in their personal abilities and capabilities, more connected to nature, go to nature to escape everyday life and that they have simplified their lives since thru-hiking the trail (see figure 8). The write in response for this question asked these alumni hikers to elaborate on how their lives have changed since hiking the trail. The responses received largely fall under the realm of therapeutic and healing aspects of the thru-hiking experience. These could be classified as a simplified life, social, mental-emotional and spiritual healing.

#### Simplifying life

First, the aspect of slowing down and simplifying one's off-trail life was a frequent response to how alumni hikers' lives had changed since completing their thru-hike. Respondents typically referred to less need for materialistic possessions.

*“I live more simply. I hiked in 2010 when I put a majority of my belongings in storage. They remain there 3 years later.”*

*“I reduced the clutter in my life. I am more grateful for the simple things like running water and clean sheets.”*

*“I have a slightly different perspective on life. Does it really matter? Is it really important? Anything you don't need while on the trail, answer=no, not super important.”*

*“The Appalachian Trail ‘ruined’ my life in that two years later, I am still severely turned off by the artificial constructs that infiltrate modern life. Now that I know true happiness can be found with only 20 pounds of possessions to my name, everything beyond the barest necessities seems like a distraction.”*

Other comments referring to simplifying one's life approached the idea of simplifying work commitments and slowing down other aspects of a busy lifestyle.

*“I feel so much more stable and content since thru hiking. The Appalachian Trail took my life out of that hectic rush, rush, rush life style and made me see the light of tranquility. Simple is better...always!”*

*“Prior to the trail life was all about work. After hiking the AT I was able to put a variety of life pressures into perspective and have a better work/life balance.”*

Several comments regarding simplifying life alluded to the idea of not measuring up to societal norms. Comments included “I am better able to slow down and take life at my pace rather than let the external world drive me” and “The AT didn't solve all the big life questions I thought it would; it only made me less interested in meeting the norms and expectations of the real world.” This offers a segue into the idea of social aspects of how hikers' lives had changed since completing their thru-hike.

## Social healing

Comments under the heading of social healing ranged from changes in individuals' interpersonal relations, social connections and communication skills, renewed faith in humanity, and general social aptitudes that changed through the experience they had from the social aspects of their Appalachian Trail thru-hike.

*"There is one life skill that I've improved on out here. It's comfort interacting with complete strangers. On the trail you depend on strangers every day. Hostel owners, other hikers, the person who stopped to give you a ride, the day hiker who's curious about the stinky guy with a long beard. Over the last few months I've found myself increasingly comfortable striking up conversations with waiters and waitresses, random day hikers, the fella standing outside a bar in town and the woman behind the register in the Dollar General. It seems almost a shame that people off the trail spend so much time in crowded places and rarely interact with one another. On the trail, if you happen to pass within 50 feet from someone else you're almost obligated to say hi and maybe ask how their hike is. We live in a big world, but depending on strangers every day makes you realize that our big world is still just another community."*

*"It really increases your faith in humanity when you see all of the good things that people do out there. I can count on only one hand the number of people that I didn't care for along the way."*

*"I have more faith in the world, that the trail provides and the world provides. Also, sometimes you need to give the person the gift of opportunity to help you."*

## Spiritual healing

Some hikers' comments reflected spiritual healing, particularly to a connection with religion-based connotations of spirituality rather than nature and general spirituality.

*"On the trail, I recognized how God provided for me no matter what the circumstances I found myself in. I have tried to carry that through into my everyday life, and to recognize that He continues to provide for me, and that I have nothing to worry about."*

*“My AT thru-hike changed my life for the better. I came to understand that life is a journey which is deeply connected to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It gave me the courage to share my faith both during my hike and after.”*

### Emotional healing

Under the classification of mental healing, respondents commented on the value of time to reflect on their experience and life in general.

*“Most valuable thing to be found on the trail: Time to think. And not the kind of time you have while drinking a cup of coffee in the morning. Out here you have an incredible amount of time free from thoughts about deadlines, weekend plans, familial commitments and next month's big presentation. I didn't realize how busy my brain was in the last few years until all I had to do was worry about how much food I needed to carry and how far I was going to walk that day. It took a week or two, but somewhere in Maine I realized that for the first time in a long time I was thinking freely about what I want to do in life, not just what I need to do this week. I wish I could articulate better how useful this is, but all I can say is that it gave me time to think about where I want to go in the next few years. How do you put a value on that?”*

*“Before the trail I had not completed anything. As a 2 time college dropout I was stuck in a rut, working in a local pizza place. I decided the first big thing I should complete would need to be a huge life goal. When I started the trail I was timid and shy, but as I went on I came out of my shell. I also found out what my limits were, and gained the confidence and self-motivation to break past them, emotionally, spiritually and physically.”*

*“I choose to hike the trail alone, and I believe this has increased my confidence when I hit a mental or physical road block. I spent some very long, tough days on the trail. Faced obstacles that seemed near impossible, overcame them and was proud to look back and feel proud of how hard I worked to get to that point. These moments are very powerful to draw upon in everyday life.”*



Some hikers shared deeply personal stories of emotional struggles that led them to the Trail and how their thru-hiking experience helped them work through their particular issues of depression and grief.

*“I dropped out of college due to depression and the end of an unhealthy relationship. Successfully completing the AT was a healing experience for me, and one that I desperately needed. I finished college afterwards and have gone on to graduate school and a decent career. I credit my experience on the AT with getting me back on track.”*

*“I decided to thru-hike in June 2011 for multiple reasons. My mother passed away from Nonhodgekin's lymphoma in May 2011 and I had been living with her as a caregiver. After her death, I became very aware of how short life is and how much time I had spent in my life making choices to make other people happy or to fill others expectations for me. So it was very freeing for me and a great way for me to express my personal independence to both decide to and to actually hike the trail. I began my hike in March of 2012 and I found that it took about 3 months of hiking to start unravelling personal issues in my mind. Both relationship issues and issues of grief. How has my life changed? I now feel more comfortable taking risks and really accept that not everything in life needs to be figured out and solved in one day. That finding a path in life can be a process of trial and error and that's ok.”*

*“On December 4th, 2010, I was involved in a head-on collision with an RV while driving up a snowy mountain in NC. That accident took the life of the woman I was going to marry and her beautiful little girl (which I regarded as my own). The following two and a half years were spent in lengthy court battles, staggering depression, and literal hopelessness. The one and only flame that kept my spirit alive was knowing that I'd one day be hiking on the AT. I allowed my hiking preparations to consume my thoughts as they drifted from reality to surreal flashbacks and back again. My wilderness excursion is my attempt at healing my soul, finding a new motivation in life, and regaining the mentality I once possessed.”*

### Transitions to off-trail life

Several hikers commented on the difficulties that they encountered on re-entering “off-trail” life. As one hiker shared, “getting back to normal life is going to be quite

difficult”. Other hikers explained the difficulty of re-entering “off-trail” life, and others spoke to the void that leaving the trail left in their life:

*“It is somewhat hard to transition back to the "real world." I find myself wishing I was on the trail.”*

*“I am always looking for that challenge/purpose gave me. I just ran a marathon and I probably did it to fill some void the trail left.”*

*“The Trail isolated me from all the noise of "town life". Take away girlfriend, job, and financial stresses and all that's left is YOU. You develop a sense of self isolation from all that and a tremendous self-respect. After reentering "town" again after the noise comes back, you can still reach back to who you were in isolation. Someone you loved and respected.”*

*“I feel better able to handle potentially dangerous situations, I'm more thoughtful about my choices, and I go back to the trail when I need to think. I'm also more distracted because my life at home isn't as great as it was on the trail.”*

*“I get depressed sometimes with this day to day life, money, work, cities, mass groups of people. I have more anxiety because of all the noise, and frustrated with how complicated everything supposedly needs to be.”*

One married couple that previously hiked the trail together carry the principles that they learned on the trail into their now “off trail” life stating “When the going gets complicated, we get camping”.

### Summary

Qualitative responses to the survey greatly enhanced statistical-based data. In particular, the elaboration of hikers most challenging moments provided insight into the therapeutic aspects of enduring severe weather conditions, injury and other health related challenges made hikers realize what they were capable of accomplishing and persevering.

That solitude, while at times lonely, actually might afford a chance for reflection on sense of self and the recognition of value companionship. Meaningful moments were somewhat site specific. Hikers frequently mentioned natural features such as the Great Smokey Mountains National Park, the Southern Highlands, New Hampshire's White Mountains and Maine's 100-Mile Wilderness for their scenic value and challenging terrain. However, by far hikers most meaningful experiences were not dependent on the site as much as the experiences with community, acts of hospitality, a connection with nature (e.g. encounter with wildlife) or a place where they had the opportunity for reflection on their personal lives.

Alumni hikers shared how their lives had changed since hiking the trail, often writing about how they lived a similar life with fewer material possessions and less desire for digital communication. They often recognized a newfound ability of connecting with strangers and value placed on face-to-face personal communication. Several hikers who had suffered personal tragedies before hiking the trail commented on the spiritual and emotional healing that they received from their thru-hiking experience. While qualitative responses reflect therapeutic benefits of the thru-hiking experience, many alumni hikers also commented that the experience was not without mixed emotions in returning to their off-trail lives.

### Semi-Structured Interviews

I conducted nine interviews over a two-day period at the Trail Days event and recorded them via digital data recorder. Interviews ranged from five to thirty minutes. Five interviews were with alumni hikers, and four with current hikers. In each case, the

hiker said they would prefer to interview rather than fill out a survey when offered the two options. Initial interview questions to “break the ice” were similar to those offered on the written survey (i.e. motivations for hiking the trail, most challenging moments, how had their life changed, etc.). Interview questions then prompted more in depth questions derived on the answers that were given to the initial questions.

Responses to the initial questions fell in line with the written survey responses, but several responses rendered unique insights, such as elaborating on how alumni hikers lives had changed since hiking the trail.

*“I have gained a sense of humility about my place in the universe. I now go hiking every week. Also, I have gained lifelong friendships as a result. I have shared this experience with others and gained self confidence in my abilities.”*

*“Thru-hiking the AT was the ultimate personal test in perseverance. My appreciation for 4 walls and a roof and a daily shower have increased tremendously. I’ve learned how little it takes to survive, in terms of gear.”*

*“I proved to be “different” than most people I knew. This gave me a sense of identity from the typical expected life society maps out for us. High school, college, full-time job. I believe a thru-hike should be part of the list.”*

One hiker was particularly poignant in explaining the challenges and rewards of the thru-hiking experience.

*“I get to focus on the physical content of it, so I focus on one step, and that’s it, it’s simple. Let see, challenges, I don’t know, the trail puts you through challenges every day and then it rewards you. So for example, everybody is hiking through the deep snow and ice and everything, but then at the end of the day it always shows you something awesome, like meeting a new person.”*

Interviewees were asked if they would consider their thru-hiking experience a therapeutic endeavor. Their responses indicate therapeutic notions times of reflection and connection with nature.

*“The trail allows you to stop when you want to stop, enjoy the view, and gives you time to contemplate things. It’s so much better than sitting in an office.”*

*“Yes, it’s good for your health. It’s about health, nature, getting away from it all. There are therapeutic aspects. I have become a better person.”*

While some interview questions were similar to the survey questions, the flexibility of the interview format allowed for more insight into these inquiries. For example, the site of hikers most meaningful experience. When asked about a special place on the trail a hiker gave great detail into a meaningful moment.

*“I don’t know exactly where I was. I was in the 100 mile wilderness, I was walking totally alone, it was towards the end of the day, I had maybe, what I perceived to be about an hour of hiking time left, and there was this tiny little side trail that sprouted off the trail and within 10 yards it kinda disappeared, but you could tell that it broke down to something, but I had no idea what. So I took this little side trail and I break through the trees and it like this lake, and there is this green vegetation on top of the lake, and within a few seconds this moose just pops his head out and I spent the whole night there. There was only one other guy there and he came in about sundown. We just watched this remarkable display of light over the lake, the sun goes down and brilliant colors, and being all alone in the place. There is just something about the peace and quietness of that night that just emanates. You could see Katahdin from there. It may have been my last night on the trail, now that I think of it. But I think even if it had been in the middle, that moment would have still been significant. There was something about that moment, in that place, at that time. It was magical.”*

Throughout the research process (i.e. initial review of surveys, initial interviews) several themes started to emerge which I wanted to explore more intently. Interview questions focused on these emerging themes and characteristics. The following hikers transcripts explored the topic of a renewed faith in humanity, and the pursuit of solitude and a more simplified life.

*“I was also trying to find my faith in people. I was giving up on people. I found it again. People go out of their way for you. They take time to talk to you. Everyone was phenomenal. I experienced lots of trail angels.”*

*“Being from Philadelphia and living there all my life there is no escape from the perpetual noise of life, the cars, the planes, the trains. The congestion of humanity, it’s just too much man. And for me, to do my best thinking, I need it to be quiet, and you have to go a long way sometimes to find that quiet. It has afforded me the time to look inside myself a little closer than that brief glance in the review mirror, and it kind of steered me in the direction I’m in now.”*

*“There is a slower pace to my life. The single biggest difference is my ability to make quality connections to other human beings. Whereas before my connections were via e-mail or telephone or whatever, it was always some sort of electronic medium separating us. And even when there wasn’t my ability to do it was even hampered because I didn’t have to near as much, and now that I have kind of simplified things I am much better at talking with other people, and building connections that are high quality with people that want to see you tomorrow too.”*

*“The idea of simplification, more human contact, less separation. It’s hard to fall back into the technology world, where you only see your best friend by text message every day. It’s just not for me.”*

Interviewees also reflected on the meaning of the thru-hiking community and the shared experience.

*“It’s remarkable. There are different levels of it. There is the support, the former hikers who want to give back, it’s a circular chain almost. This year you’re the taker, but next year you’re the giver. Today you’re the one that’s relying on, and tomorrow you’re the one that’s relied upon. And*

*then there is the hikers themselves. I think when people are thru-hiking it brings about a different version of themselves. It makes you the best of who you are. You see it every day. When you are at home and walking down the street and say hello to someone they would either ignore you or look at you strangely. But on the trail, you say hello not only for the sake of not being rude, but you stop. You have a conversation. You learn about each other, you take that time, because you have that time on the trail. I'm kind of realizing that just at this moment."*

*"A thru-hiker is family. Right as you walk up to them and you're like, I know, you've been through the same 800 miles as me and somehow you made it. That's a support system."*

### On-site observation

There were a few observations made during the on-site data collection that are worth mentioning for the study. The first was the general atmosphere of community during the Trail Days Festival. As mentioned earlier, Trail Days is a two-day festival to celebrate the trail. The festival includes speakers, workshops, trail organization informational booths, as well as vendors providing purchase, repair or replacement of hiking equipment. Entertainment-based activities are also included, such as concerts and the hiker parade. Additionally, many alumni hikers organize reunions of their year's class of hikers.

Together, these events make the festival a popular destination for current and alumni hikers. In order to partake in the celebrations and time for community fellowship many current hikers skipped ahead on the trail, or hitched rides back to Damascus to attend the festival. The festival attracts many alumni hikers. It was quite surprising to find so many alumni hikers present at the festival. I attended the festival with the purpose of accessing current hikers for the study, but actually had approximate one-third of data collected from alumni hikers (see table 1).

Alumni hikers spent more time completing the survey, and appeared to contemplate their responses far more than did current thru-hikers. This may be, in part, due to the amount of time they have had to reflect on their experience since completing their thru-hike, or that they were not interrupted as often by passerby's. The research tent was set up at the entrance to the hiker campground, so many people traveled past the entrance throughout the day. Current hikers seemed to have more distractions from passerby's who recognized them and wanted to chat or touch base about the day's events. Even so, on several occasions an alumni hiker would hear another alumni calling in greeting from across the camping grounds. I also observed current hikers who were connecting with hikers that they had not seen since the beginning of their hike due to setting different paces or other factors. The reunions I observed, both current and alumni were always heartwarming, and usually involved hugs, smiles and lively conversation. In either case, the observation was one characterized as finding long lost friends.

One recurring comment that I heard from current hikers was that they "enjoyed" filling out the survey and thanked me for allowing them to spend some time reflecting on their experience. One current hiker added a final comment to his survey:

*"This survey is helpful in reflecting on my trail experience so far. I need to journal more! I need to take more photos!"*

The other observation that presented itself at the Trail Days event was the reaction of hikers to a traumatic event that occurred during the annual Hiker Parade. While the parade features typical parade participants (e.g. fire trucks, horses, bands, pageant winners, politicians) the primarily purpose is to feature Appalachian Trail thru-hikers, walking in their respective year's "classes". The largest contingency is the current



hikers, but many alumni groups are present that have banners or wear similar attire to celebrate their “classes” reunions. The parade is approximate 1 mile in length, and follows the main route through downtown Damascus on a closed roadway.

During this year, an elderly motorist having a “medical event” drove his vehicle past police barricades and plowed through the parade participants and spectators, either throwing them aside or running over them. More than a dozen hikers participating in the parade were injured, four seriously. Ambulances and other rescue vehicles were immediately available for on-site triage, as they were also participating in the parade, while those seriously injured evacuated via helicopter to area hospitals.

While one might expect hysteria and panic to follow this type of event, surprisingly, the overall atmosphere was much calmer, with a much more purposeful and concerned collective. For example, in order to stop the motorist, several thru-hikers were able to open the doors to the vehicle and pulled the keys from the ignition, while other hikers were able to remove the driver from the vehicle and others who lifted the vehicle off hikers pinned under the wheels. Without much time these hikers seemingly worked together in a common intention and purpose to avert any more harm to the crowd, rather than panic. Those involved in attending to the injured were able to assist paramedics in clearing the way at the helicopter-landing site and getting the victims en route to the hospital.

The unusual aspect of this incident was the absence of hysteria from the participants and the absence of someone wanting to be a “hero.” The actions of the hikers who either stopped the vehicle or assisted paramedics were indeed “heroic,” they were

very humble about their involvement. When local news crews arrived, no one was showboating or overly panicked in interviews, they were simply factual and brief with their statements (see Appendix E). Meanwhile, in the campground, as parade participants returned, there was a look of concern and worry from hikers, but again, none of panic and hysteria. I make note of this incident in that the reaction of a calm concern seems a bit unusual for a traumatic incident such as this. It might be indicative of the changed persona of a person who hikes the trail, and their reaction to physical and emotional stress and the support of the trail community.

The diversity of the thru-hiking community is also of importance. Over the course of the Trail Days Festival, and from prior personal interactions with the thru-hiking community, I have observed that the community is composed of hikers of all ages, gender, nationalities, socio-economic classes, and race. While the majority of thru-hikers are in their 20's (48.6%), and presumably in college or in the planning stages of their careers. Older hikers may be on the trail due to a career hiatus, leave of absence or retirement. Although this study did not seek personal income information, study participants shared other aspects of their off-trail life through surveys and interviews, including the various geographical regions that they hail from, and it does give a picture of a very diverse community. One hiker shared her observations of the make-up of the community quite well, and it bids sharing here.

*“The diversity of people with whom you become close is a fascinating part of the trail. I don't know where else a 32 year old college professor, a 21 year old college student, a 65 year old artist, a 26 year old coal miner and a 33 year old machinist would be ‘close’ friends.”*

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### Themes and Characteristics

During analysis of the survey and interview data, four primary themes related to hikers' perceptions and experiences emerged: adventure, nature, identity and community. Each of these themes sets the foundation to consider the Appalachian Trail a therapeutic landscape, Survey and interview questions included characteristics of these themes. However, themes emerged with greater clarity during data analysis (see table 6).

Table 6: Themes and characteristics of a therapeutic experience of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail

Theme	Characteristics
Adventure	Personal challenge
	Getting away from everyday life
Nature	Connect to nature
	Simplify life
Identity	Facing challenges
	Trail names
	Sense of self
	Solitude
Community	Shared experience
	Personal connections
	Hospitality

Survey and interview results provided more clarity to my conceptual framework (see figure 24). Hikers characterized the theme of adventure as a pursuit in personal challenge and a chance to get away from their everyday life. Through the lived experience, they were able to connect with nature and live a simplified life. These aspects of nature and the landscape itself had spiritual undertones for many hikers. Results indicate that the thru hiking community occurs in a liminal state in which personal

connections are based not on societal roles, but on a shared personal commitment and forming meaningful friendships with other hikers that offer encouragement, support and frequent acts of kindness. Overall, the experiences of nature and community through the adventure of thru hiking the Appalachian Trail provides not only a life changing experience, but also an opportunity for self-reflection. The experience of facing challenges allow seeing the extent of their physical and emotional capabilities and to define who they are when they shed typical societal roles and expectations. This model supports the notion of the Appalachian Trail as a therapeutic experience, providing physical, mental, spiritual and social benefits.

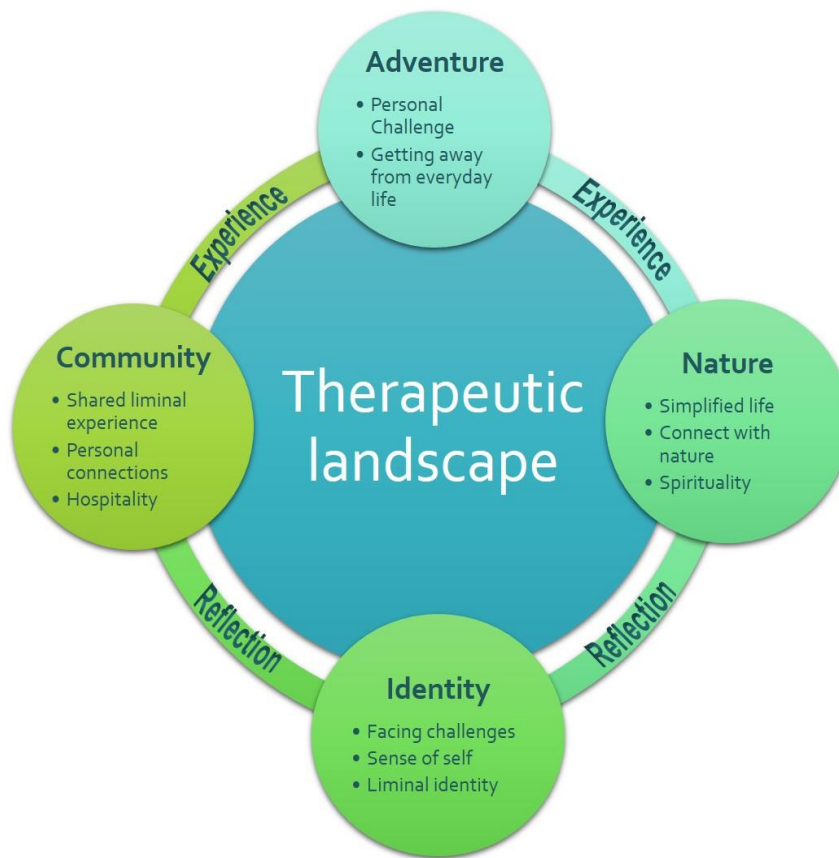


Figure 25: Appalachian Trail therapeutic experience framework

### Adventure

Tuan’s theory of escapism suggests that wilderness and nature provide a place to escape the busyness of life and connect with nature (Tuan, 1998). The Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience supports to this philosophy as well as Thoreau’s principles of simplification and a general connection to nature. Survey results showed how hiker motivations often focused on the theme of seeking adventure and challenge.

Characteristics that emerged under this theme were a simplified life, solitude, connection to nature, and the comparisons of “on-trail” and “off trail” life. Over seventy percent of

respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that adventure, connecting with nature, getting away from their everyday life and slowing down or simplifying their lives were their motivations for thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail (Figure 5). These variables spoke most closely with the theme of escapism, while other variables ranked much lower.

When asked what benefits they received from their thru-hiking experience survey participants' responses also reflected the theme of adventure, particularly in that their thru-hike allowed them time to reflect on "off-trail" life, and allowed them time to "connect with nature" (see Figure 6 & 7).

Qualitative responses from the question regarding how hiker's lives had changed since completing their Appalachian Trail thru-hike rendered additional support in the simplification characteristic. Hikers often mentioned the decrease in the need for material possession and modern technology. As discussed in the literature review, transcendentalism depicted a parallelism between the higher realm of spiritual truth and the lower one of material objects, as Nash stated "Man's physical existence "rooted him to the material portion, but his soul gave him the potential to transcend this condition" (Nash, 1982). From the survey results in this study, it seems that many Appalachian Trail thru-hikers certainly experience this transcendental process.

The use of and dependence on technology was found to fall under the characteristic of simplified life. Several respondents stated that since leaving the trail they have "less need for the internet" and "many distractions in modern society do not matter as much". Perhaps the most poignant statement regarding this was the interviewee that shared how his life had changed since completing his thru-hike in describing the desire to

simplify his life from technology. He discussed the benefit that minimizing technology made in his personal connections, as well as the difficulty he had in facing technology again when returning to “off-trail” life.

Solitude is another characteristic of the wilderness experience. Solitude is different from loneliness, which is predicted by sociality (Slavin, 2003). As such, times of solitude on the Appalachian Trail are not necessarily times of loneliness, but rather reflection and time to connect with nature. While several comments did mention uncertainty and loneliness, comments also cited solitude as being a desired, rewarding experience. Hikers that found times of solitude to be a beneficial, positive experience and often cited characteristics of time for reflection and connecting with nature. For example, one hiker stated, “I truly accepted solitude as a benefit to myself. I was surrounded by natural beauty. It was absolutely amazing”. Another hiker discussed solo hiking as “times that allowed me to reflect on my time on the trail and take myself out of my safety net. It allowed me to push myself and understand my capabilities”. Another discusses how initially fearful, his time of solitude was ultimately beneficial by facing his fears and allowing it to become one of the times he was most comfortable in his own skin.

Survey participants often made mention of how being on the Trail allowed them to connect with nature, with many hikers enjoying encounters with wildlife. As mentioned in the literature review, wilderness recreation allows participants to be fully engaged in the outdoor setting and to have direct sensory and physical involvement with one’s natural surroundings (Hutson *et al*, 2010). It is apparent from the comments received via survey and interviews that the Appalachian Trail promotes this connection to

nature. Most memorable in the engagement in one's natural surrounding was the comment in which the hiker encountered the New York City area with new eyes (refer to connection to nature section in results chapter). This comment was significant in supporting MacKaye's original purpose of the trail, to escape urban masses and experience nature and the wilderness. The Appalachian Trail can allow for this idea of accessing nature and the wilderness, even in close proximity of urban centers.

While hikers embrace their experience "on-trail", negative subtexts surround the realities of returning to "off-trail" life. This supports Ulrich's research which found that the period immediately following a wilderness experience is characterized as one of mixed feelings. Although people may feel rejuvenated by the experience, they may also experience negative thoughts and feelings about returning to their usual setting and situations (Ulrich, 1983).

From the results of my study, it is apparent that most versions of "off-trail" fall short of hiker's life experiences while on the trail. Responses from this study confirm that alumni hikers definitely incorporate "Appalachian Trail thru-hiker" into their personal identities even when leaving the Trail. Recalling the theories of place identity and place dependence from the literature review (Kyle *et al*, 2004), hikers' comments regarding the difficulties with returning to "off-trail" life demonstrate the strength of identity with the Trail (i.e. place identity) and the disappointment that "off-trail" life can have for an alumni hiker. Through comments shared in this study, returning "off-trail" life provides a poor alternative for life experienced on the Trail, which is an indication of strong place dependence.



## Identity

In general, the thru-hikers who participated in this study gave the impression that they had a strong sense of personal identity. In many ways, the Appalachian Trail experience may have helped them better define their identity. The wilderness experience of the Appalachian Trail is characteristic of leaving one's home and the attachments of thought and behavior to experience wilderness that might bring on a "heightened sense of self, and a feeling of aliveness" (Tuan, 1998). In addition, the thru-hiking experience is reminiscent of Keely and Godbey's finding that leisure activities can contain several elements that contribute to identity, including issues of competence (i.e. asking oneself "can I do it?"), frequent and direct measures of skills and presentation and validation of identities through leisure roles with others (Kelly and Godbey, 1992).

Three characteristics found under the theme of identity in this study were facing challenges, the use of trail names and sense of self. This section will look at the situations and events that allow hikers to exceed their limitations and gain personal confidence. A discussion of the phenomenon of on-trail identities (i.e. trail names) will summarize insight of sense of self.

Facing challenges is an important motivation and benefit to thru-hikers. A combined 97.4% of survey participants either strongly agreed or agreed that personal challenge was a motivating factor in their decision to hike the Trail (see Figure 5). As the second most frequently chosen motivation for hiking the trail, challenge provides a significant aspect of the thru-hiking experience. Additionally, the top four benefits received from thru-hiking, including improving mental or physical health, increasing self-

confidence and working on the practice of perseverance, reflect options that address personal challenge (see Figures 6 & 7).

Personal challenge may take many forms though generally speaking it is something that allows you to push yourself beyond your perceived capabilities. Hikers often expressed surprise in their capabilities and accomplishments by facing challenges on the Trail. Some hikers even used exact wording of capabilities, such as “I was able to push well beyond what I thought my endurance level was capable of”. Another interesting word choice was feeling more “comfortable in their own skin” after a particularly challenging experience.

Some hikers found that exceeding their perceived capabilities came during times of solitude. Hikers strongly connected with their identity in times of solitude, as discussed earlier with the idea of escapism. This conjures Hammitt’s consideration of individualism to be a cognitive dimension to solitude (Hammitt, 1982). An example of reflecting on identity in times of solitude is the hiker who stated that “times hiking solo allowed me to reflect on my time on the trail and take myself out of my safety net. It allowed me to push myself and understand my capabilities”. Another hiker supported this same claim in stating that “It was the first time on my hike I was truly alone. I hiked my strongest day on the trail there, and felt the most comfortable in my own skin I had ever felt before.”

Often, hikers found their capabilities in comparing themselves against others, with comments such as “Many hikers decided to take a zero day, but I wanted the mental and physical challenge of hiking in these conditions” and “This was a day I know many will

never experience and I look back, amazed that accomplished such a tough day”. This is reflective of Bruhn’s thoughts on personal identity in that “In the course of our daily lives we encounter many people who contribute to our sense of self” (Bruhn, 2005).

Some of this study’s inquiries revealed broad ideas of personal challenge, for example, asking participants to share their most challenging experience. However, other inquiries considered indirect aspects of personal challenge. For instance, the question, “Did you consider your Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience a spiritual experience?” might not initially seem like it was a personal challenge, but perhaps the person was setting a goal to become closer to God, or read an entire religious text over the course of their hike, thus meeting some aspect of personal challenge.

Regardless of the type of challenging experience, it is evident through the results of this research, facing challenges was a primary motivation and benefit from the thru-hiking experience. Secondly, through conquering one’s physical or emotional challenges, one builds more confidence and possibly redefine one’s capabilities, and possibly redefines the limits of what they can handle.

With regard to personal identity, the Appalachian Trail has a most interesting phenomenon in the use of trail names. These monikers allow a hiker an alternative identity while hiking the trail. These identities can last beyond the Trail through alumni circles, or by using the name again when hiking other long-distance trails. Some hikers start their thru-hike with a trail name in mind; others wait for a trail name to emerge from an experience on the trail, usually conferred to them by others. As one hiker stated, “the best trail names are given by others”. Table 6 lists the meaning behind the trail names of the hikers who participated in this study. Often trail names refer to some aspect of a

hiker's on-trail personality, or a unique characteristic or an event that occurred on the trail.

Trail names typically have an interesting story or explanation behind them. Some examples are "Thunderfeet" (a hiker with big feet), "Skidmark" (hiker that slipped often, leaving long boot marks on the trail), "Firefeet" (hiker suffering from hot, tired feet), "Turbo" (a hiker that regularly hiked high-mileage days), "Apple Brandy" (named for a craving for such). Other examples from the 2013 Trail Journals website are: "No Directions", "Bear Bait", "Dixie Grits", "Jersey Jane", "YNOT2K", "Two Sticks", "Slowski", "Snail's Pace" and "Moonwatcher". Names can be quite intriguing, almost begging for explanation, which one hiker mentioned is a great conversation starter, "at first I didn't see the reason and thought it was dumb, but now I sort of enjoy it. I enjoy meeting new people and finding out about their trail names".

While on the trail, hikers normally do not carry their normal societal roles with them or identify themselves through "off-trail" identities. The use of trail names and the idea of escapism finds them leaving these roles and identities behind. This reflects Turner's liminal state of *communitas* where relational bonds are "anti-structural, direct, extant, non-rational, and existential" and "not shaped by norms" where "identities are liberated from conformity of general norms" (Turner, 1974).

For some, freedom from these roles and identities and accepting what the Trail experience provided them is what helped them to define their personal sense of self. Completing the trail and facing challenges allows them to connect with their own identities. Comments left under the mental-emotion healing section in qualitative results

reflect this, such as “I found out what my limits were, and gained the confidence and self-motivation to break past them, emotionally, spiritually and physically” or “it is very rewarding and empowering to see how physically capable and tough I am.”

When asked to discuss the use of trail names many hikers mentioned that they enjoyed the anonymity it provided and alluded to the sense of escape this new identity allowed as part of their experience. One hiker spoke directly to this sense of escape by saying that “it allows you the anonymity to leave everyone in the real world's preconceived notions about you behind and discover who you are when it's just you”. From this quote, it seems as though the use of the trail name is two-fold; an on-trail identifying name, and the opportunity to choose a characteristic by which they want to be recognized.

Several hikers shared how the use of a trail name allowed them not only anonymity, but also alternative identities, perhaps tapping into a suppressed aspect of their off-trail identity. “Having a trail name allowed me or made me feel I could more easily reinvent myself”. Several hikers spoke to the idea of having an alter ego; “I viewed it as my stronger alter-ego” and another saying “It allowed me to adopt an alter ego...True freedom!” This is somewhat expressive of connection to nature in facilitating reflection on identity, in that “some people need to connect with nature at a deep and personal level, even to redefine themselves in way that includes the natural world (Clayton and Opatow, 2003).

Despite the usage or meaning of a trail name, one thing that was consistent with regard to identity was a strong “sense of self”. Most hikers were confident in the

definition of who they were and what they were capable of doing. They may not have come to the trail with this solidly defined, but time on the Trail, facing challenges, reflection in times of solitude or connection with others brought them to face themselves and define their identity.

While many opportunities for self-realization came from specific events, many reflections on sense of self came from the overall experience. Alumni thru-hikers shared a general sense of self that they discovered during their thru-hiking experience, such as “I learned something about myself each day”. Another shared how her trail experience helped define her sense of self, saying, “I proved to be different than most people I knew. This gave me a sense of identity from the typical expected life society maps out for us”.

The combination of escape from everyday life, facing challenges, times of solitude and making meaningful connections to others allows for reflections on identity. Many hiker comments addressed experiences on the Trail that allow them to face their weaknesses, realize their strengths, and to identify by characteristics outside of societal roles that they are known for in “off-trail” life.

### Community

The Appalachian Trail community is one of the most significant aspects of the thru-hiking experience. The data collected in this study describe the theme of community with three main characteristics. They are shared experience, personal connections and hospitality. The combination of these characteristics demonstrates the Trail’s depth of sense of community. McMillian and Chavis expressed sense of community with themes including membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and shared

emotional connections. Other insights from their work suggest a shared interest, comrades in continued activity, relevant life purpose, and giving back are all themes that exist in the Appalachian Trail community. Additionally, the theories of Turner's *communitas* and Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are applicable to the Appalachian thru-hiking experience.

The importance of the thru-hiking community was most evident through the classification of hikers' most meaningful moments, shared, social experiences. Examples of this were instances of enjoying the company of others around a campfire at the end of the day, the sense of having the full attention of others without distraction: connecting with complete strangers and making lasting friendships that were shared in the qualitative results.

The shared experience is viewed as having positive outcomes of providing encouragement and support or strengthening relationships, rather than the negative aspects of presenting challenges or difficulties to relationships (see Figure 18). The survey revealed that encounters with other hikers were overwhelmingly positive with eighty to ninety percent of respondents agreeing that encounters with other hikers were helpful, comforting, and provided a sense of community and chance to make lifelong friends.

McMillian and Chavis' research discussed two hypotheses that relate to the shared experience of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. First, the contact hypothesis postulates that the more people interact, the more likely they are to become close. This is certainly the case in the experience of building friendships on the Trail as many hikers

agreed that the Trail experience gave them the chance to make lifelong friends (see Figures 5 & 6). McMillian and Chavis' other hypothesis states that the more positive or important the experience and the relationships, the greater the community bond. This is particularly evident in the sharing of challenging and meaningful moments that are experienced together on the Trail as evidenced by the qualitative responses to each of these inquiries in this study.

The shared experience on the Trail takes many forms: hiking together, sharing campsites and shelters, food, water, cooking and cleaning duties, campfires, rides to town and a myriad of other opportunities to socialize and make personal connections with each other. Through the course of covering 2,185 miles over four to six months in search of a common goal, the opportunities to form friendships that provide support and encouragement are numerous. Hikers find that sharing meaningful moments bond them together as a community. As both Bruhn and Blackshaw's reflections of community suggest, shared experience and characteristics provide members of a community a way of reinforcing each other with positive feelings of mutual commitment and responsibility.

Many hikers commented on the support and encouragement they received in times of peril or trial. This brings up McMillian and Chavis' violent event hypothesis. This proposes that there is tremendous bonding among people who experience crisis together. Membership in a group means a sense of belonging and identification. It is the feeling, belief and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there, a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group. On the Appalachian Trail, crisis translates to challenges moments shared on the Trail. Hikers shared moments of triumph, challenge, risk and sometimes boredom or drudgery, which often were some



of the most meaningful moments of their thru-hike. Persevering in these challenging moments involves the support, or sacrifice of others, for instance, the sharing of food, shelter and other gear when several hikers faced hyperthermia. Instances such as these highlight the dedication and commitment hikers have to their fellow hikers. This is also reflective of a statement Bruhn made on sense of community whereas “A sense of community is related to the degree of responsibility we feel when our help might be needed in community crisis...a sense of community involves reciprocity in caring, sometimes at great personal risk” (Bruhn, 2005). Comments such as the one where hikers get off the trail or lose high mileage days to help others is evidence of this dedication of community.

The idea of surviving injury or health threats by way of the support of others in the thru-hiking community is somewhat reflective of Tönnies theory of *gemeinschaft*, in which the translation of “community” centers on the idea that people are bonded together in an effort to promote survival and protection of the group. Firstly, hikers are in a wilderness setting and could possibly face dangerous situations. This is evidenced in several qualitative comments in which the presence of other hikers prevented tragedy from striking (e.g. sharing food, shelter, gear) and in observations of the hiking community protecting, comforting and supporting each other during the parade incident at Trail Days. Secondly, in addition to physical threats, there is also the threat of losing sight of reaching one’s goal of completing a thru-hike; as many hikers cited, the presence and encouragement of their fellow hikers was crucial in their success of thru-hiking the Trail. Fellow hikers are often a source of encouragement and companionship in meeting the goals of completing thru-hike, as each hiker shares the same goal of completing the

Trail. This relates to Tönnies' traditional sense of what community provides, but it also harkens to McMillian and Chavis' theme of integration and fulfillment of needs and reinforcement.

In the Appalachian Trail community, reinforcement provides a reminder of the goals of completing a thru-hike, encouragement to keep going on bad days, and sympathy in the fact that fellow hikers are experiencing the same harsh weather, hardships, aches and pains together. When people who share values come together, they find that they have similar needs, priorities, and goals, thus fostering the belief that in joining together they might be better able to satisfy these needs and obtain the reinforcement they seek, thus providing an integrative force for cohesive communities (Cohen, 1976; Doolittle and MacDonald, 1978). Under any of these theories, interactions on the Trail through shared experience are fortuitous, meaningful moments that contribute to the strong bonds and sense of community. Through experiencing these moments together, the community encourages friendships to form and strengthen.

The theme of community was also evident in the value hikers placed on face-to-face interactions they experienced on the Trail. The interviewee that shared his reflections on simplifying his life by minimizing electronic communication in lieu of making more personal connections was quite representative of the essence of the thru-hiking community. Other hikers mentioned the importance of connecting to other hikers on a more spiritual level, through prayer, song, or through celebrating the beauty of nature together.

A tangible way in which the concept of community plays out is through random acts of kindness and hospitality otherwise known as “trail magic”. This study found that 100% of respondents experienced trail magic at some point during their hike and agreed that it was nice and they were grateful for it. The results showed that receiving trail magic made hikers feel part of special community. Additionally, hikers agreed that experiencing trail magic motivated them to help others while on the Trail (see Figure 13). This suggests a promotion of McMillian and Chavis’ notion of “giving back” to the community, as the majority of hikers strongly agreed or agreed that their experience with trail magic made them want to provide trail magic in the future. Sixty-five percent of alumni hikers report that they have provided trail magic since completing their thru-hike, and that providing trail magic was a method in which they could stay connected to the Trail.

Overall, the exploration into the theme of community led to a renewed faith in humanity, particularly seen in the instances of trail magic. Repeatedly, hikers mentioned random acts of kindness and hospitality as their most meaningful experiences on the trail. Many hikers specifically used the term “renewed faith of humanity” in their reflections of their Trail experience.

While on the surface, the thru-hiking community might be described through characteristics of membership, i.e. the use of common language (e.g. hiker terminology-see Appendix D), dress and ritual (e.g. trail names, trail magic), or to the actual physical trail, the meaning of the Appalachian Trail community goes much deeper than that. The Appalachian Trail community is representative of a relational use of the term community, which is concerned with quality of character of human relationships without reference to

location. The Trail community transcends the physical properties of the Trail and is appropriately described as having a “sense of community”.

Gusfield describes “sense of community” as feelings of belonging, interdependence and commitment to a social group (Gusfield, 1975). The essence of this sense of community is evident with the observations of alumni reunions at Trail Days as well as the immediate comradeship hikers have with one another when they meet. As McMillian and Chavis point out, the shared emotional connection is based, in part, on a shared history that each can identify with. Kyle and Chick’s research also points out that the bonds made through the shared experience have been found to be more prevalent than the physical attributes of a setting and are often rendered in personal narratives which are spatially anchored and shared with others over time (Kyle and Chick, 2007). Alumni hikers in particular held friendships formed during their thru-hikes with high regard and value. This was evident in observations at the Trail Days event held in Damascus, Virginia each year as alumni groups hold reunions to reminisce and reconnect with each other. This also supports Lyons and Dionigi’s research that sense of community in leisure settings is not necessarily episodic as previously thought and that the experience of Turner’s *communitas* in recreational groups is more significant than a fleeting moment (Lyons and Dionigi, 2007).

In relation to community, the characteristics of solitude are involved. Slavin found that solitude does not necessarily mean aloneness, as quoted; “Solitude is different than loneliness, which is predicted by sociality” (Slavin, 2003). Community and social connections may be an important part of solitude. Hammitt suggests that solitude includes the elements of an environment free of man-made intrusions and noises, of

tranquility and peacefulness of the remote environment, one which provides intimacy in a small group, where one's attention is limited to only a few chosen people and an individualism where one is relieved from rules and constraints of society (Hammit, 1982). MacKaye also considers the idea that on occasion a person can be gregarious while at other times crave solitude (Nash, 1982). According to the results from this study; hikers' seek escape from their everyday societal lives, but receive the benefits of the Appalachian Trail's unique community, suggests that the Appalachian Trail offers a chance for both.

The other unique aspect of this community is that it is a diverse grouping of people, many of whom have not met prior to the Trail, become such a close, intimate and supportive community over such a short period. The hiker who shared that the thru-hiking community was the only place they knew that allowed a 32-year-old college professor, a 21-year-old college student, a 65 year old artist, a 26 year old coal miner and a 33 year old machinist to be "close" friends illustrates this point. This finding suggests that Turner's theory of *communitas* is present in the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking community as it reflects an "unstructured, egalitarian community with a strong sense of community, solidarity and togetherness, reflecting homogeneity and comradeship" whose relational bonds center on "identities liberated from conformity of general norms" and occur in a liminal state (Turner, 1969).

A final aspect under the discussion of community is the conflict in the idea that the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience is discussed under the theme of escape from everyday life and society. With seventy-seven percent of hikers reporting that leaving off-trail life was a motivating factor in their decision to hike the Trail, it is a valid

presumption that many hikers do seek an escape from normal societal networks, connections, roles and expectations. However, the social and communal aspects of “on-trail” life are some of the most revered aspects of the thru-hiking experience. This view of everyday “off-trail” life relates to Tönnies theory of *gesellschaft*, which suggests, “The idea of community has become filled with impersonal and contractual relations of a more calculated kind, served by self-interest, competitiveness and formal relationships”. The experience with the on-trail community is more representative of the Tönnies theory of *gemeinschaft*, which the results of this study suggests is what hikers might be longing for. As one alumni hiker reflected of his thru-hike; “Ironically, I hiked the Trail to get away from people, but the people hiking on the Trail were the best part of the experience for me...go figure”. This quote reflects that escapism and community are not clear opposites in the case of the Appalachian Trail.

### Therapeutic landscape

The final component to discuss is the notion of the Appalachian Trail as a therapeutic landscape. As both Hoyez and Lea claim, wilderness and nature can provide environs that have restorative properties for both mind and body (Hoyez, 2007; Lea, 2008). When responding to the question regarding how hikers’ lives had changed since hiking the Trail, the results support the therapeutic aspects of natural environs. Two of the top three responses were “more connected to nature” and “I now go to nature when I need to escape” indicating that the Trail’s environment supports a place to escape and renew oneself and a wilderness and natural environment that possess therapeutic properties.

Therapeutic experiences fit into a combination of physical, mental or spiritual renewal (Gesler, 1992; Kearns and Gesler, 1998; Williams, 1998). This study was designed to address these three aspects of the thru-hiking experience, however, upon review of the results, I will introduce a fourth factor, that of social renewal. This is an extension of a holistic health approach, which provides multiple dimensions of a therapeutic experience, including physical, mental and spiritual, as well as social factors (Deliman and Smolowe, 1982; Hoyez, 2007). Under the heading of social renewal, I will discuss survey findings and hiker comments that address how they embraced the human connections they encountered on the trail, renewed their skills and fondness for face-to-face connections and were how they found their faith in humanity again.

Eighty-seven percent of alumni hikers did report “physical health” as a benefit they received from their experience, however, there was little mention of physical renewal in the qualitative results, which might indicate that this aspect of renewal was downplayed when hikers reflected on their experience. In addition to physical health benefits, mental health, connection to nature, time for reflection of “off-trail” life and increased self-confidence also ranked high for received benefits by alumni hikers (see Figure 5). Another positive response to how hikers’ lives had changed was that they were more confident in abilities and capabilities and that they had simplified their lives. Over half of survey respondents claimed “friends and family think I’ve changed for the better”. These results are indicative that they have healed or improved some aspect of their lives.

With regard to physical aspects of thru-hiking, hikers commonly mentioned the idea that the physical act of walking became less prominent in their conscious thought.

As one interviewee stated, “I barely think about hiking, even though I hike, what, about 18 miles per day, it’s mostly not really even about that.” This, and comments like it, support Slavin’s research that the initial “physical” phase of walking gradually becomes so rhythmic that the mind becomes meditative (Slavin, 2003). This is also reminiscent of Solnit’s rhythm of thinking from walking at a three mile per hour pace (Solnit, 2000). The psychological benefits (i.e. mental renewal) that hikers received from the act of walking is reflective of Glasser’s “positive addiction”. Thru-hiking the Trail is an activity that is non-competitive and voluntarily allows a person to enter “a zone” where the brain is able to enter a mentally relaxed positive state that provides an extremely optimal for a therapeutic experience (Glasser, 1976).

As the hiker becomes less conscience of the physical act of walking they are left is time for thought and reflection. One hiker addressed the time to think quite well, and it bears mentioning here:

*“The most valuable thing to be found on the trail was time to think, and not the kind of time you have while drinking a cup of coffee in the morning. Out here you have an incredible amount of time free from thoughts about deadlines, weekend plans, familial commitments and next month’s big presentation. I didn’t realize how busy my brain was in the last few years until all I had to worry about was how much food I needed to carry and how far I was going to walk that day....I wish I could articulate better how useful this is, but all I can say is that it gave me time to think about where I want to go in the next few years. How do you put a value on that?”*

Results of this study indicate that the ability to have time for the mind to think, to ponder, to reflect, brings about psychological benefits and mental renewal. This is reflective of Kaplan and Kaplan’s attention restoration theory that holds that the final phase of a restorative experience is a period of self-reflection where individuals can think



about their lives and priorities in a clearer, rational manner. Some hikers shared that through time they were able to work through grief, depression and stagnate motivation. These were highlighted with the hiker who was unraveling issues pertaining to the loss of his wife and child in a horrific automobile accident, the hiker who lost her Mother to cancer after being her caregiver for a year, or the hikers who were trying to get back on track after dropping out of college. Hikers often credited the Trail for changing trajectories in their lives, and in for its role in the healing process. Several comments stand out in indicating mental renewal such as “my wilderness excursion is my attempt at healing my soul, finding a new motivation in life and regaining the mentality I once possessed”, “I rediscovered myself after raising a family for 25+ years”, “I found my personal freedom to choose my own path in life”, “I no longer see things as impossible, I see them as challenges”, “I’m more willing to take chances and leave my comfort zone” and “I found out what my limits were, and gained the confidence and self-motivation to break past them, emotionally, spiritually and physically.”

The results of this study suggest that for those that sought it, and for some that did not expect it, the Trail provided spiritual renewal. The most common reasons for this were the opportunity for meditative practice through the act of walking, and the spiritual inspiration hikers found in the landscape itself.

While not seen as a designated religious pilgrimage, the act of hiking the Appalachian Trail can be similar to pilgrimages like Spain’s Camino de Santiago de Compostella, as it has been studied as an example of the cohesion of body and spirit and the ability to engage in meditative practice through hiking (Slavin, 2003). As one hiker stated, the Trail allowed them time for “meditation, silence and peace of mind”.

According to the results of my study, hikers did refer to their Appalachian Trail thru-hike as a spiritual, rather than a religious experience, which might be reflective of secularization, or that the Trail is not an official religious pilgrimage or with religious attributes. Of the sixty percent of respondents who claimed that their thru-hike was a spiritual experience, less than thirty-five percent reported that the Trail brought them closer to God, that they incorporated religious text into their daily routine, or that their thru-hike was part of a mission. Rather, the response of the Trail's landscape provided spiritual inspiration had a higher response rate of 93% either strongly agreeing or agreeing (see Figure 12).

The spiritual experience was often reflective of connection to nature, as comments such as "I felt a strong connection to the life around me", "spiritual as in Mother Nature, not as a God" indicate. This type of spirituality is more conducive to eastern religion and philosophies where the man-nature relationship is spiritual, where nature is a "reflection of the deity and a place where one could find their unity and rhythm with the universe" (Nash, 1982). The spirituality that hikers felt also echoes the themes found in transcendentalism in that nature as experienced on the Appalachian Trail is a symbol of the spirit, rather than a religious-based experience (Emerson, 1836).

Hikers also spoke of the connections they made with each other as part of their spiritual experience, such as "To me [spiritual] means a deep recognition of our connection to nature and to each other" and "I feel more connected with nature and how everything and everyone are connected". This fits under Fredrickson and Anderson's findings that "positive interpersonal interactions combined with complete immersion in a wilderness setting seemed to influence one's proclivity to perceiving elements of the

landscape as possible sources of spiritual inspiration” (Fredrickson and Anderson, 1999). Frederickson and Anderson also found that social interactions are part of the experience of hiking on long distance trails and can provide a sense of community and shared goals.

The survey responses in this study’s reflect that the therapeutic experience is social in nature. MacKaye wrote in his original proposal for the Appalachian Trail, there is an aspect of social healing that the wilderness experience might provide (MacKaye, 1921). The results of this study suggest that the Trail community might be one of the leading factors in social healing, as it is a most significant part of hiker’s experience. Making personal connections through this unique community seemed to be a thing that hikers sometimes sought, but in other cases was a phenomenon they did not realize they were missing from their everyday “off-trail” life until they experienced it through this community. The results in which nearly eighty percent (80%) of alumni hikers claimed that they made life-long friends is a testament to the quality of human connections made on the Trail (see figures 6 & 7). The value of making human connections and being part of a special community was evident when hikers responded to encounters with others on the Trail. Responses were overwhelmingly positive including providing a sense of community, helpfulness, companionship, comfort and a chance to make life-long friends, while the negative response of encounters being annoying ranked extremely low (see Figure 15).

As theorized by prominent scholars, modern communities are encountering decline in sense of community brought about by rapid growth, size, density, heterogeneity and anonymity (Tönnies, Durkheim, Simmel, Webster). As the motivational factors for thru-hiking indicate the need to escape modern society and

reconnect with people on a more meaningful basis than what modern society might provide for a high ranking motivation (see figure 5). For instance, a high percentage of study participants either strongly agreed or agreed that “getting away from everyday life”, “connecting with nature”, and “slowing down and simplifying life” were their motivation for hiking the trail. All of these fall under the realm of social healing.

Given the scholarship on decline in modern communities, if members of a community bind together through shared experience, including challenging and meaningful moments, then sense of community might remain strong (Marsh, 1986). This was certainly the case with survey responses that indicated that an overall sense of sense of community and lasting connection with the Trail, including providing trail magic, supporting other hikers and volunteering on trail maintenance crews (see figure 19). If modern community is one in which personal connections are lacking due to anonymity, the Trail community was found to be one in which human connections were not only facilitated, but highly revered.

One of the most outstanding features of this community is the giving and receiving of trail magic. Recall that one hundred percent of hikers had experienced trail magic during their thru-hike. When prompted to quantify the significance of receiving trail magic, hikers reported that it made them want to provide trail magic in the future and that it motivated them to help others while on the Trail. Additionally, respondents claimed that it renewed their faith in humanity and that it made them feel part of a special community (see Figure 13).

Freedom from the materialistic and technological constraints of modern society was also a common theme of social renewal on the Trail. Many hikers' qualitative comments cited the simplification of life on the Trail, such as freedom from a consumptive economy, as the hikers who stated that they had far less need for possessions once returning to "off-trail" (see "simplifying life" section in qualitative results sub-chapter). The ability of the Trail to reform hikers to simplify and slow down their lives is highly reflective of both MacKaye's goals for the trail, Tuan's theme of escapism and Thoreau's ideals of simplification. However, there are negative aspects of the social renewal. This is sometimes experienced when hikers return to everyday life upon completing the Trail, such as the hiker that admitted they were depressed with returning to day-to-day life, and the anxiety they felt when faced with money, work, cities, and masses of people.

An Appalachian Trail thru-hike is a temporal reality, typically only lasting five to seven months. In this sense, it is reminiscent of the Turner's liminal experience, where identities exist in liminoid social spaces in relation to surrounding society. Recall that liminal experiences go through three phases. First, that the pilgrim (e.g. hiker) separates from everyday life, for example, as the hiker starts a thru-hike. Second, that they undergo a period of an ambiguous state, akin to the hiker becoming a member of the Trail community, and acquiring a trail name. Thirdly, there is a return to society (i.e. everyday life) where customary relationships are re-entered but under new conditions (Turner and Turner, 1978).

However, the spirit of the Trail is continuous as hikers kept connections to other alumni hikers, made return trips to the Trail and provided trail magic. Many hikers claimed to have extended many characteristics of “on-trail” life into their “off-trail” life, as previously discussed. Additionally, many hikers made efforts to stay connected to the Trail by becoming proprietors of businesses that support the Trail, beginning careers in outdoor recreation industries, or going onto academic study that involves the Appalachian Trail.

Interestingly, many hikers reported a desire to hike the trail again, or at least section hike. As Muir found, he often returned to the mountains, especially when he felt he was in danger of being degraded by society (Cohen, 1984). Alumni hikers’ desire to return to the Trail often centers on reconnecting with the community and the landscape, as well as seeking therapeutic benefits.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of the research was to discover the values, meanings and therapeutic notions hikers form during their interactions with The Appalachian Trail and to illuminate experiential themes drawn from their interpretations of the trail and their hiking experiences. From this analysis, and the experiential themes developed therein, I argue that the Appalachian Trail, at least for thru-hikers, is a therapeutic landscape with a unique sense of place imbued with socio-psychological meanings derived from personal and physical challenges, the curative values of wilderness, and the liminal opportunities of the journey.

The theme of adventure is portrayed in the thru-hiking experience by first, living a simplified life while on the trail. The characteristics of this practice carry into “off-trail” life through less need of material objects and modern technological communication. Secondly, times of solitude allowed time for reflection and to experience the sensation of truly leaving societal life, even if temporarily. Solitude also facilitated the opportunity to connect with nature. Interestingly, while the characteristics of adventure were highly valued by hikers, experiencing them also made the transition back to “off-trail” life somewhat difficult. The solution to the difficulties with this transition often means a return to the trail. Former hikers often escape back to the trail, for day hikes, section hikes, or another thru-hike, so that they can have time to think, reflect and reconnect with nature. Connection with nature is representative of transcendentalist philosophy in finding what is possible within the experience of nature and wilderness. The Appalachian Trail wilderness provides a place and space for adventure. It allows a hiker to connect

with nature, and a chance for solitude and to slow down and simplify their daily life. The Trail experience can give strength to the body and soul as Muir described, and in keeping with Thoreau's experience of simplification, allow one to live deliberately, to bring to the forefront only the essential facts of life and learn what nature has to teach. The portrayal of adventure fulfills MacKaye's original purpose, to provide an escape from the urban masses for the chance to connect with nature.

Personal identity plays several roles in the thru-hiking experience. First, through physical and emotional challenges faced while hiking the Trail, hikers seem to find out their true capabilities, which were often well beyond their pre-conceived perceptions. Facing and conquering these challenges allowed them to gain great confidence in facing challenges they might encounter in the future. Secondly, the thru-hiking experience allows hikers the opportunity to rediscover or redefine characteristics of their individual identities as thru-hikers leave their everyday societal roles, norms and even names behind when they hike the trail. Thru-hikers see each other through an unfiltered lens, identifying each other down to the core, rather than the roles they play in everyday society. This suggests that thru-hiking experience is reminiscent of Turner's liminal experience that liberates identities from conformity and general norms. Additionally, the role of personal identity while on the trail relates to the theme of escapism, which, as Tuan described, allows time to gain a "heightened sense of self."

The Appalachian Trail's sense of community manifests through the shared experience, meaningful personal connections and hospitality. The Appalachian Trail thru-hiking community emerges within a liminal state in which hikers connect to one another by identifying each other with "on-trail" identities, shared interest and common



goals and experiences outside of normal societal groups. Interestingly, the Appalachian Trail community explores each of Tönnies' dichotomous views on community. The Trail represents a place of escape from a society that aligns with Tönnies' *gesellschaft*, a society in which community is impersonal and contractual relations served by self-interest, competitiveness and formal relationships based on digital or remote communication. However, the Trail is also a representation of Tönnies' *gemeinschaft*, a community in which members share strong bonds and kinship that promote survival and protection of the group. Personal connections made on the Trail often resulted in the making of life-long friends and were highly valued because they were connections made face-to-face within a close-knit community rather than impersonal or marred by modes of modern technical communication.

The Appalachian Trail community is defined with many of the same characteristics found by McMillian and Chavis, in which the more contact each member has with one another, that is characterized as positive and many involve challenging times or crisis situations, will have a stronger bond to one another. The bonds among the members of this community provide encouragement, support and companionship in mundane moments, challenging moments and times of peril. Hikers often sacrificed their pace, food, shelter and gear in order to help another. Sense of community was also represented through the hospitality experienced by thru-hikers with the giving and receiving of trail magic, which hikers cited as a highly valued experience on the Trail, and one in which they would like to reciprocate in the future. Overall, the impressions left with hikers from their shared experience in the Trail community was one of a renewed faith in humanity, which led hikers to strive to become more helpful and giving

towards others, as well as more receptive to receiving help. This does indeed suggest that the Appalachian Trail community, formed under Turner's liminal state and reminiscent of Tönnies' *gemeinschaft* might reflect characteristics of a utopian community.

The final objective of this study is to consider the Appalachian Trail as a therapeutic landscape. Meeting this objective is an important component of the trail's overall sense of place. Therapeutic landscapes are those that offer physical, mental or spiritual renewal. The Appalachian Trail meets these terms, along with the additional perspective of social renewal. The inclusion of social renewal borrows from a more holistic approach to therapeutic experiences. While very few comments referred to physical renewal, hikers' reports of mental, spiritual and social renewal were quite prevalent. Mental renewal was particularly prominent with hikers whose thru-hike came immediately after suffering a tragedy, illness or loss. Spiritual renewal emerged through a connection with nature rather than having religious connotations. Of great significance to this study was that the Trail's landscape itself provided spiritual inspiration more often than any other factor. Social renewal was most evident with the strong sense of community, meaningful personal connections made within the community, and overall, that experiencing these characteristics lead to a renewed faith in humanity. Interestingly, most therapeutic benefits received related directly to the motives for thru-hiking the trail: for physical health, mental health, connecting with nature, and escaping everyday life of social norms and roles. The most telling corroboration to the therapeutic aspects of the Appalachian Trail, and its therapeutic benefits over time came from how alumni hikers' lives had changed since hiking the trail. Hikers reported a stronger connection with nature, more confidence in their abilities and having slowed down and simplified their

lives since hiking the trail. Additionally, many hikers' reported that they now go to nature when they need to escape, many citing that they returned specifically to the Appalachian Trail. Interestingly, the therapeutic benefits of the thru-hike were also evident in the change of challenging moments over the course of the thru-hike. Initially, current hikers' responses to most challenging moments were very physical in nature (i.e. weather, blisters, trail conditions), however, over time, challenging moments became much more internal (i.e. personal inspection, perseverance, homesickness). The Trail works its therapy through the whole person, layer by layer over the course of the thru-hike. Hikers find themselves better versions of themselves after spending time on the Trail.

Of note under how hikers had changed though their thru-hiking experience is the reaction seen during the Trail Days parade incident. Keely and Godbey claimed that, in part, the way people define themselves is central to how they respond to events.

Normally, in a traumatic situations such as the parade incident, where people suffer from critical injuries in an out of control situation, people tend to panic. This was not the case with the thru-hiking community. Rather, the reaction from hikers were one of first, task and taking control of the situation, but secondly, a reaction best described as 'worried calm' was observed. Hikers provided support to emergency personnel if needed, but mostly to each other by controlling panic and being humble about their heroic acts.

Although, thankfully there were no fatalities in the incident, hikers did mourn the loss of abandoned thru-hikes by those who were injured. I believe that the therapeutic benefits received through the Appalachian Trail experience played a part in the reaction to this incident.

As a final thought on therapeutic notions, the Appalachian Trail landscape fits well under Kaplan and Kaplan's framework of therapeutic landscapes. Hikers report that the Trail possesses the feeling of "being away" from one's usual daily scenes and activity, both conceptually and physically, and that it was an "extent" into a whole other world beyond the immediate setting, and thirdly, that there is "compatibility" between the environment and one's purposes and inclinations.

### Meaning and value of the Appalachian Trail

The overarching intention of this study was to determine the Appalachian Trail's sense of place, described through its meaning and value on the American landscape. Through this study, I believe that the trail's sense of place represents a "throwback" to earlier times and is a true wilderness landscape that offers a meaningful experience with therapeutic benefits.

As a "throwback" to earlier times, the trail represents a place of escape from modern lifestyles, identities and societal structures. It is easier to connect with nature, live simply, and be more connected to others in a tight-knit community. Over time, it seems as though there has been decline in these facets of life. Landscape is becoming more urbanized, lifestyles become more material and less spiritual. Communication has become impersonal with text message, e-mail and social media rather than face-to-face, or even voice-to-voice. Social networks within many modern communities are weak as people become less involved with civic activities, recreation and other activities where they can know and interact with their neighbors. The Trail is a place of refuge from the

modern condition; it is a therapeutic landscape where one can heal oneself physically, emotionally, spiritually and socially.

Appalachian Trail thru-hikers live a primitive lifestyle, one in which modernity is for the most part, left behind. Thru-hikers live day to day with no electricity, plumbing, digital communications or other modern conveniences for up to seven months. The trail allows a place and space to escape modern lifestyles and technologies, and recapture the virtues of a simplified life. Alumni hikers commonly report that after completing the Trail, they have less need for material possessions and place more emphasis on making meaningful face-to-face interactions with others, rather than through digital methods.

Community defines sense of place. The Appalachian Trail's community is both locational and relational. The physical landscape is full of beauty and inspiration, however, thru-hikers were much more poignant in describing the importance of the Trail's community in their thru-hiking experience than they were in site-specific characteristics of the Trail. Though thru-hikers may only occupy the geographical community temporarily, they connected to the relational community indefinitely. The community provides encouragement for the weary and defeated, support in times of trouble, companionship and friendship, and frequent acts of kindness and hospitality. The phrase "random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty" is quite appropriate for describing the meaning and value of the Appalachian Trail, its community and the thru-hiking experience.

The Trail's sense of place represents its therapeutic value. Muir wrote, humans have an essential need for a place where "nature may heal and cheer and give strength to

the body and soul”. According to the experiences of thru-hikers, I believe the Appalachian Trail is a therapeutic landscape. The experience of thru-hiking, of becoming more connected to nature, more comfortable with personal identity and being a member of its community can reap enormous benefits that change people for the better. The thru-hiking experience changes proclivities, priorities and points of views.

Time in nature and wilderness through the thru-hiking experience can place a value on the landscape and stewardship for its continued existence and maintenance. Thru-hikers value their experience, and the Trail’s landscape, as evidenced by their lasting attachments to the Trail community and commitments to its upkeep and legacy through the giving of trail magic, volunteering for trail maintenance crews as well as membership and financial donations to Trail organizations (e.g. Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association).

In the new millennium, the idea of a wilderness experience is changing. While people still flock to national and state parks for family vacations and holidays, visits to the wilderness are getting shorter, and use more technology (e.g. fish finders, GPS, cell phones, etc) and the true wilderness experience is waning (Roggenbuck, 2009). The actual venues for experiences are changing, as the design of the built environment can represent virtual-wilderness experiences in shopping malls, theme parks, restaurants and hotels. People go to experience the “wilderness” while dining at restaurants which may put a guest in the center of a rainforest or ocean “wilderness”, explore the desert landscape in the comfort of an air conditioned hotel atrium, or run a wild Congo river. The rainforest is robotic, the ocean is an aquarium, the desert cacti is plaster and the wild river is a water slide. This is an unauthentic wilderness, which is packaged, marketed and

sold to entertain. There are no bug bites, sore feet, heat, cold or encounters with wildlife. It is clean, safe and presents little risk.

Ironically, the true wilderness is still available on the American landscape. Perhaps it is what some are yearning for when they visit a virtual wilderness and why so many products marketed to the public represent notions of the wilderness. Popular vehicle models include “Mountaineer”, “Forester”, “Denali”, and “Outback”, granola bars are sold under the name “Nature Valley” or “Cliff Bar”. Popular television shows including “Man vs. Wild”, “Deadliest Catch”, “Naked and afraid” highlight man vs. nature themes. These products and stories are packed and sold in a modern, urbanized society, which is further away from natural and wilderness. The irony is that the real wilderness still exists on our landscape.

The Appalachian Trail is a true wilderness experience. It reflects the wilderness ideals of Muir, Thoreau, Roosevelt and Leopold. Along with other long distance trails (e.g. Pacific Crest Trail, Continental Divide Trail, North Country Trail), it upholds the value of connecting with nature, and the possibility of transcending the modern lifestyles, customs and culture. The people who experience these landscapes develop a strong attachment to these wilderness places, and place great value on preserving and conserving them.

### Implications

Platt describes non-economic value of land as a “sense of place defined by collective or individual experience and values” (Platt, 1996). The non-economic value of the Appalachian Trail transpires through its scenic vistas, its hiking community and the

extraordinary experiences each hiker has on its landscape, many of them therapeutic in nature. The implications of this study are pertinent in maintaining the legacy of the Appalachian Trail and preserving wilderness landscapes and promoting wilderness experiences.

While sense of place is indeed a hard concept to define, it is of great importance in discerning the intrinsic value of landscape. Placing a high value on a landscape can lend to stewardship and preservation of the landscape. Emotional attachment to places can be an important component to incorporate into recreation and land management conservation plans. With urbanized society pulling further away from true wilderness and nature, it is important to nurture, support and promote the wilderness and the wilderness experiences that still exist. Alumni hikers and other stewards of the Appalachian Trail are key to the continuation of its legacy on the American landscape.

As the official agency of the Trail, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's vision speaks particularly to MacKaye's original purpose of the trail. Their vision is "to connect the human spirit with nature – preserving the delicate majesty of the trail as a haven for all to enjoy". Furthermore, their mission states that they are "committed to nurture and protect this sacred space...to strive to create an ever-expanding community of doers and dreamers, and work to ensure that tomorrow's generations will experience the same mesmerizing beauty we behold today" (Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2012c). This vision and mission harkens to the ideals of the early leaders and philosophers of the American wilderness. Thoreau was perhaps the first to advocate, "To save wilderness for wilderness's sake" by promoting national preserves. The transcendentalist movement defined a new, non-economic value of the wilderness, to preserve simply because it exists



(Muir, 1912). I trust that the implications of the findings of this study reflect these as well. As Benton MacKaye set out to achieve, the Trail has indeed provided a place and space to escape from the urbanized world and the “menaces” of daily life by allowing people access to the wilderness, to recreate and recuperate, and to experience a therapeutic landscape. It is essential to uphold and protect its legacy.

As Tuan stated, one of a geographer’s chief duties is to give “accurate and sensitive portrayal of the earth”, in a holistic approach that includes not only its physical and climatic properties, but also what it “yields to us personally” (Tuan, 1972). To find this, geographers must be conscious of the senses and emotions felt for the landscape. This will allow them to see beyond the physical properties of a landscape, to describe its sense of place through the lived experience. This study’s investigation into the Appalachian Trail’s thru-hiking experience reveals therapeutic notions of the Trail’s landscape that contribute to its meaning, value and sense of place.

#### Opportunities for further research

While this study was insightful into the meaning and value of the Appalachian Trail landscape, several limitations did present themselves. The subject of spiritual aspects of the thru-hiking experience caused some confusion with survey participants. Many hikers were quite adamant that their experience was spiritual without religious connotations. Some even seemed downright offended at the suggestion of combining religion and spirituality. In the future, a more nebulous inquiry into spiritual aspects might be more appropriate. It very well could render more descriptive and well thought

out responses. Additionally, precise inquiry to the value of the Appalachian Trail might render responses that are more conclusive.

The conclusions and implications of this research lead me to investigate several topics. First, I feel it would be insightful to conduct a longitudinal study of thru-hikers' perceptions of the meaning of the Appalachian Trail experience while they are on the Trail. My study's inquiries had interesting variations between alumni and current hikers. For instance, current hikers' reported challenging experiences were more physical in nature (e.g. weather, physical limitations, injury) while alumni hikers reported challenging experiences to be more emotional in nature (perseverance, homesickness, loneliness). It would be insightful to investigate when, where and why the transition from physical and emotional challenges takes place. There were also significant differences between alumni and current hikers' in their most meaningful moments. Alumni hikers' meaningful moments were much deeper emotionally and personally than current hikers'.

Secondly, data collected with regard to hikers' most challenging and meaningful moments solicited the locations of each. If this data was categorized, then plotted through a geographic information system, results might render a visual portrayal of sites of significant meaning along the Trail's landscape. I took this under consideration for this study, but time and technical limitations prevented this data to be presented in this manner at this time, but it may well be explored in the future.

Thirdly, finding the meaning and value of a true wilderness experience leads me to consider the experience of an inauthentic wilderness experience. It would be interesting to investigate these wilderness landscapes with a similar inquiry to my

Appalachian Trail study. What are the motivations of visiting a manufactured wilderness? Does it provide an escape? Does the experience change a person? What value do they place on them? Do they obtain therapeutic benefits? Do they still yearn for the true wilderness?

## APPENDIX SECTION

### APPENDIX A

#### On-line survey - Alumni thru-hikers

Thank you for your help!

The following survey asks for your opinions regarding your Appalachian Trail experience. The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your input is very important to our research in understanding the value, meaning and therapeutic aspects of hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Any information you provide will be confidential and used only for educational purposes. This study, **“Value, Meaning and Therapeutic Notions of the Appalachian Trail”**, is being conducted through the Department of Geography at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas as a partial requirement for the fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. If you have any questions or concerns please contact Kathleen Seal, graduate researcher, or Dr. Kevin Romig at 512-245-2170.

Thank you.

Department of Geography  
Texas State University – San Marcos  
601 University Drive  
San Marcos, TX 78666

**Instructions:** Please check the box or fill in the blank area as indicated.

All answers are strictly voluntary and confidential.

1. What were your **motivations** for thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
Exercise/physical conditioning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal challenge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adventure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Connecting with nature	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A spiritual journey	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Slow down/simplify my life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Getting away from my everyday life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spending time with family/friends/spouse	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meeting new friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Become part of the hiking community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____					

2. What **benefits** did you receive from your Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
Beneficial to my physical health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Beneficial to my mental health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Beneficial to my spiritual well-being	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Beneficial to my practice of perseverance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Beneficial to my personal relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increased my self-confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Allowed time to reflect on my “off-trail” life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Allowed time to connect with nature	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Made lifelong friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____					

3. How has your Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience **changed your “off-trail” life**?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
I am more connected to nature.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I now go to nature more often when I need to escape my everyday life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have simplified my life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have become more connected to God and creation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It has made me more confident in my personal abilities/capabilities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have become more involved in my community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am more environmentally responsible (e.g. reduce, reuse, recycle)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My family and friends think that I have changed for the better.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other:					

(Optional) Please use the following space to **elaborate on how your life has been changed** from your experience of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail.

[illegible]

- ☐ Encounter with wildlife
- ☐ Weather
- ☐ Water crossing
- ☐ Road crossing
- ☐ Health issue
- ☐ Injury
- ☐ Solitude
- ☐ Summiting a particular mountain
- ☐ Encounter with people
- ☐ Other

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- This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

5. To answer this question, please pick **one site or section** of the Appalachian Trail which provided a **particularly meaningful experience** during your thru-hike.  
*(Note: You will have the opportunity to mention other sites at the end of this question).*

- a. Site or section name: \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Why was this site or section meaningful to you?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
Scenic beauty	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spiritual significance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Historical significance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal significance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Physical challenge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Encounter with nature	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friends I met there	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hospitality I experienced	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other _____					

(Optional) Please use this space to elaborate on how this site or section of the trail was meaningful to you. You may also mention additional sites or sections that were meaningful to you and why.

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6. Did you consider your Appalachian Trail thru-hike to be a **spiritual experience**?

☐ Yes

☐ No ➡ (skip to question #8)

7. In what way was your Appalachian Trail thru-hike a spiritual experience?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
The Appalachian Trail' landscape provided spiritual inspiration.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I committed myself to become more connected with God and creation while hiking the trail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading the Bible or another religious text was an important part of my daily routine or ritual on the trail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I saw my thru-hike as part of mission work for an organization or charity.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____					

8. Did you experience **trail magic** while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail?

*“Trail Magic”: All the wonderful, unexpected things that happen to thru-hikers during their hike. (e.g. coolers of fresh snacks and cool drinks left on the trail, free rides to town, the offering of accommodations, etc.).*

☐ Yes

☐ No ➡ (skip to question 10)

9. How significant was your experience with **trail magic**?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
It renewed my faith in humanity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It was nice, and I was grateful for it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It made me feel part of a special community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It motivated me to help others while I was on the trail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It made me want to provide trail magic in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. Did you adopt a **trail name** while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail?  
*Trail names: The often descriptive and humorous names thru-hikers adopt while hiking the trail.*  
☐ Yes  
☐ No ➡ (Skip to question #13)

11. What was the significance of adopting a **trail name**?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
It was symbolic of my leaving my everyday life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It made me feel part of a special community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____					

12. What was the meaning of your **trail name**: (check all that apply)

- ☐ Alludes to a special place on the trail.  
☐ Alludes to some event from my on-trail experience.  
☐ Alludes to some characteristic of my **on-trail** personality/identity.  
☐ Alludes to some characteristic of my **off-trail** personality/ identity.  
☐ Has spiritual meaning.  
☐ Represents a character or story from literature or mythology  
☐ Represents a biblical reference  
☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

13. Did you keep a personal journal while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No ➡ (Skip to Question 15)

14. What was the significance of keeping a personal journal of your thru-hiking experience?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
It was therapeutic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It was rewarding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It provides me with a memoir of my experience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____					

15. In general, did you find **encounters with other hikers** to be:

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Comforting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Annoying	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A time of companionship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provided a sense of community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A chance to make life-long friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helpful (in providing information, trail conditions, weather, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____				

16. For the majority of your hike were you:
- ☐ Hiking with a group of 3 or more hikers
  - ☐ Hiking with one other person
  - ☐ Hiking solo ➡ (Skip to question 18)

17. If you hiked the Appalachian Trail with another person or group did your shared experience:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
Strengthen your relationship(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provide significant challenges to your relationship(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helped to work out difficulties in your relationship(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provided encouragement and support in challenging times	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____					

18. How have you stayed connected to the Appalachian Trail since completing your thru-hike?

	Have done	Would like to do	No interest in doing
Day hiking on the Appalachian Trail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Section hiking the Appalachian Trail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Another thru-hike on the Appalachian Trail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provided "trail magic"	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provided support for another thru-hiker	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Volunteered for trail crew/trail maintenance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Advocacy work for the Trail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sharing my experience with others through presentation/slide shows of my hike	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Publication of my experience (book, magazine, journal article, photographs or films)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

19. What was your age when you hiked the trail?

- ☐ < 20
- ☐ 20-29
- ☐ 30-39
- ☐ 40-49
- ☐ 50-59
- ☐ 60-69
- ☐ 70+
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

20. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

**Thank you for completing this survey.**

(Optional) You may use the back of this page to share any additional thoughts on how your Appalachian Trail thru-hike was a therapeutic endeavor, or share any other encounters, events, places or people that contributed to your thru-hike being a meaningful experience.

## *APPENDIX A*

### On-site survey - Current hikers

Thank you for your help!

The following survey asks for your opinions regarding your Appalachian Trail experience. The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your input is very important to our research in understanding the value, meaning and therapeutic aspects of hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Any information you provide will be confidential and used only for educational purposes. This study, “**Value, Meaning and Therapeutic Notions of the Appalachian Trail**”, is being conducted through the Department of Geography at Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas as a partial requirement for the fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. If you have any questions or concerns please contact Kathleen Seal, graduate researcher, or Dr. Kevin Romig at 512-245-2170.

Thank you.

Department of Geography  
Texas State University – San Marcos  
601 University Drive  
San Marcos, TX 78666

**Instructions:** Please check the box or fill in the blank area as indicated.

All answers are strictly voluntary and confidential.

1. What are your **motivations** for thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
Exercise/physical conditioning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal challenge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adventure	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Connecting with nature	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A spiritual journey	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Slow down/simplify my life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Getting away from my everyday life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spending time with family/friends/spouse	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meeting new friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Become part of the hiking community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____					

2. What **benefits** do you anticipate you will receive from your Appalachian Trail thru-hiking experience?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
Beneficial to my physical health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Beneficial to my mental health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Beneficial to my spiritual well-being	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Beneficial to my practice of perseverance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Beneficial to my personal relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Increase my self-confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Allow time to reflect on my “off-trail” life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Allow time to connect with nature	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Make lifelong friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____					



4. To answer this question, please pick **one site or section** of the Appalachian Trail, which provided a **particularly meaningful experience** during your thru-hike thus far.  
*(Note: You will have the opportunity to mention other sites at the end of this question).*

a. Site or section name: \_\_\_\_\_

b. Why was this site or section so meaningful to you?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
Scenic beauty	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spiritual significance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Historical significance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal significance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Physical challenge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Encounter with nature	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friends I met there	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hospitality I experienced	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other _____					

(Optional) Please use this space to elaborate on how this site or section of the trail was meaningful to you. You may also mention additional sites or sections that were meaningful to you and why.

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5. Do you consider your Appalachian Trail thru-hike to be a **spiritual experience**?

☐ Yes

☐ No ➡ (skip to question #7)

6. In what way is your Appalachian Trail thru-hike a spiritual experience?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
The Appalachian Trail' landscape provides spiritual inspiration.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I committed myself to become more connected with God and creation while hiking the trail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading the Bible or another religious text was an important part of my daily routine or ritual on the trail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I see my thru-hike as part of mission work for an organization or charity.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____					

7. Have you experienced **trail magic** while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail?

*“Trail Magic”: All the wonderful, unexpected things that happen to thru-hikers during their hike. (e.g. coolers of fresh snacks and cool drinks left on the trail, free rides to town, the offering of accommodations, etc.).*

☐ Yes

☐ No ➡ (skip to question 9)

8. How significant has your experience with **trail magic** been?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
It renews my faith in humanity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It is nice, and I am grateful for it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It makes me feel part of a special community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It motivated me to help others on the trail.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It made me want to provide trail magic in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. Have you adopted a **trail name** while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail?  
*Trail names: The often descriptive and humorous names thru-hikers adopt while hiking the trail.*  
☐ Yes  
☐ No ➤(Skip to question #12)

10. What has been the significance of adopting a **trail name**?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
It is symbolic of my leaving my everyday life.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It has made me feel part of a special community.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

11. What is the meaning of your **trail name**: (check all that apply)
- ☐ Alludes to a special place on the trail.
  - ☐ Alludes to some event from my on-trail experience.
  - ☐ Alludes to some characteristic of my **on-trail** personality/identity.
  - ☐ Alludes to some characteristic of my **off-trail** personality/ identity.
  - ☐ Has spiritual meaning.
  - ☐ Represents a character or story from literature or mythology
  - ☐ Represents a biblical reference
  - ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

12. Are you keeping a personal journal while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No ➤(Skip to Question 14)

13. What is the significance of keeping a personal journal of your thru-hiking experience?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
It is therapeutic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It is rewarding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It will provide me with a memoir of my experience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

14. In general, do you find **encounters with other hikers** to be:

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Comforting	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Annoying	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A time of companionship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Provides a sense of community	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A chance to make life-long friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helpful (in providing information, trail conditions, weather, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____				

15. For the majority of your hike thus far, have you been:

- ☐ Hiking with a group of 3 or more hikers
- ☐ Hiking with one other person
- ☐ Hiking solo ↪(Skip to question 17)

16. If you are hiking the Appalachian Trail with another person or group is your shared experience:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Neither agree or disagree
Strengthening your relationship(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing significant challenges to your relationship(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Helping to work out difficulties in your relationship(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing encouragement and support in challenging times	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other: _____					

17. What is your age?
- ☐ < 20
  - ☐ 20-29
  - ☐ 30-39
  - ☐ 40-49
  - ☐ 50-59
  - ☐ 60-69
  - ☐ 70+
  - ☐ Prefer not to answer
18. What is your gender?
- ☐ Male
  - ☐ Female
  - ☐ Prefer not to answer

**Thank you for completing this survey.**

(Optional) You may use the following space to share any additional thoughts on how your Appalachian Trail thru-hike was a therapeutic endeavor, or share any other encounters, events, places or people that contributed to your thru-hike being a meaningful experience.

## APPENDIX B

### Semi-structured interview questions

#### I. Motivation

1. Tell me the story of how you came about deciding to attempt an Appalachian Trail thru-hike.
  - a. Was there a particular event in your life that led you to your thru-hike?
  - b. Would you say that you *had time* or *made time* to hike the trail?
2. Before starting your Appalachian Trail thru-hike, or early in your hike, what were you most anxious about regarding your hike?
  - a. Was it real or imagined?
  - b. How did you overcome it?

#### II. Appalachian Trail Community:

1. Describe the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking community to me.
  - a. Outside of doing the same physical activity of hiking every day, what bonds you together?
  - b. What sets the Appalachian Trail thru-hiking community apart from other groups you have been part of?
2. Tell me about a particularly memorable experience you had with hospitality while on the Appalachian Trail.
3. Describe an encounter with a hiker, group of fellow hikers, or other trail community member, that was particularly comforting or made you feel a strong sense of community.

#### III. Therapeutic experience:

1. Would you describe your thru-hike as a therapeutic endeavor?
2. Describe a time of solitude you experienced on the trail. How would you characterize this time of solitude? (Therapeutic, challenging, lonely, peaceful, reflective, rewarding, fearful?) Where did this time of solitude occur?
3. How do you think the Appalachian Trail's physical landscape factored into the therapeutic aspects of your thru-hike

## APPENDIX C

### Appalachian Trail hiker terminology

**AT:** Acronym for Appalachian Trail.

**Blazes:** Painted, 2-inch by 6-inch, vertical white rectangles that are placed at eye height on trees and other objects, in both directions, to mark the official route of the Trail. Side trails are marked with blue blazes.

**Flip-flop:** A thru-hike where a hiker begins at one terminus of the Trail, hikes towards the other terminus, then jumps ahead to the other terminus, and hikes back toward the initial terminus to complete his or her thru-hike at the jumping point.

**Lean-to:** A three sided shelter, used primarily in New England.

**Long-distance hiker:** A somewhat indeterminate term applied to anyone who is hiking more than a few week, and who usually has to resupply at least once during his or her hike; often used interchangeable with the term thru-hiker.

**Post-holing:** Taking a step on what is thought to be hard-packed snow, only to hit a soft spot and sink straight down into it. Your leg creates, then immediately occupies, a narrow, straight, and deep hole in the snow. Akin to the type of hole a fencepost sinks into.

**Section hiker:** A persona who is attempting to become a 2,000-miler by doing a series of section hikes over a period of time.

**Thru-hiker:** Traditionally a person who is attempting to become a 2,000-miler in a single, continuous journey by putting on a backpack, leaving from one terminus of the Trail, and hiking essentially unassisted to the other terminus.

**Trail magic:** The term used to describe all the wonderful, unexpected things that happen to thru-hikers during their hike. (note: persons that provide trail magic are typically referred to as “trail angels”).

**Zero day or “zero”:** A day during which zero miles of the Appalachian Trail are hiked, usually a day spent in a Trail town resupplying and resting but can be a day in the woods as well.

Source: Bruce, D. 2003. *The thru-hiker's handbook*. Conyers, GA. Center for Appalachian Trail Studies.

## APPENDIX D

### Institutional Review Board Approval



#### **Institutional Review Board**

#### **Request For Exemption**

## **Certificate of Approval**

**Applicant: Kathleen Seal**

**Request Number : EXP2012Z6850**

**Date of Approval: 01/22/13**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Blanks".

Assistant Vice President for Research  
and Federal Relations

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jon Linn".

Chair, Institutional Review Board

## APPENDIX E

### 2013 Annual Trail Days Hiker Parade



People attend to a victim who was hit by a car during the Hikers Parade at the Trail Days festival in Damascus, Va., Saturday, May 18, 2013. Witnesses said the car drove into a crowd at the parade and hurt several people, but the nature of their injuries wasn't immediately known. (AP Photo/Republican-American, Bill O'Brien)

DAMASCUS, Va. (AP) — An elderly driver plowed into dozens of hikers marching in a Saturday parade in a small Virginia mountain town and investigators were looking into whether he suffered a medical emergency before the accident.

About 50 to 60 people suffered injuries ranging from critical to superficial, but no fatalities were reported. Three of the worst injured were flown by helicopter to area hospitals. Their conditions weren't immediately available.

Another 12 to 15 victims were taken to hospitals by ambulance and the rest were treated at the scene, where some paramedics and other first-responders were participating in the parade.

It happened around 2:10 p.m. during the Hikers Parade at the Trail Days festival, an annual celebration of the Appalachian Trail in Damascus, near the Tennessee state line about a half-hour drive east of Bristol.

Damascus Police Chief Bill Nunley didn't release the driver's name or age but said he was participating in the parade and he had traversed the Appalachian Trail in the past. Multiple witnesses described him as an elderly man.

Nunley said the man's 1997 Cadillac was one of the last vehicles in the parade and the driver might have suffered an unspecified medical problem when his car accelerated to about 25 mph and struck the crowd on a two-lane bridge along the town's main road. The driver was among those taken to hospitals.



"It is under investigation and charges may be placed," Nunley said.

Witnesses said the car had a handicapped parking sticker and it went more than 100 feet before coming to a stop.

"He was hitting hikers," said Vickie Harmon, a witness from Damascus. "I saw hikers just go everywhere."

Amanda Puckett, who was watching the parade with her children, ran to the car, where she and others lifted the car off those pinned underneath.

"Everybody just threw our hands up on the car and we just lifted the car up," she said.

Keith Neumann, a hiker from South Carolina, said he was part of the group that scrambled around the car. They pushed the car backward to free a woman trapped underneath and lifted it off the ground to make sure no one else was trapped.

"There's no single heroes. We're talking about a group effort of everybody jumping in," he said.

Nunley cited quick action by police, firefighters, paramedics and hikers to tend to the victims, including a volunteer firefighter who dove into the car to turn off the ignition. The firefighter, whose name wasn't released, suffered minor injuries.

Mayor Jack McCrady encouraged people to attend the festival on Sunday, its final day.

"In 27 years of this, we've never had anything of this magnitude, and is it our job to make sure it doesn't happen again," he said.

McCrady said a donation fund was being set up to assist the injured, some of whom don't have medical insurance.

"We want to make sure they don't suffer any greater loss than they already have," he said.

Source: Associated Press. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/witnesses-car-strikes-crowd-va-parade>. Accessed May 16, 2014.

## APPENDIX F

### Dropout rates for northbound hikers

Year	2008	Dropout rate	2009	Dropout rate	2010	Dropout rate	2011	Dropout rate
Springer Mountain, GA Southern terminus	1,250	-	1,425	-	1,460	-	1,700	-
Neel Gap, GA 30 miles	1,150	8%	1,325	7%	N/A	-	N/A	-
Fontana Dam, NC 160 miles	1,050	16%	911	36%	N/A	-	N/A	-
Harpers Ferry, WV 1,000 miles	667	47%	709	50%	747	49%	949	42%
Katahdin, ME Northern terminus	363	71%	399	72%	434	70%	464	73%
Completion Rate	29%		28%		30%		27%	

*Data Source: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2014*

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