

**BEYOND RECREATION**

**HIKING ALONG THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The following paper explores the reasons for and impact of seeking a natural world experience. My discussion revolves around a narrowly defined group of individuals who choose to travel long distance along the Appalachian Trail. The research and the presentation of results are interdisciplinary and involve a variety of materials and forms. I tap diverse sources in the fields of American and nature literature, psychology, philosophy, and land management. I also involve the voices of many people by drawing heavily from responses to a questionnaire I designed for especially dedicated long-distance hikers.

The resulting tapestry of information richly portrays that people value the natural world for various reasons and in various ways -- ways which go *beyond recreation*. There are cultural, psychological, social and spiritual values to be sought and discovered, at times consciously, but often unexpectedly, by the individuals who hike. One of my major assumptions is that part of the American tradition is to see nature as somehow separate from "civilization"; thus, people actively seek the natural world to fulfill certain unmet needs, perhaps needs which surface during times of transition in an individual's life. Another assumption is that a discussion of the emotional, physical, and spiritual tradition and connection with the natural world need not be separate from the academic world.

Indeed, this paper is an interdisciplinary journey, but it is also a personal one. Unlike a defined trail which is linear, my individual path is one which has no beginning or end, but rather, it is a continuous pilgrimage of which this paper is only one part. My desire is to understand or define human nature as well as environmental nature in such a way that there is one common system for relationships and ethics. It is a view which fosters human ethics and values which stem from and promote positive, inclusive relationships with the land. It is a vision of a broader definition of ecosystem and a validation or affirmation of spiritual and ethical feelings and behavior toward our environment. Alas, I am overstepping the traditional resources I have consulted, and am moving beyond my paper even before sharing it.