

**Conflicts Between Recreation Subworlds:
The Case of Appalachian Trail Long-Distance Hikers**

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of an ethnographic investigation of conflicts among long-distance hikers along the 2,175 mile long Appalachian Trail. The findings are based primarily on field research conducted during a six-month end-to-end hike of the Appalachian Trail in 2003 by the lead author. Multiple activity styles and orientations of long-distance hikers were found – “purists” who were intent on hiking every foot of the trail and “blue blazers” and “yellow blazers” who were not. Friction between purists and the non-purists was not uncommon and involved both social values conflict and interpersonal conflict based primarily on differences in activity styles and in the meaning the Appalachian Trail held for them. The relevance of these findings for recreation conflict is discussed as well as implications for management and future research.

Key Words: Social worlds, trails, hiking, recreation conflict, Appalachian Trail

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Introduction

"It was a lot like high school; with cliques and the constant popularity contest. And the web-sites are used as smear campaigns!" One would not expect that to be a description of long-distance hiking on the Appalachian Trail. Indeed, the long-distance hiking community is correctly regarded as being tightly knit. And yet, as in most social groups, conflicts do occur among its members.

This is not surprising, as researchers have documented instances of conflict between individuals engaged in numerous outdoor recreation activities, including mountain bikers and hikers (Carothers, Vaske, & Donnelly, 2001; Ramthun, 1995), skiers and snowboarders (Thapa & Graefe, 1999; Vaske, Carothers, Donnelly, & Baird, 2000), and many others. However, there has been a notable paucity of research on conflicts occurring within a single distinct user group, even though the existence of such "intra-activity conflict" was suggested over thirty years ago (Jacob & Schreyer 1980). The following study sought to build upon previous research on outdoor recreation conflict by exploring this relatively unexplored area: conflicts that occurred between outdoor recreationists *within* a single activity rather than conflicts among individuals engaged in different activities.

Related Literature

Conflict has been the subject of focused outdoor recreation research from a number of conceptual and theoretical perspectives for over a quarter century. The earliest and most simplistic approach was to view conflict as little more than resource competition among different user groups (Devall & Harry, 1981; Owen, 1985). This limited approach has given way to two more theoretically grounded and somewhat overlapping conceptualizations: conflict as goal interference and conflict based on differences in social values.

Goal Interference

Building most directly on expectancy and discrepancy theories, Jacob and Schreyer (1980) conceptualized recreation conflict as "goal interference attributed to another's behavior" (p. 369). They argued that an individual will perceive conflict if their expectations for a satisfactory recreation experience are not met and also attribute the cause of their dissatisfaction to another person. Jacob and Schreyer elaborated that goal interference can arise between recreationists on the basis of four distinct factors: *activity style* – the various personal meanings attached to an activity, *resource specificity* – the significance attached to using a specific recreation resource for a given recreation experience, *mode of experience* – the varying expectations of how a natural environment is perceived, and *tolerance for lifestyle diversity* – the tendency to accept or reject lifestyles different from one's own. Conflict conceptualized as goal interference assumes that direct (face-to-face) or indirect contact (e.g., encountering evidence such as tracks or noise) is necessary for conflict to be experienced. Hence, this type of conflict is sometimes referred to as "interpersonal conflict" (Vaske, Donnelly, Wittman, & Laidlaw, 1995).

Some empirical support for Jacob and Schreyer's (1980) conceptualization of conflict can be found in the literature. For example, an analysis of conflicts between hikers and stock users in the John Muir Wilderness suggests that all four of Jacob and Schreyer's factors were associated with the occurrence of conflict between the two groups (Watson, Niccolucci, & Williams, 1994). Several studies show that resource specificity (referred to as "place attachment" or "place meaning" in some studies), in particular, can be an important predictor of goal interference. Farnum, Hall, and Kruger (2005), for example, concluded that conflict can revolve around the perception that others do not share a similar level of attach-

ment to a particular recreation area. Vaske et al., (1995) found that hunters and non-hunters at Mt. Evans in Colorado who “attach more significance to a resource are more likely to experience a conflict” (p. 220). Similarly, Gibbons and Ruddell (1995) found a positive association between levels of resource specificity and conflict among backcountry skiers. Hawkins and Backman (1998) described how horseback riders with strong place attachment to the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River Corridor were upset by the recent influx of commercial whitewater rafters. More recently, Hammitt, Backlund, and Bixler (2004) reported that differing levels of place attachment were associated with conflicts among trout anglers.

Social Values Conflict

In contrast to the conceptualization of conflict based on goal interference, in the study referred to above Vaske et al. (1995) also found that recreationists did not need to actually interact, directly or indirectly, in order for conflict to arise. They reported that over twenty percent of non-hunters at Mt. Evans, Colorado perceived there to be a problem with hunting, despite having had no direct contact (i.e., seeing) or indirect contact (i.e., hearing gunshots or seeing animals being shot) with hunters in the area. They proposed that this form of conflict, which they referred to as “social values conflict,” is rooted in differences in the norms and/or values held by various recreationists (Ruddell & Gramann, 1994; Sarembea & Gill, 1991).

Using an approach based on the conceptualization introduced by Vaske et al. (1995), Carothers, Vaske, and Donnelly (2001) found that social values conflicts were reported between hikers and mountain bikers. They also found that social values conflicts were reported both among hikers themselves as well as among mountain bikers themselves. In fact, their results showed that mountain bikers were more likely than hikers to report social values conflicts with other mountain bikers. The authors did not

provide an explanation for these findings. However, citing a debate among hunters over the acceptability of use of the off-road vehicles to hunt, Carothers et al. pointed out that conflicts among participants in the same recreation activity (i.e., intra-activity conflict) are not unprecedented. Ultimately, they recommend that more research be conducted on the relationship between interpersonal and social values conflicts by looking specifically at individuals engaged in the same recreation activity.

Intra-activity Conflict

Jacob and Schreyer (1980) proposed that when intra-activity conflicts occur, they might revolve around statuses associated with skill and/or experience. For instance, one type of status-based conflict could occur when a high status participant interacted with a low status participant. Jacob and Schreyer also suggested that if one participant disregarded the status of another participant who desired to be recognized as having a particular status, conflict may result. Bryan's (1979) research on trout fishermen revealed intra-activity conflict, not so much related to status, but based on adherence to regulations regarding fishing behaviors and fishing etiquette. Unfortunately, there have been very few subsequent empirical examinations focused directly on either Bryan's findings or Jacob and Schreyer's propositions.

In one study, Thapa and Graefe (2004) reported the existence of low levels of intra-activity conflict among both skiers and snowboarders in Colorado. However, the questions that were used to gauge conflict did not allow for a determination of whether or not status issues were involved nor what exactly was the basis for the conflict. Another analysis consisted of a review of 11 previous surveys of hikers, canoers, and kayakers of the “Great Walks” trails in New Zealand (Cessford, 2000a, 2000b). In this analysis, Cessford concluded that it was not the noise level or numbers of recreationists *per se* that caused conflicts. Instead, it was sug-

gested that intra-activity conflicts revolved around differences in the way “behavior styles within an activity [were] interpreted as being appropriate” (Cessford, 2000a, p. 233).

Cessford’s (2000a) conclusions regarding the sources of intra-activity conflict are consistent with Fuller’s (2003) portrayal of conflicts among rock climbers in the 1980s. Similar to the debate among hunters mentioned by Carothers et al. (2001) and the conflicts described by Bryan (1979) among trout fishermen, Fuller explained how conflicts developed among climbers over the acceptability of the emerging techniques of “hangdogging” and “rap-bolting.” Most who objected to the new techniques, and some who practiced them, argued that they “represented an inferior style of ascent” (Fuller, 2003, p. 11). Moreover, Fuller found that once the conflict moved beyond a dispute over the particular practices themselves and became a battle between culturally bounded groups, the level of conflict escalated dramatically. This was evidenced by the number and content of articles, editorials, and letters to the editor appearing in two popular climbing periodicals. These results suggested that having a sense of “groupness” and seeing others as members of easily recognizable “out-groups” can escalate recreation conflict; in the above case, status-related social values conflicts. The literature on social worlds provides a useful perspective from which to understand part of this dynamic, namely, the construction of in-group and out-group boundaries.

Social Worlds

According to sociologists Anselm Strauss (1978) and David Unruh (1980), the groups of which we are members can be referred to as social worlds. Social worlds consist of a collection of individuals who interact and communicate with each other on the basis of their common orientation toward a particular social object or activity. A wide variety of social worlds exists. Stamp collectors, cigar aficionados, and NASCAR fans are all example of social worlds.

Most relevant to understanding intra-activity conflicts is that these social worlds often have internal differences. According to Strauss, “most [social worlds] seem to dissolve, when scrutinized, into congeries of subworlds” (p. 123) with at least slightly different orientations to the same object or activity (e.g., cross country mountain bikers vs. downhill mountain bikers). Strauss (1993) also pointed out that membership in subworlds was not always apparent to those outside of the social world.

The existence of subworlds in recreational groups has already been suggested to be the case in several outdoor recreation social worlds (e.g., Devall, 1973; Bryan, 1977, 1979; Ditton, Loomis, & Choi, 1992), where degree of recreation specialization was the basis upon which researchers differentiated recreation subworlds. Recreation specialization, in addition to being a temporal progression, consists of a variety of behavioral and attitudinal dimensions of recreation participation similar to the concepts of activity style and resource specificity, as defined by Jacob and Schreyer (1980). Moreover, as Fuller’s (2003) research suggested, it is exactly these differences in behaviors and attitudes among rock climbers that provided the foundation upon which subgroup identities were built and these identities, in turn, led to increased conflict.

In light of these considerations, the authors of this study attempted to explore the nature of interpersonal and social values conflicts by examining conflicts among recreationists engaged in the same activity in the same setting at the same time; in this case long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail. While there were no specific hypotheses at the outset, the results were organized around three conceptual and theoretical issues. First, what was the relative importance of the four factors elaborated by Jacob and Schreyer (1980) in predicting intra-activity conflict among A.T. long-distance hikers? Second, were there subgroups of A.T. long-distance hikers and, if so, to what degree did the exis-

tence of subgroups facilitate conflicts? And, third, what was the role of third party “observers” to recreation conflicts? To address these issues, the authors employed a qualitative approach (mainly participant observations) to examine the social world of long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail.

Methods

The Appalachian Trail (A.T.) is a continuous footpath marked by white painted blazes that follows the Appalachian Mountains for 2,175 miles from Georgia to Maine. Although it was not originally conceived with the idea that people would hike it from end-to-end in one long journey (an accomplishment now referred to as an A.T. “thru-hike”), providing opportunities for long-distance hiking is now one of the stated missions of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC). In the last decade, the number of individuals who started the A.T. each year with the intention of completing a thru-hike was in the thousands, including an estimated 2,875 beginning in the year 2003; the year the data for this current study was gathered on the trail.

The method used in this study was qualitative ethnography, incorporating a combination of archival data sources, participant observations, and a survey of A.T. long-distance hikers. The study and its conclusions are also informed, in part, by the fact that both authors are past A.T. thru-hikers. The primary data source was participant observations conducted by the principal investigator while hiking the A.T. end-to-end over the course of 6 months in 2003. This began at the southern terminus of the trail in Georgia on April 13th (around the time of year that many other northbound A.T. long-distance hikers embark) and finished at the northern terminus in Maine on October 9th.

Qualitative research has provided extremely valuable insights in the past for recreation and leisure studies. For instance, in his groundbreaking research on recreational specialization,

Hobson (1977, 1979) employed in-depth interviews and participant observations of trout fishermen. More recently, Scott and Godbey (1994) engaged in participant observations and semi-structured interviews to decipher the contours of the social world of contract bridge. However, despite the contributions that these and other studies have made, quantitative approaches have come to dominate the field. This is unfortunate, as Schneider (2000) has pointed out that a continuing reliance on them could “impede the advance of recreation conflict research and its subsequent management” (p. 129).

In the present study, observations and discussions with hikers were initially inductive in nature, as there was no specific hypothesis being tested upon initial entry into the field. After being on the trail for several weeks, however, observations and questioning increasingly involved deciphering the multiple activity styles of long-distance hikers and documenting the conflicts that arose among them. This was accomplished by directly questioning long-distance hikers about: 1. their activity styles; 2. what the A.T. meant to them; 3. their feelings about hikers with different activity styles; and 4. the nature of any conflicts they might have had with other long-distance hikers.

The principal investigator talked with many long-distance hikers for several hours at a time while hiking on the trail together. He also came into contact with long-distance hikers while staying at the overnight A.T. shelters (with over 20 hikers on occasion), at trailside hostels, and while resupplying in nearby towns. Informal conversations were engaged in with roughly 500 hikers during the principal investigator’s thru-hike and observations made of many more. Accounts of these interactions and observations were recorded soon afterward using a hand-held tape recorder. These accounts were interpreted on an ongoing basis in order to improve the focus of future data collection and, later, to assess the

validity of earlier assessments.

Of course, the possibility of losing one's objectivity during extended participant observations is a potential problem which must be acknowledged and steps taken to minimize the risk of related bias. In the present case, certain things might have been taken for granted after several months of hiking, such as one's appearance, behavior, and hiker terminology. This possibility was minimized, in part, by ongoing efforts to remain aware of the possibility of "going native." The principal investigator also took copious field notes in an attempt to bypass any filter that might have existed by virtue of such deep immersion, many on seemingly irrelevant details and occurrences. Interpretations were also discussed with the second author, whose thru-hike was many years earlier. Ultimately, a certain amount of bias was inevitable, however, as complete objectivity is by definition impossible (Spreitzhofer, 2002).

The approach of collecting data while actually hiking the Appalachian Trail had the additional benefit of providing access to the A.T. shelter "registers" (generally spiral-bound notebooks) located at the over 250 trail shelters and hiker hostels in which hikers could voluntarily record anything they wished. Entries mentioned such things as who an individual hiked with that day, how far and from where they hiked, who they met along the way, what and where they ate, difficulty of terrain experienced, the weather, injuries, the scenery, philosophical musings, and reflections (including occasional complaints) about other hikers. Most importantly for this research, hikers quite often revealed their own activity styles and their feelings about the activity styles of other hikers. The registers examined were from the subset of shelters that the principal investigator visited during the day or slept in at night and, thus, were selected on a convenience basis. We have no reason to believe register entries were significantly different at shelters that were bypassed in a way that was relevant to our re-

search. In all, approximately 200 shelter registers (80% of the roughly 250 available) and well over 1,000 register entries were examined. Those entries that discussed hiking styles or conflicts with other hikers were recorded verbatim on the spot and compared and contrasted with other incidents that had already been recorded.

Another archival source used was the website www.trailjournals.com. On this website, thousands of personal journal entries have been posted from hundreds of hikers dating back to 1998. The entire journalistic accounts of 10 separate hikers from among all those who had completed the A.T. between 1998 and 2004 were chosen at random and analyzed (n=1,814 journal entries). Selections were made by listing and numbering every one of the hiker accounts available, then using a table of random numbers to select 10 of them. This provided detailed insights into these hikers' experiences by following closely their complete journeys as recorded in their own words. In addition, all the trailjournals.com entries posted by long-distance hikers on 20 randomly chosen days going back to 1998 were read and analyzed (n=372 journal entries; selected in the same fashion as above). This allowed for a wider swath of long-distance hiker experiences to be examined. The 2,186 journal entries that the authors looked at provided a broad range of experiences. Towards the end, additional journal entries added fewer and fewer new dynamics that had not been previously revealed, thus, the authors felt that the number of journal entries that were examined provided a sufficiently exhaustive picture of this source of data. Of course, those who posted entries on trailjournals.com were not representative of all long-distance hikers. For one, they could be more avid hikers (otherwise, they might not take the effort to post their journals online) and, as such, perhaps more inclined to present their social world in a positive light. Their journals might also be more oriented to the outside world, as they could be writing with

family, friends, or a wider audience in mind. However, their accounts were examined through the lens of the authors' experiences on the trail and did not appear out of the ordinary in any way.

In order to gather additional information, an email survey was also sent to a convenience sample of 194 long-distance hikers whose email addresses were gathered by another long-distance hiker for the purpose of creating an email list-serve for future communication. In the survey, respondents were asked mainly open-ended questions to: 1. identify their style of hiking on the A.T.; 2. share what it meant to them to have that style; 3. explain what the A.T. meant to them; 4. indicate the types of long-distance hikers, if any, they did not get along with; 5. describe any conflicts they had with other hikers while on the trail; and 6. explain what those conflicts revolved around. Despite two follow-up emails, only 46 completed surveys were returned, for a response rate of 24 percent. This is not surprising given the fact that other researchers have had difficulty getting respondents to complete and return email surveys (e.g., Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2004). Long-distance hikers could be a particularly difficult group of individuals to get to respond to an email survey. Although these 46 respondents are not likely representative of long-distance hikers as a whole, their responses still provided insights into the social dynamics existing on the trail.

Over ten hours worth of tape recorded data gathered through participant observations was transcribed and coded in addition to the data collected from the shelter registers, trailjournals.com, and the email survey. The coding was performed by selecting out and categorizing all observations of and statements made by hikers that spoke to the hiker's activity style or resource specificity. Categorizations were made by the authors based on the statements of the hikers themselves, who were more often than not explicit about what type of long-distance

hiker they thought of themselves as and what the Appalachian Trail meant to them. In cases where the hiker was not clear as to their activity style or resource specificity, they were not included in the analysis unless it was obvious from other things they said or did. Second, all of the conflicts that occurred were coded in terms of whether they appeared to represent either interpersonal or social values conflicts. Finally, each conflict was coded as to whether or not it had anything to do with hikers' differing activity styles or resource specificity. When in doubt as to the type or source of the conflict, the authors relied on strict interpretations of the statements made by the hikers themselves instead of making assumptions about what they meant.

Results

Long-distance hikers on the A.T. were found to have quite distinct orientations towards their hiking activity and the A.T. itself. On the A.T., long-distance hikers frequently distinguished themselves as either a "purist" or not (non-purists referred to themselves as "blue blazers," or "yellow blazers") depending on how closely and completely they followed the official route of the Appalachian Trail. Not all long-distance hikers fell neatly into either one of these categories nor were these identities salient in every interaction among hikers. There were also some hikers with other, even more nuanced approaches (e.g., lightweight hikers, high mileage hikers, "slackpackers," etc.), but the above two were clearly found to be the dominant approaches to long-distance hiking along the A.T. Both of these main A.T. hiking styles is described in detail below.

Purists

The defining characteristic of "purist" Appalachian Trail long-distance hikers was their dogged attempt to hike every inch of the official 2,175-mile trail route. Some were very serious about hiking all of the A.T. The most committed

purists fought through trees that had fallen across the trail (i.e., “blowdowns”) instead of walking around them (and, thus, missing several feet of the actual trail). When it was not possible to get through a blowdown, some stuck one foot through the tree limbs then went around it and backed up to where they got their foot through before moving on. Not all who thought of themselves as purists went to these lengths, of course. These examples simply illustrate the behavior of the most strident purists. Nor is this a new phenomenon. In a published description of their 1973 thru-hike, Sherman and Older (1977) described, “...the X-Guy, a purist extraordinaire, who marked the Trail with an X whenever he left it so that he could return to the exact spot...” (p. 78).

For many purists, their resolve to hike every inch of the A.T. seemed to stem not only from the challenge of “hiking the A.T. from end-to-end,” but from a certain conception they appeared to have of the Appalachian Trail itself. In particular, purists were inclined to consider the A.T. to be a place that held special meaning for them. They would rather hike there than anywhere else (certainly this was true for the months they were on the A.T.). The purist orientation was aptly summarized on a t-shirt designed by one subject who has hiked the trail from end-to-end as a purist eight times. It had a white blaze (the painted markings used to designate the route of the A.T.) on it and read, “Two paths diverged in the woods... I took the one with the white blazes and that made all the difference.” This t-shirt communicated his strong preference for hiking on the A.T. as opposed to any other trail. Indicative of this particular hiker’s level of devotion to maintaining a “pure” hike was how he once backtracked three hours when he realized that he had somehow missed about forty feet of the official white-blazed Appalachian Trail.

Blue and Yellow Blazers

“Blue blazers” and “yellow blazers” (i.e., non-

purists) both differed dramatically from purists in terms of their activities on the Appalachian Trail as well as the personal meanings they ascribed to the trail itself. In fact, blue blazers got their name by virtue of their frequent use of connecting side trails (usually marked with blue painted blazes) as alternatives to parts of the official A.T. Although these alternative side trails sometimes represented shortcuts around longer A.T. sections, “blue blazing” A.T. hikers tended to “walk the blues and see the views,” as one reported. Yellow blazers went so far as to skip parts of the A.T. altogether by hitchhiking (i.e., using the yellow centerline “blazes” that line roads). Some blue and yellow blazers even took an “aqua blaze” alternative by rafting the Shenandoah River instead of hiking through Shenandoah National Park. While hiking with them, they often remarked that it was more important for them to have a good time than to worry about hiking every inch of the A.T. The social revelry of some has led other hikers (including some blue and yellow blazers themselves) to sometimes refer to them as “hiker trash” or “brew-hikers,” instead of thru-hikers.

The specific activity style of blue and yellow blazers likely stemmed, at least in part, from their definition of the A.T. that was generally less reverent than that held by purists. Whereas purists were inclined to view the Appalachian Trail as a particularly special place and often as the ultimate hiking challenge, blue and yellow blazers tended to see the A.T. as just another trail (albeit a very long one). As one blue blazer put it, “the A.T. is a metaphor for all trails.” He elaborated by saying that there was nothing inherently special about the A.T. and that any experience a person was looking for on the A.T. could be found on any other trail. This helps to explain why he and others like him did not mind substituting side trails for the official route or skipping some sections altogether.

Conflicts between Purists and Non-Purists

Given the differences described above, it is

not surprising that conflicts were observed regularly and also frequently documented in shelter registers, on trailjournals.com, and in the email survey responses. Three main varieties of conflict among long-distance hikers on the A.T. were found. First, there were interpersonal conflicts that stemmed directly from activity style differences. Second, hikers reported goal interference when someone else's bad behavior caused all of them to be denied services in towns along the trail. Third, they engaged in multi-faceted disagreements over each others' status as legitimate "thru-hikers." This latter type of conflict was largely social values conflict, in that most of them took place in the absence of direct or even indirect goal interference. The latter two forms of conflict among A.T. hikers were also interesting in that they both involved a third party "observer."

In terms of interpersonal conflict, many purists became annoyed by blue and yellow blazers who partied, were loud, disrespectful, and engaged in other specific behaviors that directly interfered with their preferred experiences on the A.T. Actual interpersonal conflicts on the Appalachian Trail were not terribly common; most of the time, long-distance hikers got along. However, conflicts did occur and, as we will see, differences in activity styles were sometimes a contributing factor. For example, an entry in a shelter register north of Pearisburg, Virginia indicated one hiker's disgust with hikers who partied. The hiker wrote that, "The hotel stay was great except for the loud, rude, annoying, drunken asshole hiker trash in the room next door who kept us up all night." In referring to his negative encounters with individual blue and yellow blazers, one purist told the principal investigator, "They are the only type of hiker I don't like." These instances of interpersonal conflicts were largely the result of differences in the activity styles of purists and blue and yellow blazers, with purists attributing goal interference to their interactions with non-purists. They also illustrate the fact that many long-distance

hikers saw themselves and others in terms of "types" of long-distance hikers.

To provide a more extreme example, one evening at a hostel in Virginia a male hiker who was drunk physically attacked a female hiker who expressed annoyance at his loud, boisterous behavior. The principal investigator heard the details the next morning from several of the people who were there that night, as he was camped just a few miles from the hostel where it happened. It turns out the violent hiker was a yellow blazer who partied a lot on the A.T. He and his hiking companions had been annoying at least two purists (including the victim) with their partying on the trail for a few days before this incident. When the purists tried to "do big miles" to get ahead of them, the partiers would happen to wind up in the same spot as the other hikers by taking a shortcut or hitchhiking. This culminated in the assault, after which the victim and her companion skipped ahead several hundred miles to make sure they got away from that group of hikers. The assault certainly increased the bad blood between the woman and her attacker, but quite likely also exacerbated other purists' dislike of those who "come here to party." There was more to this incident than just a hiker-on-hiker assault. It served to accentuate the subworld boundaries that existed that year among A.T. long-distance hikers on the basis of their differing activity styles.

A second type of conflict found amongst A.T. long-distance hikers occurred when the bad behavior of certain hikers caused many others to be discriminated against by hotel owners and other service providers in nearby towns (e.g., organizations that sometimes allowed hikers to sleep in their garages, YMCAs, and church hostels). This often stemmed from the same behaviors that led to the interpersonal conflicts described above. The reason for the problem was that service providers typically could not distinguish between different types of long-distance hikers so they sometimes turned all hikers away. For example, a fire department in Virginia

stopped allowing any hikers to sleep in their garage for free after firefighters found drunken hikers playing with the water hoses. In the same town, some of the services that the YMCA provided for long-distance hikers were cut off after drunken hikers were caught swimming in the pool. In another case, a community group had allowed hikers to camp at their pavilion, which sits right next to the trail. However, when they found a number of drunken hikers there one day, they called the sheriff and have refused to allow hikers there since. Notices were placed in nearby shelters asking hikers not to stop there. Some long-distance hikers have also been known to be loud and trash hotel rooms, as in a previous example. This has resulted in establishments such as the Redwood Motel in North Adams, Massachusetts not allowing hikers to stay there overnight. Although it is difficult to say how often it happened, these examples indicate that denial of services to long-distance hikers did occur and had negative consequences for purists and non-purists alike.

Long-distance hikers in general, and purists in particular, got very upset when they were denied services or felt that they are looked down upon because of the bad behavior of other hikers. This often resulted in all blue and yellow blazers being scapegoated. For example, an entry in a shelter register in Pennsylvania expressed one purist's sentiments: "I somehow have to avoid the knot of partying losers...If the only way you can keep up after lying in a bar for 5 days is to yellow blaze, then go home. I wish they would skip the rest of the trail and go home. They're giving the rest of us a bad reputation." Essentially, purists were saying to those who would listen, "we (purists) are not like them (non-purists)." An email survey respondent also complained that the bad behavior of some affected everybody, stating, "I was upset mostly by the hikers who gave thru-hikers a bad name because of their behavior in towns." This particular type of goal interference rarely involved direct interpersonal conflicts, as face-to-

face interaction was not necessary. However, there was some evidence of direct confrontations regarding this. As one email respondent wrote, "They'd also give hikers a bad name in town by being generally disrespectful to its inhabitants. I had some small verbal interactions with these types."

A third type of conflict among long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail involved status disputes between purists and non-purists. These were more overt status conflicts than those described above and were essentially battles over who could properly call themselves a "thru-hiker" (defined as someone who is hiking the A.T. from end-to-end). It is difficult to say how many Appalachian Trail long-distance hikers experienced these status-related classification struggles. Based on the data gathered, nearly every long-distance hiker became aware of the distinctions among hiking styles after a few weeks of being on the trail and perhaps half of them at one time or another experienced some variety of the conflicts described below.

A.T. purists often reported that they did not think blue or yellow blazers should be able to claim (actively or by default) full status as "thru-hikers." In this case, purists were saying to those who would listen, "they (non-purists) are not like us (purists)." Purists argued that blue and yellow blazers were not legitimate thru-hikers because they skipped (sometimes long) parts of the white-blazed Appalachian Trail. As one purist's shelter register entry lamented, "you don't have to be a purist to realize the darn trail is being overrun with cheaters who are calling themselves thru-hikers." Purists also complained that blue and yellow blazers actually lowered the prestige associated with hiking the trail from end-to-end. One purist, when asked why he cared what blue and yellow blazers did, responded by saying that, "it diminishes the uniqueness of a thru-hike if a person can blue blaze and then sit in a bar and tell his friends about it as if he did the whole thing." This sentiment was acknowledged by a survey

respondent who wrote, “blue blazers... face reprimand and ostrization (sic) [because they] threaten the effort and accomplishments of purists.” According to purists, the problem was that too many hikers would not complete the entire trail, but would talk about it as if they did.

There were other ways in which these status disputes manifested themselves. For instance, some purists stated that they did not think blue and yellow blazers deserved special treatment by tourists near the A.T. or by “trail angels” (individuals who do favors for long-distance hikers such as providing food or rides to town). Purists argued that blue and yellow blazers would not have gotten this kind of treatment if tourists and trail angels knew that they were not actually hiking the entire trail.

On top of this, purists were annoyed by those who applied for “2,000 Miler” status with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy without hiking the whole A.T. The principal investigator heard purists mention this while on the trail in 2003 and it was also mentioned frequently in an online forum devoted to hiking on the A.T. (whiteblaze.net). They claimed that a fairly sizable number of blue and yellow blazers applied for “2,000 Miler” status every year (in some instances claiming that they knew of particular individuals who did so) and that they did not deserve it. They correctly pointed out that blue and yellow blazers did not actually conform to the Conservancy’s strict requirements for acquiring “2,000 Miler” status (which requires individuals to have hiked all 2,175 miles of the A.T.).

Blue and yellow blazers frequently defended their authenticity by referring to the “hike your own hike” philosophy. This is a cornerstone of long-distance A.T. hiking culture, which basically holds that the hiking style of individual hikers should not be influenced by others nor should hikers judge the hiking style of others; a “live and let live” philosophy. Blue and yellow blazers even asserted their own superiority on occasion by claiming that their style of hiking was, in fact,

better than hiking in a pure fashion. For instance, the principal investigator hiked with two blue blazers in the rugged White Mountains of New Hampshire who said that “the A.T. is stupid” whenever it did not follow the easiest or most direct route possible. They wondered aloud why anyone would rigidly adhere to a “stupid” section of the A.T. instead of hiking a blue blazed side trail that was easier, shorter, or (in their opinion) more beautiful.

When they were not defending their status as authentic long-distance hikers or asserting their own hiking style as superior, blue and yellow blazers often complained that purists went out of their way to disparage them. For instance, one long-distance hiker responded to the shelter register entry of a purist who suggested that non-purists “hike their own hike somewhere else” by writing: “Well gosh golly darn it gee whiz anyway this is the purist form of self-righteous bullshit I’ve seen in a register yet. You don’t need a license to be out on the trail nor do you have to prove to this person that you’re a thru-hiker.” Referring to the behavior of some “white blazers” (i.e., purists), an avowed blue blazing survey respondent wrote:

The only ones I don’t agree with are the ones that put you down for the way you are doing your hike. If you want to yellow-blaze up a section, do it. If you want to aqua-blaze do it, if you want to take a different blue-blaze trail that goes to the same place, do it; it’s your hike! I also respect white blazers, but don’t like the ones that put you down for doing what you want to do!

Another survey respondent proclaimed, “The ones I had the hardest time with were the ‘purists.’ If they wouldn’t have said anything I wouldn’t have cared, but when they started to prop themselves up as ‘that’s the way the trail should be hiked,’ they truly do not understand

why the trail was begun in the first place.” Along the same lines, one respondent wrote that, “I tend to get along with just about everyone, but my preference would be to avoid the purists and zealots.” Another survey respondent said that, “purists were stuck up, firm in their beliefs; if they were purists and you got a ride and skipped a couple of miles, they didn't like that...not really an outcast, but looked down upon.”

Blue and yellow blazers were also disturbed when purists defaced their shelter register entries. In one instance, when a hiker had written in a register about how hard a particular section was, another hiker wrote in the margin, “how would you know if you've been yellow blazing?” This behavior was mentioned by a survey respondent who referred to the “hike your own hike” philosophy in his defense of non-purists by writing, “I could not see how the ‘purists’ were writing in shelter logs about how people who slack packed [not carrying a full pack that day by having a support person transport part of their gear further along the trail] were... not ‘real’ thru-hikers. Hike your own hike – god-damn right!”

Interestingly, the principal investigator only witnessed one instance of a purist confronting anyone directly, or the other way around, with regards to these status differences. In that case, a purist accused a yellow blazer of “cheating” because she had skipped a small section of the A.T. by hitchhiking. She replied that, “no, I’m not. I’m doing it the way I want to.” The confrontation ended at that. A survey respondent who claimed to have observed face-to-face confrontations between purists and non-purists wrote, “Seeing ‘purists’ trying to tell others what to do certainly didn’t sit well with me.” The large majority of these status disputes, however, did not involve direct interaction among those involved.

Discussion

On the Appalachian Trail, long-distance hikers’ activity style and resource specificity were found to be blended in unexpected ways, such that those hikers on the purist end of the spectrum had a tendency to think of the A.T. in a certain way and hike it a certain way. Non-purists, on the other hand, viewed the trail differently and had a different style of hiking. The participant observer approach employed allowed for a nuanced understanding of these differences since they were directly observed. This could not have been as effectively accomplished by solely distributing written surveys, as different long-distance hiker activity styles were not based on level of participation (a common measure in survey-based outdoor recreation research).

Interpersonal conflict occurred when the behaviors of non-purists interfered with the goals of purists. This is perhaps not surprising in light of studies summarized earlier that found resource specificity to be a predictor of goal interference (e.g., Farnum, Hall, and Kruger 2005). Further, similar to the dynamic found by Fuller (2003) among rock climbers, A.T. long-distance hikers often differentiated themselves on the basis of their differences and began to see themselves and each other as members of specific subgroups (i.e., purists, blue blazers, or yellow blazers). At this point, when purists were denied services, they were able to attribute their goal interference to non-purists, as in the above hiker’s remark that, “they’re giving the rest of us a bad reputation.” Social values conflicts also ensued over the interpretation of the status of hikers with different activity styles and place meaning they ascribed to the A.T. itself.

Ultimately, the conflicts that arose due to these differences and the distinct social values of the subworlds that were formed around them have implications for recreation researchers in at least two regards. The first relates to our understanding of recreation conflict in gen-

eral and the other relates to the factors which influence how recreation conflicts unfold. Past research has conceptualized conflicts among recreationists as being either interpersonal conflicts related to goal interference or social values conflicts (Vaske et al., 1995). Our results suggested that the distinctions between these two types of conflict may not always be clear cut. For instance, the case of purists' frustrations at being discriminated against by third parties appears to represent a hybrid category of recreation conflict that combines both indirect goal interference and social values conflict. There was certainly goal interference in that purists were being denied services, but the conflicts reported by purists also appeared to follow from the distinct social values associated with their subworld affiliation. As such, interpersonal and social values conflict may not always occur completely independently of each other, but might sometimes be blended in interesting ways. These findings also point to a possible theoretical connection between subworld affiliation and social values conflict. Specifically, while indirect goal interference may have occurred if there were just one or even a few hikers responsible for causing the denial of services, having an identifiable *category* of long-distance hiker that seemed to be responsible opened the door to social values conflict. To put it another way, it is hard to imagine having a "social" values conflict with a particular individual absent an association of that individual with a specific social group.

The same could be said for the status-related social values conflicts between purists and non-purists. Purists would likely not be bothered as much if it were just a few non-purists who received favors from "trail angels" (individuals who provided food and other assistance to hikers) or applied for "2,000 Miler" status with the ATC. However, since it was perceived to be a systemic problem caused by a distinguishable category of long-distance hikers (blue and yellow blazers), purists felt their status as "real

thru-hikers" was cheapened. In light of this, future researchers may find it useful to consider the role of subworld affiliation in predicting social values conflict and to further explore the possible overlap of interpersonal and social values conflicts. It would be particularly valuable to explore these conceptual questions using samples of users engaged in other outdoor recreation activities.

The second area where these results have important implications for research relates to the factors which influence how recreation conflicts unfold. Foremost among these is the finding that third party "observers" (e.g., service providers in nearby towns, "trail angels," and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy) can play a role in conflicts. Past research has always conceptualized conflict as occurring only between individual recreationists or groups of recreation participants themselves. Researchers exploring potential conflicts should be alert to the possible direct and indirect roles that third party "observers" like those identified in this research as well as other non-recreationists might play in the interactions and experiences of the recreationists being examined.

Consistent with past studies (Farnum, Hall & Kruger, 2005; Hammitt, Backlund & Bixler, 2004; Hawkins & Backman, 1998; Vaske et al., 1995) our results provide empirical evidence that conflicts can, in fact, be influenced by the meanings that participants attach to the places where they recreate. In this case, the importance that hikers attached to the A.T. (and actually completing all of it) was at the core of the conflicts that were identified. It would be going too far however to conclude that differences in place meanings actually *caused* conflict. Even when first conceptualizing recreation conflict, Jacob and Schreyer (1980) asserted that factors such as "resource specificity" simply influenced the likelihood that conflict would occur rather than cause it *per se*.

In terms of the factors which influence how recreation conflicts unfold, our results also indi-

cate that achievement and recognition can be extremely important motives for some people in some situations. The frustrations expressed by purists were rooted in their own desire and sometimes an apparently compelling “need” to complete every foot of the A.T. For some this appeared to be primarily for personal reasons that did not depend on the validation of others. But for many the recognition of their achievement by others seemed to be quite important. Consistent with what Jacob and Schreyer (1980) predicted, it could be that recreationists with strong needs for recognition are particularly susceptible to goal interference and therefore conflict. Perhaps such recognition-based conflicts are more likely among participants in the same activity since styles and differences can be more directly compared. Researchers examining recreation experiences that are particularly challenging and where recognition of “authentic” performance is possible should not underestimate the potential for this type of conflict.

This research has several implications for managers of recreation settings, particularly for managers of trails and trail systems. While long-distance hikers represent only a small minority of A.T. users, they are an extremely important user group in terms of their visibility and impact on the A.T. Although not currently rising to the level of high priorities, conflicts like those reported here could have important implications for managers of the A.T., particularly in cases where bad behavior in nearby towns might be attributed to long-distance hikers in general. Because the support and engagement of nearby communities is critical for the long-term protection of the broader A.T. corridor, the attitudes of local residents and decision-makers are indeed important for A.T. managers and those of associated land managing agencies such as the National Park Service and USDA Forest Service. Managers seeking to reduce conflict among long-distance hikers on the Appalachian Trail have a few options, depending on the nature of

the conflict they are seeking to address.

One rather impractical possibility would be for the ATC to attempt to somehow enforce their standards for gaining “2,000 Miler” status or at least use more forceful language in their 2,000 miler application. This might help satisfy purists, but antagonize blue and yellow blazers. They might want to instead create an additional category such as “A.T. Long-Distance Hiker” for anyone who has, say, hiked a month or more on the trail. In the case of blue and yellow blazers who feel their hiking style is superior to that of purists, this might be an appealing recognition. Another way to reduce conflicts would be to find ways to emphasize the commonalities among long-distance hikers as opposed to their differences. This would be no easy task given that purists were in many cases actively trying to distance themselves from blue and yellow blazers.

With regards to the interpersonal and social values conflicts caused by rowdy behavior, it would be best to address the root causes of the problem; namely, to focus on how to limit the particular bad behaviors that have a negative impacts for many others. This is something various trail advocacy groups have already begun doing, but perhaps could be emphasized even more. For instance, the ATC attempts to educate long-distance hikers about the necessity of engaging in responsible behavior along the trail (e.g., practicing “Leave No Trace”) and in nearby towns. During peak starting months for long-distance hiking (March and April) they station a caretaker at Springer Mountain (the southern terminus of the A.T.) to orient hikers. The caretaker talks about appropriate behavior in towns, especially with regard to the use of alcohol. Unfortunately, the caretaker is not there to meet every hiker and the importance of the message may diminish over the course of a hiker’s many weeks on the trail. For little money the ATC could address this problem by posting caretakers or signs at some of the places along the trail that are notorious for partying, instead of rely-

ing primarily on contacts at the southern terminus. Additionally, while the ATC's current efforts at educating hikers on the importance of "Leave No Trace" focus on an individual's responsibility for their own behavior, putting a greater emphasis on hikers educating each other could minimize problem behavior further. Thus, the cultural norm in the hiking community of "hike your own hike" could be amended to "hike your own hike, but intervene if you see someone violating 'Leave No Trace'.

The ATC's emerging "A.T. Communities" initiative, which is intended to solidify the relationship between the hiking community and the towns along the trail, could be structured to assist businesses in tracking problem behavior. This has the potential to mitigate the problem of service providers discriminating against all hikers because of a few problem hikers by identifying those hikers responsible. Along similar lines, the Appalachian Long-Distance Hikers Association (ALDHA) has for several years engaged in an "Endangered Services Campaign." This is another attempt to influence hikers' behavior in positive ways, imploring hikers to "Leave No Trace" while in towns. However, flyers addressing this were not observed on the trail by the principal investigator in 2003. This was unfortunate, as it is likely that if there was a greater emphasis on responsible behavior messages both on and off the trail, it would help reduce the problems that occur and the conflicts between purists and non-purists that result from them.

Ultimately, if the long-distance hiking community cannot police itself, a few things might happen. First, more businesses could start denying services to hikers. Second, law enforcement might become increasingly involved in controlling bad behavior, especially in trailside communities that serve hikers. Third, purists would likely attempt to distance themselves even further from blue and yellow blazers. None of these are desirable scenarios. Hopefully, the present findings provide a better understanding

of what is driving the conflicts taking place among A.T. long-distance hikers, which in turn can help inform strategies designed to preempt deeper conflicts involving these and other recreation subworlds.

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