

2022

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### Recommended Citation

Dumont, Clare (2022) "COVID-19 Exposes a Wilderness Myth: A Long Trail Trek is Not about Retreating from Towns and Community," *Appalachia*: Vol. 73: No. 2, Article 8.

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# COVID-19 Exposes a Wilderness Myth

*A Long Trail trek is not about retreating from towns and community*

**Claire Dumont**



THE DRIED NOODLES LAY SCATTERED ACROSS THE FLOOR. THE RESUPPLY boxes were half-packed. The logistical struggles of thru-hiking during a pandemic rendered my Excel spreadsheet nearly useless. I was planning a September hike of Vermont's 272-mile Long Trail. Though, instead of searching for post offices and hitchhiking routes to resupply, I was calling friends to meet me in trailhead parking lots with boxes of food. Instead of checking bus schedules to the southern terminus and from the northern one, I was organizing drop-off and pickup points with a family member. Gone were the days when I could sketch out a rough plan and wing it. Instead, I had a slew of people who had to rearrange their weeks if I was running a day behind schedule. The mental exertion necessary to navigate this logistical ordeal was overwhelming, which raised the question: Why attempt a hike at all?

When I set out to plan my adventure, the idea to return to the trail seemed like a stable one. I, like many Americans, was raised to revere wild space as a place to go to escape and heal. Backpacking and hiking offered a sense of independence, which evolved into a steady confidence that has carried me through personal adversity. For as long as I could remember, it was a place on which I could depend for fresh air, peace, solitude, and community. It was a place of self-reliance and personal power. Planning during a pandemic inverted my perception of what I subconsciously took to be an everyday truth: The wilderness would always be there, and I could always go. What became starkly apparent during the planning process and throughout the hike was my level of reliance on the built infrastructure I was formerly able to overlook.

While planning and hiking the Long Trail, town days were no longer mere blips in northern progression. They became a point of potential infection and an ethical question mark. When I developed an unexpected but not hike-ending knee injury, I was forced to contend with the same concerns that trail associations and trail towns had voiced in March 2020. At the beginning of the pandemic lockdowns, most trail associations encouraged hikers to leave trails and return home. One of the primary reasons was for the safety of trail towns. The geographic nature of a long-distance trail rendered its hikers perfect vectors to spread disease between the rural communities they rely on for resupplies such as food, washing machines, showers, fuel, and post offices.

*Claire Dumont near the top of Camel's Hump on the Long Trail in Vermont.* COURTESY OF CLAIRE DUMONT

It was a moment when systemic social issues became clearly intertwined with the hiking community. The presence of rampant poverty, lack of nearby hospitals, and inaccessibility of quality health care in rural communities clashed with hikers' desire to spend time outside. The question of potentially introducing a deadly virus foregrounded these communities in hiking narratives. I do not mean to paint hikers as oblivious. The culture and rhetoric of the outdoors has enabled hikers to float into and out of trail towns without being forced to reckon with what is happening in them. Pandemic restrictions proved how central the resources in trail towns are to the success of a hike and consequently forced hikers to recognize their dependence.

Upon leaving a trail town in northern Vermont, I began the climb to the ridgeline. I stopped at a cliff overlooking the Lamoille River. The setting sun cast a yellow light across the rainbow of late-September foliage. I savored the moment as a lanky hiker swiftly passed. After becoming acquainted farther up the trail, I learned that he worked on a seasonal trail crew. He described the extent to which pandemic restrictions limited their ability to restore trails before the 2020 hiking season. I was struck by the sheer number of their interventions that made the landscape hikeable.

Land managers knew the extent of the stewardship necessary to maintain the trails, which yielded another warning against thru-hiking in early 2020. Managing bodies encouraged those who chose to hike to proceed with immense caution as they had not conducted regular maintenance. They warned against blowdowns, small landslides, eroded steps, and unstable bridges. Damaged shelters would not be repaired. Privies would be closed. Similar to resurfacing a highway or patching a school's leaky roof, the infrastructure of wilderness would not be serviced. While hiking, it was easy to forget that these trails and campsites would not exist without extensive care and maintenance. Amazingly, trail crews create spaces that augment the wilderness experience such that these areas appear untouched and pristine, yet in so doing, they contribute to the illusion of self-reliance.

In response to announcements from various trail associations, hikers expressed outrage and confusion. Although many did postpone or cancel their long-distance adventures, others continued with little recognition of the people and institutions they relied on to complete their expedition. Numerous hikers countered with the refrain, "Nature is the safest place to be," and they were partially correct. After months of living through the pandemic, scientists now agree that whether through ventilation systems, air purifiers, or outdoor gatherings, fresh air is essential to preventing infection. Wind disperses virus

particles. They live longer on metal and plastic surfaces than on wood. Transmission is more frequent in concentrated, densely populated areas compared with rural communities. Although hikers' claims held some truth, they depended on the pervasively accepted premise that wilderness was untouched, clean, and devoid of human interaction as though the virus could not possibly be transmitted under a forest canopy.

We are at the height of the pandemic, and wilderness is undergoing an existential crisis. The risk of COVID-19 and ensuing restrictions has highlighted how people experiencing the solitude of the trail actually heavily depend on the society and infrastructure they seek to escape. For many, this realization was profoundly unsettling. If there was no stability, no self-reliance, and no separation, then what was wilderness? The outdoor community saw countless responses to pandemic restrictions and warnings that challenged the cultural belief that nature exists separately from society, that it was pristine and empty.

I believe that there was something deeper at play in these perceptions that is rooted in the heart of what nature represents. From the work of environmental historians and geographers such as William Cronon, Carolyn Merchant, and Jake Kosek, I learned how the historical moment when the U.S. government designated Wilderness Areas defined what and who was allowed in those spaces. It was a moment of urbanization and a changing labor landscape. Protected areas appeared as the antithesis of cities and urban sprawl. The behavioral ethics that governed wilderness and taught people how to care for these spaces stemmed from the anxieties of the time. Stewards sought to create spaces that reflected the romance of rural life and allowed recreators to feel the self-sufficiency of surviving the wildness of the frontier. These ethics also ascribed cleanliness and purity to these spaces. Nature was divine and uncontaminated.



*Dumont deep in the Vermont woods during her Long Trail hike.* COURTESY OF CLAIRE DUMONT

In the people I met on the Long Trail, I observed how these ideas and their notions of wilderness as a separate entity persisted. This idea of separation I understand as the myth of wilderness. The very experience of visiting natural spaces is inextricably linked to everything happening outside of their boundaries. The pandemic has made us acutely aware of the holes in our collective thinking about wilderness, which has destabilized our perception of nature as reality.

Wilderness caused existential frustration in 2020 and provided a necessary outlet for the human spirit. I observed this both in my conversations with fellow Long Trail hikers and in searching for the necessary gear for my hike. A few days before departing for the southern terminus, I drove to Freeport, Maine's 24-hour L. L. Bean store to pick up the remaining items on my gear list. I easily found a new cooking pot and a headlamp. The fuel wall, however, was nearly empty: not a single canister of MSR isobutane to be found. I flagged down an employee to verify, and he referred to it as "the theme of the summer" because everyone was going outside. A little panicked—if Bean's did not have it, who would?—I called three other gear stores until I found one with fuel in stock, and it was limited. After interacting with other hikers, I learned just how lucky I was to find a canister. It seemed as though the pandemic was a catalyst for an explosion of outdoor recreation. Hiking, backpacking, biking, or kayaking were some of the few activities people could partake in relatively safely.

In the midst of an outdoors boom, yet another reckoning rippled through almost every aspect of American life. In May 2020, the first protests against the death of George Floyd swept across all 50 states. The movement sparked national conversations about police brutality disproportionately inflicted on the Black community. This gave rise to a massive discussion of how racism crops up for all people of color in every sphere of life. Hikers chronicled the bigotry they had experienced on trails and rightfully demanded change. The outdoors community witnessed trail associations and gear companies institute widespread initiatives to demonstrate their commitment to diversifying the outdoors. They pledged to donate gear and resources to decrease the monetary barrier to entry that discourages people from going outdoors.

Although addressing bigotry was central to the movement, activists pointed out that it was only part of the problem. The systemic nature of racism meant that even in the absence of bigotry, the systems that govern the United States disadvantage people of color. Yet in all of the discussions, there was a distinct lack of acknowledgement of how these systems operate within



the spaces that the hiking community relishes. Indigenous environmentalists have long spoken about how protecting land through the National Park and Forest system violently displaced their communities. Black civil rights activists have noted how the forest has historically been a dangerous place for their communities where local, white authorities would allow racial violence to occur. Looking back to the conception of land protection, one of the very urban anxieties that led to the separation of these spaces was immigration. Those who created wilderness did so partly to construct a space for whiteness.

It is a history that is deeply uncomfortable for the predominantly white outdoors community to acknowledge, especially because its legacies are so clearly present in current political discourse. It is more pleasant to conceive of wilderness as apolitical, but that is yet another myth because wilderness is not an apolitical space for everyone. It is another hole in our collective thinking through which 2020 has shone a light. These holes do not necessitate the collapse of wilderness; they do not weaken its importance or the importance of outdoor recreation. When I stepped onto the Canadian border at the northern terminus of the Long Trail, I gazed into the warm color pallet of autumn trees. A line of barren earth cut through the forest to mark the international border. I drew in a deep breath of crisp air and allowed the elation, excitement, and melancholy of finishing a monthlong hike seep out through my eyes. Anyone who knows the peace of spending a night under the stars or the exhilaration of stepping onto a summit understands how crucial these experiences can be to feel human. The essence of these experiences has not changed.

Acknowledging the holes has not weakened my love for wilderness, but it has rewritten my understanding of it and my role within it. During this surge in outdoor recreation, these holes have created space to expand what it means to love and appreciate the outdoors. The acknowledgement leaves us with the ability to imagine a wilderness that is inclusive. It allows us to recognize the legacies of exclusivity that have historically defined the hiking community and, through reflection and deliberate change, work to improve it.

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*Editor's note: This essay was the runner-up in the 2021 Waterman Fund Essay Contest. The Waterman Fund generously supports prize money for winners and runners-up. For more about the annual contest, see [watermanfund.org](http://watermanfund.org).*

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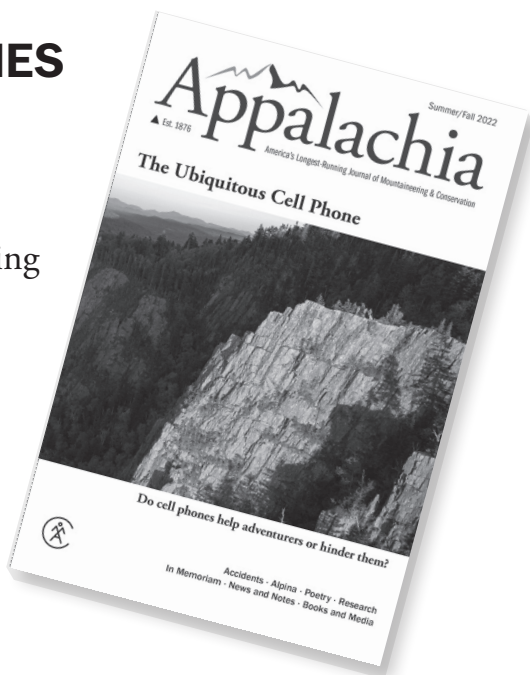
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