ASSESSMENT OF READJUSTING TO LIFE AFTER COMPLETING A THRU-HIKE OF THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

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ABSTRACT

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Hundreds of individual hike the entire length of the Appalachian Trail each year. Research on place attachment and culture shock served as a basis for this study. Ten phone interviews were conducted during winter of 2011 interviewing hikers from 2009 or 2010. Results indicated that thru-hikers have difficulty with communicating the experience, new routines/structure, meeting social expectations, and loss of community during readjustment. Character development, an increased sense of confidence, and change in personal care, were all life changes from the AT. Hikers miss being outside, the physical exertion, the community of the trail, and the simplicity of life. It was unclear if depression is experienced during readjustment. However, subjects were motivated towards other long term goals from hiking the AT. This study shows that hikers feel a strong connection to the trail, thus more efforts should be taken to protect such an important place to many individuals.

Key Words: Appalachian Trail, place attachment, culture shock, readjustment, motivation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ii
Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE	1
Background of the Study	1
Review of Literature	2
Place attachment.	2
Culture shock.	4
Purpose of the Study	7
Research Questions	7
Delimitations	7
Limitations	8
Assumptions	8
Definition of Terms	9
Chapter 2 METHODS AND PROCEDURES	10
Descriptions of Subjects	10
Description of Instrument	11
Description of Procedures	11
Method of Data Analysis	12
Chapter 3:PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS	13
Readjustment Challenges	13
Life Changes	15

Aspects of the Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers Miss	17
Depression	19
Motivation Towards Other Goals	20
Summary	21
Chapter 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	22
Summary	22
Discussion	23
Conclusions	28
Recommendations	28
REFERENCES	30
APPENDIXES	33
Appendix A:Interview Script	34
Appendix B:Informed Letter of Consent	36

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Background of the Study

The Appalachian Trail (AT) is a 2,176.2 mile footpath from Georgia to Maine (Mass, 2008). Since the trail was completed in 1937, hikers from every background imaginable have meandered down its wandering pathways. Every year about 4 million people walk along the trail (Jory & Dappen, 2000). About 2,000 individuals start hiking at one end with hopes of walking to the other; these individuals are referred to as thruhikers (Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2010). According to the Appalachian Trial Conservancy (ATC) website (2010), 11,590 hikers have reported a thru-hike since Earl Shaffer completed the first thru-hike in 1948 (Martin, 2002).

Completing a thru-hike is quite a feat for a person to accomplish, considering there is a 25% chance they will make it all the way (ATC, 2010). Many factors play into why hikers make it and why they do not. Constant rain, muscle fatigue, and harsh trail conditions all contribute to why hikers choose to abandon their thru-hike attempt. But, a small percentage manage to push through and complete the entire journey.

Along the way, hikers encounter other hikers, and form a unique community. One hiker described participation in this community as a way to share the challenges, great views, small, unique moments, and develop deep bonds to one another (J. Hudson, personal communication, November 3, 2010). These relationships often develop into life long friendship and occasionally even marriages. Such small communities help

encourage a thru-hiker along their journey, but ultimately each hiker must see the trek through to completion.

Research has been done as to why people hike in general (Svarstad, 2010), why individuals attempt to hike the AT (Goldenberg, Hill, & Freidt, 2008), and on the connection hikers feel to the mountains (Rollero & Piccoli, 2010). However, limited research is available as to the readjustment thru-hikers go through after finishing the AT. The purpose of this study is to assess the post thru-hike experience of Appalachian Trail thru-hikers.

Review of Literature

Research for this review of literature was conducted at the Robert E. Kennedy Library on the campus of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. In addition to books and other resources, the following online databases were utilized: Academic Search Elite, Expanded Academic, psycINFO, and Google Scholar. This review of literature is organized into the following topic areas: place attachment and culture shock.

<u>Place attachment.</u> Place attachment can be defined as the link people develop to specific environments, where they have a tendency to remain and feel safe and at ease (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). This attachment takes time to develop and is hard to explicitly explain how these bonds are formed.

To better understand place attachment, it can be broken down into two distinct aspects, place identity and place dependence. Proshanky (1978) defined place identity as,

Those dimensions of the self that define the individual's personal identity in the relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals and behavioral tendencies and skills relevant to this environment. (p. 155)

Twigger-Ross and Uzzell (1996) added identification with a group, defined by a location, as another aspect of place identity. Joining these two ideas together, it is clear that place identity comes from the non-tangible experiences a person has with a location. Place dependence, however, refers to the physical aspects a person interacts with in their environment (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003). An example of place dependence is the location of water sources influencing a person's routine, such as washing the dishes at a kitchen sink due to the availability of water.

Considering place identity and place dependency as two parts of place attachment, it would seem logical to assume that place attachment would become stronger as an individual increases their activity within a particular environment. Rollero and Piccoli (2010) found a trend suggesting a positive correlation between place attachment and activity level. Lewicka (2005), however, opposed these findings with the discovery of cases that showed a negative relationship between place attachment and activity level. Recognizing this ambiguity, Kyle et al. (2003) suggest that the disagreement arises in how a person attaches meaning to a place. The connection of activity level to place attachment turns out to be a very complex issue and cannot be determined by a simple, single variable analysis; more research is needed to have a strong conclusion (Kyle et al.; Rollero & Piccoli).

There is a positive connection between place attachment and the amount of significant relationships a person has in the area (Rollero & Piccoli, 2010). It also has been found that place identity and self-expressions have a positive correlation (Kyle et al., 2003). Combining these two ideas, it makes sense that groups would start to form and express their own identity. Rollero and Piccoli found that as place attachment increased so did the positive perception people have of their environment.

Considering the influence that place identity, place dependence, relationships and self-expression all have on place attachment, AT thru-hikers have a high predisposition to develop a strong attachment to the trail. Kyle et al. (2003) described this positive connection of hikers to the AT in stating, "As the importance and pleasure derived from hiking increased and the perceived self expressive value of hiking increased, so too did respondents' emotional bond (self identification) with the AT" (p. 266-267).

<u>Culture shock.</u> Going to a new environment puts stress on a person's cognitive being, forcing them to take in new sites, norms, values, and language. Sudden immersion into a new culture can startle an individual and cause behaviors to be different from the ordinary; putting them in a state of culture shock. According to Winkelman (1994), the responses manifested through our behavior, mental, emotional, or physical functions to a new environment is *culture shock*.

Researchers have identified several stages of culture shock and have developed multiple models ranging from three to eight stages (Pedersen, 1995). The five stage model that Pedersen outlines uses the following stages: honeymoon, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and interdependence. The honeymoon stage occurs when the environment is full of new and exciting experiences, and the new culture seems intriguing

(Pedersen). Disintegration, however, happens as a person realizes the conflicts they have between the new and former culture. During this stage anger, frustration, and even rejection of the new culture may occur, but the experience is internalized and may lead to disengagement or even depression (Pedersen). Pedersen outlines that as more time is spent in the new culture the reintegration stage is reached. This is when a person starts to mold their home culture with the new one. Negative reactions to the new culture become outwardly directed, as the individual attempts to make sense of the new environment and how to act within it (Pedersen). During the autonomy stage hostile aggression towards the new culture ceases, and people move more towards a balance of their home culture with the new culture; they are able to see the positive and negative of both (Pedersen).

Pedersen suggests that in the interdependence stage the individual has formed a new identity within the new culture and are able to be productive in the new environment.

Considerable research has been focused towards the experience of culture shock while traveling from country to country, but Fabrizio and Neill (2005) argue that feeling out of place in new and unfamiliar situations is culture shock as well. This widens the scope of culture shock, and Spering (2001) includes both the physical interactions and the socially accepted aspects of the environment as vital parts of culture. Combining the ideas of Spering and Fabrizio and Neill, culture shock should be treated as stress reactions to underlying mental and physical expectations not being met, causing difficulties in predicting and controlling the outcomes (Furnham, 2003).

Going through culture shock requires a person to adapt to a new environment.

Inability to adapt may lead to an experience of culture shock that could amplify personal dysfunctions and even prevent potential personal development (Winkelman, 1994). The

desire to adapt comes from the person-to-person conflicts that arise when an unfamiliar culture is encountered (Mak, Westwood, Ishlyama, & Barker, 1999). This adaptation may require a person to learn new behaviors, expectations, skills, make new relationships and even recreate their self-identity within the new circumstances (Fabrizio & Neill, 2005). An approach that combines both the mental and behavioral aspects is recommended when adaptation to a culture is undertaken (Mak et al.).

Considering what must be accomplished on a daily basis when one is attempting to thru-hike the AT, it is easy to see the new behaviors and practices that must be learned. Hikers in all states of Pedersen's (1995) stages of culture shock can be found along the entire length of the trail. As hikers spend time on the AT they slowly start to adapt to the different lifestyle and environment of the trail. Those who fail to adapt to life on the AT may become frustrated or even quit their thru-hike attempt. Successful integration into the thru-hiker culture allows the hikers to be at ease and thrive in their surroundings. Full integration into thru-hiker culture forces hikers to experience culture shock again, when they finish their journey and head back home.

Summary. As thru-hikers journey down the AT, place identity, place dependence, relationships, and self-expression all influence their physical and emotional bonds to the trail. These bonds are better known as place attachment. Research on place attachment to the AT reveals that hikers do experience place attachment to the AT (Kyle et al., 2003). With this attachment comes the learning of new behaviors and ways of doing things. Thru-hikers learn how to act within the new environment and what their identity is in the culture of the trail. The scope of culture shock has been widened to include feeling out of place or unfamiliar with a situation (Fabrizio & Neill, 2005). With the expansion in scope

of culture shock, hikers feeling unfamiliar with life on the trail are now considered to be in culture shock. Research has been devoted to how an individual progresses through culture shock and how to best deal with it (Mak et al., 1999; Pedersen, 1995). However, additional research is still needed pertaining to the adjustment to unfamiliar places and situations within an individual's country of origin.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assess the post thru-hike experience of Appalachian Trail thru-hikers.

Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- 1. What are the primary challenges in readjusting to life after the Appalachian Trial?
- 2. What lifestyle changes occur due to experiencing a thru-hike of the AT?
- 3. What aspects of hiking the Appalachian Trail do thru-hikers miss?
- 4. Do thru-hikers experience depression after leaving the trail?
- 5. Does completing a thru-hike motivate hikers to achieve other long term goals?

Delimitations

This study was delimited to the following parameters:

1. Information on adjusting to life after the Appalachian Trail was gathered from hikers who completed their thru-hike between 2009-2010.

- 2. Life readjustment, lifestyle changes, aspects of the trail missed, depression, and motivation were analyzed.
- 3. The data were collected during the winter of 2011.
- 4. Information for this study was gathered using a telephone interview.

Limitations

This study was limited by the following factors:

- 1. The instrument used was not tested for validity or reliability.
- 2. A snowball sampling method was used, limiting the subjects to those who have kept in contact with each other.
- 3. Interviewees may have responded in an untruthful way and given answers in a manner they deem socially acceptable.
- 4. Interviewees were recalling past feelings and emotions that may have been partially distorted since the original occurrence.
- 5. The researcher's status as a thru-hiker may have influenced the interviewees.

<u>Assumptions</u>

This study was based upon the following assumptions:

- 1. It was assumed that interviewees responded truthfully to all questions.
- 2. It was assumed that the person spoken with over the phone was the actual intended interviewee.
- It was assumed that the interviewee actually hiked the full length of the Appalachian Trial.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as used in this study:

Appalachian Trail. A 2,176.2 mile footpath from Georgia to Maine (Mass, 2008).

<u>Culture shock</u>. The responses manifested through our behavior, mental, emotional, or physical functions to a new environment (Winkelman, 1994).

Place attachment. The link people develop to specific environments, where they

have a tendency to remain and feel safe and at ease (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001).

<u>Thru-hike</u>. Hiking from one terminus of the Appalachian Trial to the other, in one season (ATC, 2010).

<u>Thru-hiker</u>. A hiker who is attempting to hike (or has completed) the entire length of the Appalachian Trial in one season (ATC, 2010).

Chapter 2

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study was to assess the post thru-hike experience of Appalachian Trail thru-hikers. This chapter is organized into the following sections: description of subjects, description of instrument, description of procedures, and method of data analysis.

Descriptions of Subjects

The subjects of this study were thru-hikers of the Appalachian Trail (AT), which spans from Maine in the northeastern United States to Georgia in the southeast. Hikers that completed a thru-hike of the AT between January 2009 and December 2010 were interviewed. A thru-hiker was defined as someone who hiked the trail from terminus to terminus in one continual push. Those who attempted such a hike are of all ages (ATC, 2010). The background of those who chose to thru-hike the AT are a cross section of society. Students, teachers, doctors, lawyers, book writers, police officers, construction workers, and many other occupations were what these hikers left to hike the AT. Four hundred and twenty three hikers completed the trail in 2009, and 309 hikers in 2010 (ATC, 2010). Hikers that were interviewed were selected by convenience for the researcher. A snowball sampling method was use to interview a total of ten thru-hikers.

Description of Instrument

To gauge the readjustment that Appalachian Trail thru-hikers experience, an interview script was developed (see Appendix A). A total of five questions were designed. Each question addressed one of the following: what were the primary challenges in readjustment, lifestyle changes that occurred, aspects of hiking the AT missed, if depression was experienced, and if motivation to accomplish other long-term was developed. With the readjustment process having potential to greatly differ from hiker to hiker, all questions were asked in an open-ended style. The interview script was pilot tested on three hikers who completed the John Muir Trail. Small adjustments to the wording of the questions and the order in which the questions were asked were made, based upon feedback from the pilot test.

<u>Description of Procedures</u>

Potential subjects were identified through a list of personal contacts identified by the researcher, who is a thru-hiker of the AT in 2009. Subjects were initially contacted via email to inform them of the research and request an interview with them. At this time, subjects were informed that the interview questions were related to life adjustment and may potentially be difficult depending on one's personal experience in that readjustment. If their response was affirmative, subjects were sent an informed consent form to print, sign, and mail to the researcher in a self-addressed stamped envelope (see Appendix B). In their email response it was requested both that they suggest a time to do a phone interview and that they state agreement of their understanding that the questions may be sensitive along the lines previously mentioned. Interview times were set up for the

convenience of the interviewee. Interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted from 15 to 45 minutes. Interviews began with a period of orientation where the researcher reacquainted with the subject. Before the interview started, the researcher again reminded the interviewee of the information on the informed consent related to potential risk and asked if they were ready to proceed with the interview. Questions were asked sequentially from the interview script (see Appendix A) with follow up All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed, to allow the interviewer to focus on what the interviewee was saying. Interviews were transcribed verbatim after the interview was completed. Interviewees were thanked for their time and informed that a copy of the results would be available to them.

Method of Data Analysis

After the qualitative data were collected, the researcher reviewed the interviews for trends and themes. All trends or themes were developed in response to the research questions. All trends or themes corresponded to the readjustment of thru-hikers.

The trends and themes were then given to an independent reviewer for inter-rater reliability. With the researcher and an outdoor recreation specialist reviewing the data, personal biases of the researcher were controlled. Before any further data analysis was conducted, an inter-rater reliability of 84.2% was achieved. The trends and themes were then put into similar groupings and coded for further analysis.

Chapter 3

PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

In order to assess the readjustment experience of Appalachian Trail thru-hikers, one-on-one phone interview were set up. A total of ten thru-hikers, who completed their thru-hike in 2009 or 2010, were interviewed. All interviews were conducted and transcribed by the primary researcher. Subjects were first asked about their ending experience as a way to ease into discussing the post thru-hike experience and then questioned about their post thru-hike experience. This chapter is organized into the following categories: readjustment challenges, life changes, aspects of the Appalachian Trail thru-hikers miss, depression, and motivation towards other goals.

Readjustment Challenges

Subjects were first questioned about the primary challenges readjusting to life off the trail. Of the ten subjects, 20% (n=2) mentioned that they had gone through similar experiences before and did not have many challenges readjusting. The responses of the eight (n=8, 80%) who expressed challenges readjusting after the AT were varied. Responses were coded and developed into themes. The four themes that emerged were: communicating the experience, new routines/structure, meeting social expectations, and loss of community.

Thirty percent (n = 3) of subjects gave responses that fell under the theme communicating the experience. This theme was developed around the feeling that others were unable to relate to the thru-hikers experience. Subject #3 expressed this stating, "I

think that [the] hardest part was that I wanted to talk about it so much to everybody, but...they wouldn't get it." Subject #1 showed a feeling of disconnect from family and friends saying, "It was hard sometimes to be around people at first, because you [were] gone for so long then having everyone [ask] "how was it?" You just feel that culture shock." Frustration of this theme was express by Subject #4 responding, "So many people just couldn't relate to your experience. You feel like you [have] done this great thing, and nobody appreciates it."

The theme of *routines/structure* was developed from thru-hikers (n = 4, 40%) expressing having a hard time functioning within a structured setting. Subject #1 expressed this the best by responding,

I would say the hardest part about transitioning back was going to the classroom right away. You go from having your own schedule. You do what you want to do. You hike when you want to hike. Relax when you want to relax. You eat...then you all of a sudden have this really structured life. You have to listen. Like actually remember and write stuff down. I can't even explain...

The theme *meeting social expectation* was developed from hikers (n = 3, 30%) expressing feeling pressure to act a particular way. Both female subjects (n = 2, 20%) gave responses that supported this theme. Subject #5 brought the theme up by saying, "It was kind of hard not to be crude, or more crude. That doesn't fly so well with the people in my area." Subject #8 expressed difficulty with this theme stating,

Being a girl [again] and getting some lady like mannerisms back [was hard].

Totally happened on trial crews before. But this being out in the woods for six

months consecutively, [then] realizing like, you know like, you can't pee out side

any more! There are definitely some habits that are like acceptable out in the woods that aren't really acceptable back in public society.

The last theme developed was *loss of community* (n = 3, 30%). Subject # 1 felt this lost saying, "I would say that I had lost the sense of community." Subject #5 best supported this theme stating,

One thing I really appreciated about the trail was that there were people there and you were with people all the time. So you have that initially community, but coming home, I have good friends but you don't see them regularly every day. So feeling that separation in your life, of like wow there in no involvement form other people in my life. That was really sad in my life.

Both these subjects made it clear that they experienced a loss of community.

Life Changes

Questions concerning changes to the subject's lives were asked. Responses were varied. After coding and searching for emergent themes, three themes were developed: character development, increased sense of confidence, and change in personal care.

Responses that fell under the *character development* theme (n = 3, 30%) were centered around further development of traits they already possessed. Subject #1 supports this theme by stating, "The trail solidified in me and gave me experience to, to define my identity and kind of my core values. I think the trail helped to strengthen them. For that I am quite thankful." Subject #5 echo's Subject #1 saying, "I think more confidence, in who I was as a person. More confidence in the ideas that, in holding on to my ideas that I

had and not being scared to share them." Subject #9 choose to put it bluntly, "[For] a lack of a poetic term, it turned me into a man."

Sixty percent (n = 6) of the subjects cited their thru-hike experience instilled in them an *increased sense of confidence*. Responses revolved around the AT being a goal the subjects had to struggle with to achieve. Subject #4 displayed this stating, "I kind of set out on the AT to test myself and you know, do something different and harder than the norm. And having proven that, I feel that I could do anything." Subject #9 agreed with Subject #4 saying, "I am more confident, much more confident. Of the 12 big things [in my life], probably there are six or seven large failures in my life. But I finished the AT."

The theme of *personal care* (n = 3, 30%) was linked to diet and to overall hygiene. Subject #7, who had been a "very strict vegetarian" stated,

On the thru-hike, I mean you know how it goes, I ate anything and everything that I could. I stayed vegetarian... but I hadn't had a soda in nine years...so yeah those sort of things, kind of stuck around. Even to present day, I'm still struggling with things of that nature.

Subject #4 put a different spin on diet change by saying, "I started eating healthier...to keep down the weight I had lost." Subject #3 responded best to hygiene change by saying,

I just think my personal hygiene isn't necessarily grosser but I have a lower standard now. If I haven't showered in a few days it doesn't really matter cause I [have] been a whole lot grosser. People in the US thinks that's really gross, I think they are crazy.

No one reported having an increased level of hygiene due to hiking the trail.

Aspects of the Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers Miss

The primary researcher then asked the subjects what they missed about hiking the Appalachian Trail. There were a range of responses, but after coding, four themes were developed: being outside, physical exertion, the community on the AT, and the simplicity of life on the AT.

Subject's who gave responses that fell under the theme of *being outside* (*n* = 5, 50%) missed the contact with nature. Subject #4 supports this theme saying, "I miss sleeping in tents. I miss waking up in the sun and breeze. I miss walking in the rain strangely enough." Subject #9 showed a strong desire to be in closer contact with nature stating, "we were driving by a particularly woody part of Long Island. And I had to an overwhelming urge to stop the car, run into the woods and sit under a tree." Subject #8 used a more poetic phrase to support this theme saying, "I think just being totally surrounded by nature all the time, like waking up everyday in the woods, there is definitely a peace that [it] brings. That's pretty special."

Respondents gave several responses the fell under the theme of *physical exertion* (n = 3, 30%). Subject #8 supported this theme saying, "My body really wanted to exercise all the time. Like my legs would get really sore because I wasn't hiking all the time." Subject #4 agreed with Subject #8 stating, "I really missed walking. I would go out to the bars with my friends and walk back home afterwards even though it was like four miles." Subject #6 expressed missing physical exertion by sharing, "At least once a week

I go out on a hike somewhere. Just keep the ball rolling. Coming back with everyone back at home, it kind of seems that life is so sedentary after doing a big trip like that."

Subject's responses that fell under the theme *community on the AT* (n = 8, 80%), were directed both toward the people on the trail and the surrounding communities. Subject #6 commented on missing both these aspects saying,

It was just so much fun. Just like hiking and meeting people every day that have things in common with you from all over the world and then start hiking with you. So I would say I miss the people the most. Just from the whole, everyone is so friendly. And people pick you up on the side on the road and feed you meals and it's just like, what is going on?

Subjects also miss the variety of people on the trail. Subject #3 supports this saying, "There were just all those excited people that were out there...I like the people out there. I like the spirit." Subject #1 depicted the AT community being unique saying,

I mean you look back and you realize how unique of an experience of community it is. And you are not going to find it any other place. And you're aware of it after you have done something like the AT. Most people aren't aware of that. They don't assume that the community out there is so amazing.

Simplicity (n = 4, 40%) emerged as a theme in several different ways. Subject #7 shows a longing for simplicity by saying, "I miss the simplicity of just being able to wake up and not necessarily not know what you are doing. But you go though things automatically. You know? You break down the tent and then you are walking." Subject #9 furthers this thought by saying,

For 140 days it was get up, eat, break down camp, hike, eat, hike, eat, set up camp, eat, sleep. Wash, rinse, repeat...and that was all I did for four and a half months. As hard as it was, physically and mentally, there was an ease to it. I knew what to expect any given day. By the time the end came, I knew exactly what to expect out of a rainy day, out of a sunny day...

Subject #6 puts this theme in a simple phrase saying, "when I was out there I thought things were so complicated. Where I was going to get food or water. But looking back I wish I could worry about [just] those things again."

Depression

Of the ten thru-hikers interviewed, five reported (n = 5, 50%) some level of sadness or depression during their process of readjusting. Subjects who expressed these types of feelings expressed it such as Subject #1 saying, "I [felt] those times of boredom or loneliness, just times of being lost, feeling lost sometimes. It's like, I don't know how to have a productive day." Subject #5 described their feelings saying, "...a deep sadness. Related to the fact that having my ideal life style and not sure how to incorporate it into the society that I live in." Subject #4 however used the word "depression" and described it saying, "It really was this kind of dark feeling that was hanging over my head...I actually lost it for a good while."

Of the five (50%) thru-hikers who reported not experiencing sadness or depression, two (20%) expressed they were ready to be done hiking the AT. Subject #8 puts it simply saying, "[The] AT was a lot more of a mental challenge than I thought it was going to be in the process of hiking...I was happy, so happy when I accomplished it.

I was really ready to be done." The other three (30%) thru-hikers who reported not experiencing depression linked it to having strong support when they came back. Subject #10 describes this saying, "I feel that I was lucky that I had a very supportive family and a cushion [of support] to fall on. I lived in my old room in my parent's house. And that was very helpful."

Motivation Towards Other Goals

When questioned about their motivation toward other long term goals, the subjects responded in a variety of ways. Themes that emerged were travel and adventure, career goals, and physical challenges.

The theme *travel and adventure* (n = 4, 40%) has responses similar to Subject #4 saying, "It has made me want to travel more." Subject #6 furthers this thought stating, "That was kind of the entry level to the trekker type life style. Once you do that it's kind of like, I can't go back...because I have already done it and that is what I want to do." Subject #1 expresses this theme simply by saying, "I kind of have the bug in me now."

Three of the subjects gave responses that created the theme *career goals* (n = 3, 30%). Subject #2 alludes to this saying, "The AT put perspective on life and what I want for the long term." Subject #7 shows how the AT motivated them in their art business stating, "Since I got back I have really turned energy towards that even more so." Though Subject #8 is unsure of the exact details, they echo this theme stating, "[I am] definitely a lot more career oriented than I was before the AT."

The final theme that emerged was *physical challenges* (n = 3, 30%). Subject #6 confirms this theme stating, "But after the trail it's like doing something and know you

can finish something like that, you think alright what else can I do... what other tests can I put myself to. From a physical endeavor thing." Subject #9 takes it further saying, "On the way down from Katadhin we were already planning what was next. How far could I push it until I couldn't do it."

Summary

The results presented in this chapter show that thru-hikers have difficulty with communicating the experience, new routines/structure, meeting social expectations, and loss of community when they are readjusting from the Appalachian Trail (AT) back to their lives. Character development, increased sense of confidence, and change in personal care are areas of life that participants identified as changed from their thru-hike. Aspects of the trail that hikers expressed as being missed are being outside, physical exertion, the community on the AT, and the simplicity of life on the AT. Some hikers experience depression during the post thru-hike experience. Appalachian Trail thru-hikers determined they are motivated towards travel and adventure, career goals, and physical challenges after hiking the AT. A more detailed summary and discussion of the findings will follow in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study researched the post thru-hike experience of Appalachian Trail (AT) thru-hikers. This chapter will include a summary of the study and a discussion of the findings including limitations, conclusions based on research questions, and recommendations for future research.

Summary

Hundreds of hikers each year hike the entire length of the Appalachian Trail.

Those who complete the journey represent only about 25% of all who have attempted the journey. Research on place attachment, how it affects our daily lives, and how a person experiences culture shock served as a basis for this study. Literature on place attachment revealed that an individual's daily routine is affected by the physical environment they are in and the non-tangible connections they make with their environment. The way in which a person experiences culture shock is broken down into a five stage model with the ending stage being full integration into the new culture.

Subjects for this study were thru-hikers who completed the trail in 2009 or 2010. A snowball sampling method was used to find subjects for this study. Overall, 10 indepth, voice recorded, phone interviews were conducted during winter of 2011. The data were then analyzed for recurring themes and an inter-coder reliability of 84.2% was reached.

Results of this study showed that thru-hikers have difficulty with communicating

the experience, new routines/structure, meeting social expectations, and loss of community during their post-thru hike experience. Character development, an increased sense of confidence, and change in personal care, were all life changes resulting from hiking the AT. Thru-hikers miss being outside, the physical exertion, the community of the trail, and the simplicity of life. No conclusive results could be drawn whether hikers experience depression during their post thru-hike experience. It was clear though that subjects were motivated towards travel and adventure, career goals, and physical challenges as a result of their thru-hike.

Discussion

During the initial few months back from the Appalachian Trail, thru-hikers showed varying stages of culture shock. Several hikers gave responses indicating they were experiencing the honeymoon stage of Pederson's culture shock model. But these phrases were immediately followed by responses which showed they had progressed further into culture shock and were now encountering challenges readjusting. Expressing difficulty communicating the experience, following new routines/structure, meeting social expectations, and perceiving a loss of community all link to the disintegration and reintegration stages of culture shock. Some hikers expressed negative reactions towards the communities they were living in while others did not. As connections are broken with the AT and individuals experience different post thru-hike situations, they will go through culture shock with varying degrees of positive or negative reactions.

The average thru-hike takes five to six months during which many challenges emerge. These challenges range from constant inclement weather, to physically

demanding trail, and to the mental strains of attempting to accomplish the journey. As stated in the background for this study, only about 25% of those who start a thru-hike attempt, actually finish. Through facing and overcoming these challenges, subjects reported having an increase in self-confidence. This increase of self-confidence results because each hiker must take every step under their own will. The length of the trail and interaction with fellow thru-hikers along the way contribute to further development of the subject's character. Their journey served as an affirmation that the values and beliefs they held were indeed important to them as their values and beliefs were tested through the challenges of their thru-hike and interaction with the trail community. The obstacles of the trail also incurred personal care changes. With constantly being out in the woods, thru-hikers are not presented opportunities for personal hygiene on a daily basis. Hikers experience and must learn to live with a different level of hygiene. Because of this, several subjects reported they noticed a change in their normal hygiene routines. Showers, specifically, were reported to be less important. Diet was another area of personal care reported to change as a result of hiking the AT. Thru-hikers tend to lose weight as a result of the physical exertion required. Some subjects reported that when they got back from the AT they modified their diets and continued to exercise to keep the weight off. Others reported their diets changed from being extremely health conscious, to eating what ever they could get their hands on, in order to consume enough calories. These eating habits were hard to shake and some are still dealing with them two years after starting the AT.

Thru-hikers create a strong place attachment to the Appalachian Trail, as described in Chapter 1. Research literature also shows that as place attachment increases,

so does the individuals positive personal perception of the environment. Holding a positive perception of the AT, it is only natural that the subjects express longing for parts of their thru-hike journey. The aspects subjects miss were reported to be: being outside, the physical exertion, the community on the trail, and simplicity of the life on the AT. As subjects completed their journey and headed back to the lives they left, they started to break bonds of place attachment to the AT. Breaking these bonds, along with experiencing culture shock, subjects had to begin formulating how to incorporate their experience of the AT into their everyday lives. Some looked for opportunities to be outside as often as they could. Others questioned why the community immediately around them was always busy. Still others longed for the sense of community they felt and experienced on the AT. Regardless of the their current situation or occupation, all subjects expressed missing their experience of thru-hiking the AT. This longing to again experience aspects of the AT could be tapped into by organizations who maintain or protect the trail. If opportunities for previous thru-hikers to relive parts of their journey were provided, organizations could use the abilities of these individuals to further their missions.

It is inconclusive whether thru-hikers experience depression during the post-thru-hike experience. Depression would fall under the disintegration stage of Pederson's model, which multiple subjects gave responses that indicate they were currently in or already went though. But even though a person may be in the disintegration stage, it does not mean that they are depressed. Some subjects explicitly used the word "depression" to describe their feelings, but others used words and phrases such as "loneliness" or "a deep sadness." Looking at cases in which subjects reported they did not experience depression,

support from their family and community was a key factor to avoid depression. The variation of experiences reported indicate a need to further define what constitutes depression and how to identify it.

Subjects have clearly been motivated towards other long term goals as a result of their thru-hike experience. Not surprisingly, some responded that they were hoping to do more traveling and adventuring in the future. With hiking the AT being a continual adventure and new experience, it is logical for those who developed place attachment, specifically place identity, would feel compelled to seek out other outlets for that kind of an experience. For those who feel motivated toward more physical challenging goals, the link is in the physical aspect of the actual hiking. Subjects expressed missing the physical exertion required to hike the AT, so desiring other long term physical challenges is a natural progression. It was surprising to have subjects respond with motivation towards long term career goals. The responses given showed forward thinking about life away from the AT and what the subject desires. A possible explanation could be experiencing the contrasting life styles on and off the AT. The hike then, would serve as a time for the individual to examine their life style and determine their priorities. More research is needed to fully examine the motivation thru-hikers feel about career goals.

This study was limited by several factors. As described in Chapter 1, the instrument was not tested for validity or reliability. This may have led to subjects giving varied answers based upon their interpretation of the questions. Subjects may have responded to uncomfortable questions in a way perceived as socially acceptable. This may have led to the ambiguity of whether or not thru-hikers experience depression during their post thru-hike experience. Subject were recalling past feeling and emotions, which

may have become partially distorted since the original occurrence. The current situation of the subject may have influenced their view on how the readjustment process was.

Using a snowball sampling method limited the subjects interviewed to those thru-hikers who had remained in contact with one another. For future research other sampling processes should be used to collect a broader spectrum of subjects. This study was limited by the primary researcher being a former thru-hiker of the AT who brings in personal bias from his own post thru-hiker experience and may have influenced the responses of some subjects.

This study has shed light on what Appalachian Trial thru-hikers experience once they complete their journey and leave the trail. Serving as a base for future research, this study can be used to craft other more detailed research studies looking at the readjustment process. Quantitative research is needed to better understand the post-thru hike experience of the Appalachian Trail thru-hiker population. The scope of future research should be widened to examine other similar experiences such as: NOLS/Outward Bound, study abroad programs, youth intervention programs, military assignments, and scientific research expeditions. Organizations who maintain or protect the AT, would benefit from targeting past thru-hikers. By better understanding the long term impact of thru-hiking the AT, organizations can use this knowledge to focus and further their missions. Lastly, this study shows that hikers feel a strong connection to the trail, thus more efforts should be taken to protect such an important place to so many individuals.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study the following conclusions are drawn:

- The primary challenges thru-hikers have readjusting to life after the
 Appalachian Trail are difficulty communicating the experience to those
 around them, operating with in new routines or structure, meeting social
 expectations, and feeling a loss of community.
- 2. Thru-hikers experience development of their character, an increase of self-confidence, and a change in their personal care as long term effects of hiking the Appalachian Trail.
- 3. Aspects of the hiking the Appalachian Trail that thru-hikers miss are being outside, the physical exertion required to hike the AT, the community on the AT, and the simplicity of life on the AT.
- 4. It is unclear whether or not thru-hikers experience depression during their post thru-hiker experience.
- 5. Thru-hikers are motivated to achieve other long term goals related towards adventure and travel, physical challenges, or their career.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study the following recommendations are made:

- Further research is needed as to whether or not thru-hikers experience depression during their post-thru hike experience.
- 2. Organizations which maintain and protect the AT should target past thruhikers to help with trail work and expansion of protecting the AT.

- 3. Future quantitative research is needed to quantify the post thru-hike experience of the Appalachian Trial thru-hiker population.
- 4. Similar research should be conducted on experiences such as NOLS/Outward Bound, study abroad programs, youth intervention programs, military assignments, and scientific research expeditions.
- 5. Further efforts should be taken to protect the Appalachian Trail, since it is such an important place to many individuals.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Interview Script

Interview Script

Interviews will begin with a period of orientation where the researcher reacquaints with the subject. Before the interview starts, the researcher will again remind the interviewee of the information on the informed consent related to potential risk and ask if they are ready to proceed with the interview.

- 1. Could you please describe challenges you had readjusting when you came back from the AT?
 - a. Initially, what was your favorite thing about being home? Is that still true?
 - b. What was your least favorite thing about being home? Is that still true?
 - i. IF NOT STILL TRUE, why has that changed?
 - c. Did you feel a sense of community? Could you please describe how that played out?
 - d. Were there habits that were hard to stop/start up again?
- 2. Has there been any particular area in your life that you have noticed significant change in since coming home from the AT?
 - a. What has this change been?
- 3. What (if any) aspects of hiking the AT do you miss?
- 4. Did you experience any sadness or other emotions during the first couple of months back from the AT?
 - i. Was it linked to the AT?
 - ii. How did this play out?
 - iii. What did you do to manage these feelings and emotions?
- 5. Do you find yourself motivated towards other long-term goals?

Appendix B

<u>Informed Letter of Consent</u>

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN AN ASSESMENT OF THRU-HIKERS READJUSTING AFTER COMPLETING THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

A research project on readjusting to life after hiking the Appalachian Trail is being conducted by Benjamin Turley as a senior project in Recreation, Parks and Tourism Administration at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, under the direct supervision of Dr. Marni Goldenberg. The purpose of this research is to assess the life readjustment of Appalachian Trail thru-hikers after completing the Appalachian Trail.

You are being asked to take part in this study by participating in a one-to-one phone interview. Your participation will take approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Please be aware that you are not required to participate in this research, and you may discontinue your participation at any time. You may also ask to skip any questions that you deem too sensitive or prefer not to answer.

The possible risks associated with participation in this study include talking about emotionally sensitive experiences and may include talk about depression and other mental distress and illness. If you should experience depression or mental distress/illness, please be aware that you may contact your local counseling service providers for assistance. However, you would be responsible for any associated costs.

Your confidentiality will be protected by the researcher. The researcher will be the only one to know your identity. In the reporting of data, code names will be used. Potential benefits associated with the study include a better understanding of what thruhikers go through in readjusting to life after the trail. This understanding may help other thru-hikers in the future, as educational and awareness programs can potentially be developed.

If you have questions regarding this study or would like to be informed of the results when the study is completed, please feel free to contact Ben Turley at bturley@calpoly.edu or Dr. Marni Goldenberg at (805) 756-7627, mgoldenb@calpoly.edu. If you have questions or concerns regarding the manner in which the study is conducted, you may contact Dr. Steve Davis, Chair of the Cal Poly Human Subjects Committee, at (805) 756-2754, sdavis@calpoly.edu, or Dr. Susan Opava, Dean of Research and Graduate Programs, at (805) 756-1508, sopava@calpoly.edu.

If you agree to voluntarily participate indicate your agreement by signing below. I reference, and thank you for your participati	1 10
Signature of Volunteer	Date

Signature of Researcher

Date