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Letters

Cell Phones

I have hiked all of the 4,000-footers. I am a trailhead steward for the White Mountain National Forest and spend most of my time on the Champney Falls Trail. I volunteer as an information volunteer for the Appalachian Mountain Club at the Highland Center and in the huts. I talk to hikers about cell phone usage almost as frequently as about gear and trail choices.

The idea of self-reliant adventure, solitude, and being in the wild was something I looked forward to each year as I embarked on that year's section of the Appalachian Trail. Nothing was more upsetting to me than to hear other hikers listening to loud music or making noisy phone calls. The jolt of these moments ruined my walk in the woods for many minutes and really hit my soul. As a steward, I am well aware of the increasing dependency that especially younger or novice hikers have on cell phones. The quick fix or assistance mentality takes away from the whole reason for heading into the forest. As a longtime educator, I have observed that the characteristics of grit, overcoming challenges, learning from mistakes, and perseverance have been waning over the past 30 years.

However: I know how to change a tire on my car, but I still join AAA each year to counter that unforeseen circumstance that I can't solve on my own. I recently turned 70, and I take a cell phone with me on every hike or bike ride. As Sandy Stott has noted, I am in the shoulder season of my life, and the unexpected can happen at any time. Some situations do not fall into the self-reliant or self-rescue category. As many note every hike is a different hike with different trails, weather conditions, or times. Ty Gagne has written that because Kate Matrosova was an experienced hiker, that may have actually contributed to her poor decision making and overconfidence. Just because you have climbed tougher mountains doesn't mean you can climb less challenging ones.

My point here relates to Stephen Kurczy's wonderful experience with his son, Manny ("Do Cell Phones Belong in the Mountains?" Summer/Fall 2022). What a special moment for both of them. They obviously went on these treks well-prepared and were successful. But previous results don't guarantee future results. It may be a 1 percent occurrence, but what would they have done if, with no cell phone, an unexpected severe accident happened? Having a cell phone may not have helped because of lack of service.

Yet service might have been available, and they would have benefited from this.

Taking a cell phone on hikes is a form of insurance. Having it doesn't mean you have to use it. The key, as Kurczy stated well, is educating the public about the proper and respectful usage of this technology. I store my cell phone deep inside my pack, below my ten essentials.

—Chris Elliot
Center Ossipee, New Hampshire

Thanks to Stephen Kurczy for writing about his travels with Manny and postulating on the need for cell phones in the wilderness. I found the topic thought provoking and meaningful, with societies' overreliance on tech ubiquitous no matter where you go.

I enjoy cycling and hiking in Connecticut's northwest corner, and admittedly I typically have my phone on me. In a couple of weeks my two sons and I (a little older than Manny: 21 and 25 years old) will be hiking the Presidential Traverse from Appalachia [a trailhead on Route 2 in Randolph] south. This will be my seventh year of the past eight heading to the White Mountains, and third traverse. You've convinced me to leave the device behind and to truly become untethered. The challenge will be if the boys will agree to the idea as well.

Regardless of their decision, I look forward to intentionally turning off more often and enjoying nature for nature's sake, without the reliance on this little rectangular device that consumes too much of my attention already.

—Richard M. Portelance
New Milford, Connecticut

Most people are lazy and as trends waver, so shall the cell, whether it be enough apps misguiding them and the digital social backlash shutting them down, or hiking just becomes too much work.

There are trails here in Massachusetts that have signs stating, "Pass at own risk," and, "No cell service beyond this point." There was one sign on a trail near the New Hampshire–Vermont line that read something to the effect of, *If you go beyond this sign, please note you are past the trail's halfway point and a long way from your car. 911 will not rescue you, don't bother trying to call because there's no cell service anyway.* The sign took up a good five feet of vertical tree.

Our party chuckled at the sign, but in truth, on our day section hike we all had phones.

So in conclusion, I suggest the wonderful people like [New Hampshire Fish and Game Lieutenant] Jim Kneeland and [U.S. Forest Service Wilderness Manager] John Marunowski need to post some signs and stop answering the phone.

—*Karissa Moore*
Phillipston, Massachusetts

Hikers with ALS Found Connection and Support

Shortly after the Summer/Fall 2021 issue arrived, I was reading it one morning while I waited for my wife to get me out of bed, washed, and dressed, all activities for which I need a caregiver because I was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) in August 2017. Upon reaching page 34, I found an article written by Rachel Curtis (“Preparing: A Wrong Turn, a Dangerous River, and an Absent Partner”).

“Gee, I know a Rachel Curtis, but I’m sure it can’t be the same person,” I thought to myself. But then I read the first paragraph and I flinched.

I knew Scott.

Scott was the first person I ever met with ALS. I was introduced to him by someone who thought that we would connect beyond our ALS diagnoses. He was right; Scott and I shared many interests, including hiking, and we both had trekked in Nepal, so we met regularly for walks in fall 2018, while we were both still ambulatory. Our meetings were less frequent in 2019 as I became consumed with my own ALS challenges, but we maintained contact until he died that November. And as with the guidance he provided Rachel, he provided guidance to many others, including me, on how to navigate life with ALS.

Finding one’s way through ALS means learning to adjust every day. It also helps to learn acceptance of the things one can no longer do. We spent the winter holidays of 2018 with family in New Hampshire. I could no longer cross-country ski with the rest of the family, but my brother-in-law insisted that we find a hike one morning that I might be able to do. We stopped by Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, and the staff suggested the Nineteen-Mile Brook Trail. We drove up the road to the trailhead, and a dozen of us slowly started up the trail, my two youngest nephews constantly spotting me against slips and falls as I navigated with my hiking poles. I made it about one

quarter-mile up the trail before I decided that I had to turn back to be within my margin of safety. I knew at that moment that this was my last hike. As a lifelong hiker, this was a profound sense of loss, but I had to accept it, just as I have had to accept every loss for the last five years.

I miss Scott. And Rachel's piece was a reminder of how special he was to those who knew him. Rachel kindly continues to stay in touch, occasionally meeting up with my wife to provide her the same kind of guidance that Scott once provided to Rachel.

—Bruce Rosenblum
Somerville, Massachusetts

Misinformation in Apps and Online

You are to be commended in reviewing AllTrails and the other apps used by hikers (Books and Media, Winter/Spring 2022). These discussions bring into focus the almost frightening amount of hiking misinformation now prevalent on the internet and in apps used by hikers.

I ran into the misinformation problem when I was maintaining the Metacomet-Monadnock Trail in New Hampshire. The description of how to climb Gap Mountain in Troy, New Hampshire, provided in a popular hiking app had serious errors. The app provided a map that showed a public road running through private property where the road was not public and the property owner adamantly did not want hikers crossing his property. In addition, the app gave the suggested starting point for a climb of the mountain at a point that required crossing posted land and, if used, would have added well over a mile to a climb of the mountain. I had to post a warning sign at that entry point pointing to the correct access point to the mountain.

Thus the misinformation provided by trail apps might not only increase the number of unnecessary rescues of stranded hikers, but also put a burden on trail stewards who must spend significant time and effort trying to correct casually created errors in hiking apps.

The discussions of trail apps did not mention the large number of rogue web pages and blogs created by hikers that describe their hiking experiences on various trails. Although most of these descriptions are well meaning, there are many discrepancies in the information they provide. As an example, each hiker has his or her own idea of the difficulty of a particular hike.

Although it is difficult to see how to combat the promulgation and use of erroneous or incomplete trail information, I would suggest that some

organization such as the Appalachian Mountain Club bring together the creators of commercial trail use apps and individuals responsible for the stewardship of actual trails. One hopes the result of such a meeting would be a mutually acceptable plan for reducing the trail misinformation on the internet and related services.

—*Frank Bequaert*
Keene, New Hampshire

ANNOUNCING THE NEXT WATERMAN FUND ESSAY CONTEST

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Essays this year should be about a writer's experience with the tangible effects of climate change in the wilderness. How are melting glaciers, loose rocks, mush-like avalanches, heavy rains, or devastating heat waves affecting wilderness trips and how people understand wild areas? How about our relation to flora and fauna and our human need for wildness?

We define emerging writers as those who have not been published in a national outlet or written a book or self-published one on the topic of their submission. Essays are due March 1, 2023. See watermanfund.org for details or email *Appalachia* Editor-in-Chief Christine Woodside at chris@chriswoodside.com.

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