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## Backcountry Cell Phone Vignettes: Connected and Disconnected

Ian Ramsey

Douglas Balmain

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# Connected and Disconnected

Ian Ramsey

LAST SUMMER I WAS IN THE BACKCOUNTRY OF ALASKA'S GLACIER BAY, 55 miles from a road in the largest designated wilderness in the world, surrounded by brown bears, humpback whales, and tidewater glaciers. And I was hunched over my cell phone, texting (through a Garmin inReach satellite device) with the National Park Service because the boat that was supposed to pick up my group of high school students was hours late, and we needed to make a plan.

A month later I was guiding ultrarunning trips around Mount Rainier. I used the same technology to keep tabs on runners spread out across 30 miles of the remote Wonderland Trail. I've used my cell phone to take pictures of brown bears, to help me stay on route on glacial moraines, and to listen to inspiring music during a 100-mile ultramarathon in the mountains of Utah. I teach people how to use apps on their phones to navigate, but I also teach students about the dangers of unintentional technology use and how it can literally reshape your brain.

Where the backcountry was once the one place to get away from technology, we now find ourselves wired up with GPS watches, cell phones, and satellite devices. Where humans' experience of wild places was once direct, it is now often shaped and curated by technology: using Gaia GPS to see where you are, holding glamorized YouTube videos as your aesthetic basis of beauty comparison, listening to podcasts instead of the gentle whisper of the wind. And while it means that we're often safer, more able to communicate and navigate, it also means that our direct experience and attention is corrupted.

When I take high school students into the Alaska backcountry for a week, it is often the first time in years—or ever—when they've been away from cell connection. And they become different people: quieter, less anxious, more focused and social. They sleep better. Their emotional connections reset to people, place. And self, not screens. They settle into what I call the Deep

Now. And at this moment in history, this can be one of the greatest gifts of the backcountry: a kind of sabbath from the self-referential dopamine-addicted crush of technology. A place to be slower, quieter, to look within and without. To settle into the moment and to become part of something greater than yourself. We are moving ever more quickly into a disruptive world of virtual reality, biomonitoring, and artificial intelligence. Our relationship to technology is intensifying. Those who thrive will be those who skillfully manage their relationship to it, who can use it and not be used by it. Even in the backcountry this increasingly takes effort and intention, but it is much easier than the overstimulated press of our daily lives. My hope is that when people go into the backcountry, they can experience the full, undistracted presence of their lives and remember that feeling afterward. The backcountry is where we can go to learn this.

## Each Day, a Little Less Phone Use

Ian Ramsey

WE WERE BACKPACKING FOR FIVE DAYS, A GROUP OF TEN MIDDLE schoolers, another teacher, and I. Through rain and fog and sun and blisters and Clif bars and tears and sing-alongs. And for the first two days the students would say, “This looks like just a movie,” or, “This looks just like an Instagram post,” and they would pose for selfies and try to get a signal no matter how many times we asked them to put away their phones.

But each day, they would use their phones less, or their phones would run out of power, and all that phone energy was replaced by kid energy because this is a middle school backpacking trip, and middle schoolers have many languages, some of which are obnoxious, such as farting and making bad jokes and bragging, or poking each other when you want to say I have a crush on you but don’t know how to say that yet and I’m afraid of what my friends might say, and some of them are silent fear, and some of them are yelling and jumping, and some of them are klutzing around because they don’t fit into their hormonally vibrating bodies yet.



*Kid energy prevails at the Appalachian Mountain Club's Zealand Falls Hut on August 13, 2019. PAULA CHAMPAGNE*

On our fourth night out, just after dinner, we were standing on piles of rocks outside of a New Hampshire mountain hut, above treeline, surrounded by the most crystalline night of stars any of them had ever seen. And the kids were supposed to be sitting silently for five whole minutes, which is an eternity for a 13-year-old boy, so there would be the occasional twitter or squeal or guffaw but mostly they were being quiet, when an older woman marched out of the hut and held up her smartphone to the riot of stars, trying to use some app that identified the stars, and when it didn't work after 30 seconds, she muttered and stomped back into the hut without ever bothering to look, unimpeded, at the stars. And all the kids saw this, and they had no problem being quiet after that, at least until one of them threw a pebble at another, and the whole sweaty gang broke up into high-pitched laughter. And the next day, no one took out their phones until we got back on the bus at the end of the trip.

And when they think back on this trip years later, they remember the smell of the alpine flowers. And they remember the way everyone cheered when the last kid made it to the summit. And how the one kid cried the whole way up

and how another kid ever so gently held the crying kid's hand. They remember the way that woman trying to see eternity through a three-inch screen missed the whole point of being out in these big heart-battling mountains, that it's just friends and all this sheer, intense, painful, awe-inspiring wildness pulsing right through them until they become part of something bigger than themselves.

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IAN RAMSEY is a writer, educator, wilderness traveler, and musician. For twenty years he has been on the faculty of North Yarmouth Academy in Maine, where he teaches environmental writing, brain science, physiology, music, and mindfulness and leads student trips.

# Digital Disorientation

Douglas Balmain

LAST SUMMER, I INVITED MY FRIEND STEVEN ON A FIELD MONITORING trip into one of Montana's lesser-known Wilderness Study Areas. As we checked over our day packs, I noticed Steven looking at his iPhone.

"Are you getting service out here?" I asked, hoping the answer would be no. Bringing technology into the backcountry has always been taboo for me.

"No, I downloaded a map of this area last night. The app works offline."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah, it's pretty cool. It has property boundary and land ownership information in it too. Hunters use it a lot so they know they aren't trespassing."

"Huh. I'll be interested to see how it works." My reply was half-genuine. Modern technology does have its utility.

Despite them lacking high-tech features, I've remained loyal to the map and compass. I value the organic connection with one's environment that analog navigation requires. It forces me to pay special attention to the landscape. I find myself more closely noting the passage of time, changes in the weather, progress, and physical output—all of those subtle aspects of backcountry navigation that "smart technology" has made us forget.

Navigating with map and compass causes me to pause often, to continually re-center myself as I move across the terrain. I enjoy these pauses. They

have become as ritualistic as they are pragmatic. They are moments to breathe, to settle—to be present with the land I'm engaging.

Steven had no need of reorienting. As long as the icon signifying his location was active on his screen, he knew where he was. I found the simultaneous presence of screen and map to be frustrating. It had the effect of confusing me and detracting from my ritual. After a few distracted attempts to reconnect with my map, I folded it up and stashed it in my pack. Steven's phone would be our navigator for the remainder of the day.

The route back to our vehicle took us into steep and unforgiving terrain. The deep drainages and dense woods afforded little view of the sky. I was becoming increasingly disoriented.

Steven and I were working through a bog at the bottom of a defile and were both beginning to tire when Steven made a hasty jump for a fallen log. His boot slipped on the slick wood and sent him into an uncontrolled fall. As I watched him hit the ground, I was suddenly struck by the tenuous nature of our position. What if he was hurt? What if he smashed his phone's screen in the fall?

The phone had distanced us from our environment. We had been blundering through the country in a straight line. If we had maintained our connection to the land, we would have chosen our route more wisely, we would have had a pragmatic understanding of where we were in relation to where we were going, we would have kept ourselves safer. We had traded our powers of intuition away for a glowing screen.

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DOUGLAS BALMAIN lives in Laramie, Wyoming, where he runs Pondering Poet Publishing Company.



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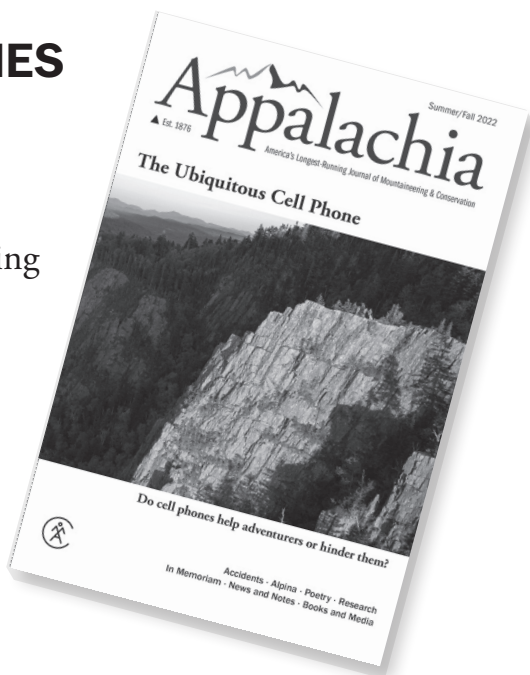
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