Journal of Experiential Education • 2008, Volume 30, No. 3 pp. 277–281

SEER 2007 Abstract

Why Individuals Hike the Appalachian Trail: A Qualitative Approach to Benefits

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The Appalachian Trail (AT) is a 2,175 mile–long National Scenic Trail extending from Maine to Georgia. Since its inception in the early 1920s, individuals, families, schools, and other organizations, just to name a few, have used the AT. Approximately 3 to 4 million visitors hike a portion of the AT each year (ATC, 2006). Throughout its 80-year history and millions of hikers, much of the empirical research on the AT has focused on place attachment (Kyle, Graefe, & Manning, 2004; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003). While Nisbett and Hinton (2005) explored motivations for AT hikers with disabilities, only limited research could be found on understanding motives among other AT users. In addition, researchers have indicated a need to further examine "types" of hikers (i.e., day, weekender, section, and thru) of the AT (Kyle et al., 2004). To better understand the AT hiker, the means-end theoretical framework was used.

Review of Literature

The AT is commonly referred to as the People's Path because nearly two-thirds of all Americans reside within a day's drive of the trail (NPS, 2007). The U.S. Census Bureau, in 2006, estimated that more than 299 million people were living in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2006); therefore, two-thirds of the American population is roughly 200 million people. Even though approximately 200 million people live within a day's drive of the AT, the National Park Service estimates that

only 4 million people—or 2% of the population within a day's drive—visit the trail annually (NPS, 2007). For this reason, one could argue that the potential benefits for this trail are yet to be recognized. Because the AT is a very accessible resource that could be used to advocate physical activity and because health issues directly correlated with lack of exercise are currently so prevalent in American society, the promising possibilities for this trail need to be capitalized.

Means-end theory seeks to develop an understanding of how participants feel about a particular product or service (Gutman, 1982). The theory focuses on the interrelationship among product meaning at three levels of abstraction: attributes, consequences, and values (Goldenberg, Klenosky, O'Leary, & Templin, 2000). For an outdoor adventure experience, key "product" attributes include the length of the experience, location, activities done while in the backcountry setting, and the number and nature of individuals in the group. The positive consequences, or benefits, for participants completing a wilderness-based experience may include: companionship and camaraderie, acquisition of skills needed to function in outdoor settings, or increased environmental awareness. Values for participation in an outdoor adventure experience include self-esteem, warm relationships with others, self-fulfillment, and fun and enjoyment of life.

Methodology

The process of means-end data collection is a qualitative approach termed laddering (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). In this study, this questioning technique was completed through phone and face-to-face interviews that lasted approximately 10 minutes for each interviewee. The interviews were conducted with four levels of AT hikers: day hikers, weekenders, multiday users, and thru-hikers (i.e., hikers attempting to complete the entire 2,174-mile trail). Interviews included obtaining demographic data, outcomes obtained, and laddering from the top three outcomes.

For this study, researchers asked a series of open-ended questions that first asked participants to identify the concrete attributes of hiking Appalachian Trail (AT). In other words, what they feel they gained by hiking the AT. The participant was then asked why a particular outcome was important. More often than not, the participant gave a more abstract consequence. At that point, the question "Why is that important?" was asked again. This process of asking "Why is that important?" continued for each response given until the respondent no longer provided a meaningful answer (e.g., the response became "I don't know," or "it just is..."). This procedure is called laddering because it forces the participant up the "ladder of abstraction," bridging relatively concrete concepts at the outcome or benefit level to more abstract concepts at the value level (Klenosky, Gengler, &

Mulvey, 1993). From the relationships identified in the implication matrix, a hierarchical value map (HVM) was created. The HVM provides a graphical summary of the linkages that emerged across participants' ladders.

Results

A total of 43 data sets were collected. Descriptive statistics were run to determine demographics of the sample. The sample consisted of 16% thru-hikers, 12% section hikers, 41% weekenders, 27% day hikers, and 4% who classified themselves in multiple areas as "type of hiker." Thus the largest single group of the study was weekenders (41%). Females represented the majority of this sample (65%). The study was 98% Caucasian, with only one African-American participant. The occupations held were diverse, but the largest single group was retired individuals (23%). Participants' ranged in age from 21 to 75 years old.

The nondemographic data were analyzed through LadderMap (Gengler & Reynolds, 1995). LadderMap is an MS DOS program that creates Hierarchical Value Maps (HVM) based on input. Various attributes that emerged from the data included: being outdoors, hiking, the trail, camping, and survival. Consequences that emerged included environmental awareness, physical challenge, camaraderie, exercise, and solitude. Self-fulfillment, self-reliance, fun and enjoyment of life, and warm relationships with others are some of the values that emerged. Specifically, strong links exist between hiking and exercise, exercise and health, and health and fun and enjoyment of life. Fun and enjoyment of life is the biggest value and has many correlations. Generally people hike the AT for fun and enjoyment of life and for warm relationships with others.

Discussion

As the number of Americans afflicted by obesity and diabetes grows as the result of an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, hiking has more benefits than may be realized by potential users. This study supports hiking as an activity for a healthy lifestyle. Physical activity such as day hiking is not only physically healthy, but psychologically beneficial as well. New research is being conducted to further investigate the physical benefits of exercise through hiking (Hill, Swain, & Hill, 2007). However, more research needs to be done on hiking's psychological benefits, so that we can collaboratively assess hiking's benefits with the goal of motivating a greater number of individuals to hike. As these results indicate, self-fulfillment, self-reliance, fun and enjoyment of life, and warm relationships are several of the emerging values, or underlying motives for hiking.

These positive traits parallel much of the recreation benefits movement. Many would argue that these are highly valuable and would benefit

users that have not yet experienced hiking one of America's amazing natural resources, the AT. The information from this study can add to the body of recreation literature as we continue to increase awareness and implement programs that target the benefits of outdoor recreation. Finally, this type of research can serve as a partnership model between recreation agencies and academia to foster implementing and researching outcome-based products, such as promoting healthy lifestyles through physical activity.

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