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The long-distance hiking social world along the Pacific Crest Trail

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ABSTRACT

The social world framework provides insight into the various meanings participants assign to their leisure involvement. The purpose of this study was to understand the long-distance social world of the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). Using naturalistic inquiry, we identified two major subworlds that create long-distance hiking culture on the PCT. One includes the long-distance hikers, which we described as the herd. These hikers are divided further into purists and social hikers. A second major PCT subworld was composed of shepherds. These individuals, who included trail angels and veteran hikers, helped hikers and organized activity along the PCT. Purists, social hikers, and shepherds had firm ideas about the "right" way to hike the PCT. These findings provide stakeholders an in-depth understanding of the various types of long-distance hikers who may travel through their towns and protected areas, giving them insight into potential conflict and diversity along the trail.

KEYWORDS

Social worlds; qualitative research; outdoor recreation; recreation specialization

The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) is a continuous footpath that spans 2,650 miles from Mexico to Canada through California, Oregon, and Washington. The trail encompasses a wide variety of ecosystems, including the Mojave Desert and the mountainous rain forests of the Pacific Northwest. Like other trails (e.g., the Appalachian Trail), the trail constitutes a social world—or culture area—that brings together long-distance hikers and individuals who provide support to hikers. Although studies have explored the outcomes of hiking the PCT (Goldenberg & Soule, 2014), benefits and motivations of hiking (Hill, Gómez, Goldenberg, Freidt, Fellows, & Hill, 2014; Yun & Peden, 2018), gender and sustainability (Jacobs, 2018), and use of technology (Dustin, Beck, & Rose, 2017), no studies exist that provide insight into the long-distance hiking culture of the PCT and the various subworlds encompassing the trail. The scholarly neglect of this social world is concerning given the amount of media attention the PCT has received from the book *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* (Strayed, 2013) and the subsequent film. The Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA) recorded 1,000 hikers completing the trail between 2008 and 2012. Between 2013 and 2017, 2,638 hikers completed the trail (PCTA, 2018). The growing popularity of the PCT stems, at least in part, from the visibility accompanying Strayed's book and movie.

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Use of the PCT affects both the cultural resources of gateway communities and natural resources of the wildlands the PCT traverses. Increased use of the trail will likely bring various impacts, for better or worse, into bold relief. Although long-distance hikers may be irritated by trail regulations, some may recognize the need to preserve the integrity of the trail (Hitchner, Schelhas, Brosius, & Nibbelink, 2019). Trail conflict and natural resource impacts along the PCT remain incipient and are not documented as fully as they are along the Appalachian Trail (MacLennan & Moore, 2011). In this study, we used the social world framework to understand the various meanings long-distance hiking participants ascribed to the PCT. We were particularly interested in hikers' views of activity legitimacy (Strauss, 1978, 1984). Simultaneously, our goal was to understand the role that trail angels and veteran hikers provided along the PCT. These individuals provided indispensable support and assistance to the hiking community, and, as a result, we wanted to understand how they influence the social world. Findings from this study will be primarily relevant to future hikers of the PCT, stewards of the PCT long-distance hiking culture, and citizens of adjacent communities by providing a deeper understanding of characteristic styles of participation, potential sources of conflict, and the community-building potential of long-distance hiking. Understanding PCT long-distance hikers' perceptions and preferences provides further understanding of how hikers think and behave toward each other, the towns they visit, and the wildlands through which they traverse.

Literature review

Literature on social worlds provides insight into the meaning that leisure participants ascribe to their participation and the community-building potential of leisure activities. Shibutani (1955) provided an early conceptualization of social worlds and saw them as culture areas that link people, groups, and organizations via mutual interests and common communication channels. Scholars have long noted that social worlds may form around any number of pastimes, including kayaking (Devall, 1973), contract bridge (Scott & Godbey, 1992), fishing (Ditton, Loomis, & Choi, 1992), dancing (Brown, 2007), golf (Wood & Danylchuk, 2011), hiking (Kilot & Collins-Kreiner, 2018; MacLennan & Moore, 2011), rock climbing (Bogardus, 2012), distance running (Shipway, Holloway, & Jones, 2013), and bowling (Hughes, Hallo, & Norman, 2016). These and other social worlds vary in size, location, inclusivity, degree of organization, and permeability of boundaries (Strauss, 1984).

According to Hughes et al. (2016), social worlds are characterized by three core characteristics: shared culture, communication channels, and knowledge. As culture areas, social worlds represent unique schemes of life that are internally recognizable to participants (and often unrecognizable to outsiders). Various conventions, practices, traditions, technology, and shared understandings characterize the social worlds and set them apart from others (Scott & Godbey, 1992). For example, members of long-distance hiking social worlds are typically given "trail names" by their fellow hikers (MacLennan & Moore, 2011). Short-term or day hikers are typically not given trail names, so the assigning of names solidifies membership into the social world of long-distance hiking. A shared culture is created and enacted through shared communication channels, which

are limited by neither geography nor a person's social position. Communication may occur face-to-face, but also through mediated or informal sources, such as magazines and websites (Hughes et al., 2016). As the name suggests, shared knowledge represents the degree of familiarity social world members have with the history and various features of the social world. Some rock climbers, for example, "revere past climbers, original routes, and historical connectivity, which forms the *raison d'etre* for their style of climbing" (Scott & McMahan, 2017, p. 572).

Social worlds share one other important characteristic: they tend to be differentiated into smaller, more specialized subworlds. Participants within subworlds engage in activities and share interests that distinguish themselves from others within the social world. There are several sources of segmentation within social worlds, one being intensity of involvement. Researchers using the recreational specialization framework, for example, have noted that participants in any leisure activity vary in their frequency of participation, skills and knowledge, types of equipment used, resource preferences, and commitment to the social world activity (Bryan, 1979; Ditton et al., 1992; Scott & Shafer, 2001). Using the recreational specialization framework, researchers have noted activity participants can be arranged along a continuum from those who tend to be casual to those who are highly committed. In Bryan's (1979) classic study of trout fishing, he identified four categories of participants along the specialization continuum: occasional participants, generalists, technique specialists, and technique-setting specialists. These and other leisure subworlds reflect differences in levels of seriousness and the extent to which individuals regard their involvement as a central life interest (Scott, 2012; Stebbins, 2007).

Although the recreational specialization framework provides a useful tool for segmenting social world participants along a continuum of involvement, it potentially ignores the meaning and ideologies participants ascribe to their participation. Subworlds sometimes arise as members coalesce around a style of activity they believe to be superior to that of others. As noted by Strauss (1984), members of subworlds sometimes develop "a collective definition that certain activities are pre-eminently worth doing and 'we' are doing them" (p. 128). Strauss added that subworld members may develop a strong conviction that what they are doing is "legitimate: fun or appropriate, aesthetically right, morally right, leading to truth" (Strauss, 1984, p. 128). Strongly held ideologies result in subworld members distancing themselves from other social world members as they seek to promote the rightfulness of their style of participation. As noted by Scott and McMahan (2017), "traditional rock climbers are adamant there is a right way to climb and climbers who do not conform to this are regarded with contempt" (p. 572). Acceptance in the subworld is contingent on adhering to the values and engaging in appropriate behaviors propounded by insiders and opinion leaders (Robinson, Patterson, & Axelsen, 2014).

A few studies of leisure social worlds provide insight into how subworlds form around core activities felt to be legitimate. One of these is an ethnographic study of contract bridge players reported by Scott and Godbey (1992). They argued that division within the social world of contract bridge was based on the "perceived social versus serious nature of the group activity" (p. 57). Some players were attracted to social clubs as they facilitated sociability and nurtured relationships among friends. By contrast, some

players were attracted to serious clubs because they promoted high-quality bridge and fostered skill development. Friendships were not integral to participation within serious clubs. Brown (2007) corroborated these findings in a study of shag dancers. She noted that casual dancers' primary motivation was fun, whereas the serious dancer was committed to the development of skills. In other words, distinct subworlds of dancers coalesced around their orientation to dance and interpersonal relationships. In both studies, division or segmentation was based in part on what participants felt was "authentic" activity. Stated differently, subworlds of bridge players and shag dancers believed that their styles of participation were superior to those of others.

Outdoor recreation scholars have examined ideological differences in the context of purism values (Shafer and Hammitt, 1995). *Purism* refers to the "attitudinal disposition toward an ideal" (p. 16) and influences participants' evaluation of authenticity, willingness to use certain kinds of equipment, and perceptions of human impacts. Building on these ideas, MacLennan and Moore (2011) examined the social world of Appalachian Trail (A.T.) long-distance hikers. They found some hikers along the A.T. regarded themselves as "purists." These hikers differentiated themselves from nonpurists not by equipment and skill per se, but by their understanding of the "right" way to hike the trail. Purists tended to be highly committed to walking every inch of the trail and "fought through trees that had fallen across the trail … instead of walking around them (and, thus, missing several feet of the actual trail)" (p. 8). Nonpurists were equally committed to hiking but felt it "was more important for them to have a good time than to work about hiking every inch of the A.T." (p. 8). To that end, they sometimes took side trails that were shorter but regarded as more scenic. Differences in ideologies between purists and nonpurists were sometimes acute enough to result in intergroup conflict and goal interference.

Fondren (2015) reported similar findings in her book about the A.T. She noted that many hikers claimed they advocated a "hike your hike" mentality that provided, theoretically, an even playing field for all A.T. users. Upon further investigation, she observed underlying tension between different groups of hikers, which was based on their approach to hiking, their point of entry, and the direction of their hike. Some nonpurists regarded purists with contempt due to the purists' insistence on telling others how to "do it right" (p. 106). Interestingly, Fondren distinguished between "chest thumpers" and "dreamers." Chest thumpers were those hikers who felt it was important to hike the entire A.T., whereas dreamers were focused on the existential and esthetic attributes of the trail. In summary, MacLennan and Moore (2011) and Fondren observed distinct subworlds along the A.T., and members within each were adamant there was a "right way" to hike the trail.

A recent essay written by Dustin et al. (2017) about the first author's experience hiking the PCT provides additional insight into purism values espoused by some hikers. They lamented what they saw as the proliferation of and dependence on smartphones carried by PCT hikers that Dustin encountered in 2016. Dustin et al. noted that the apps on the smartphones "made it possible for hikers to know exactly where they were … [and] where the next reliable water sources could be found" (p. 27). Although they did not cite episodes of conflict, they noted "there is something disconcerting about relying on sophisticated electronic technology to navigate the PCT" (p. 27).

They claimed that such technology is "antithetical to what trail experiences were designed to be" (p. 27). Their convictions were strong enough that they felt smartphones should be discouraged along the trail and "trails like it throughout the world" (p. 29).

Although social world members may be divided into subworlds on the basis of intensity of participation and ideology, they may also be divided in terms of the function they serve within the social world. To date, virtually all studies on leisure social worlds have limited their focus to activity participants (e.g., anglers, birdwatchers, bridge players, dancers) and glossed over those social world members who provide indispensable support and logistical work on behalf of activity participants. The social world of long-distance running includes runners but also race organizers and support workers. Likewise, the social world of hiking includes hikers but also trail angels, veteran hikers, and others. Trail angels are of particular interest as they are well known among hikers worldwide for providing lodging, transportation, and other forms of assistance to hikers (Kilot & Collins-Kreiner, 2018; MacLennan & Moore, 2011). Importantly, trail angels and other service providers have been known to withdraw favors and refuse service to hikers because of offensive behaviors (e.g., drunkenness) of some individuals (MacLennan & Moore, 2011). The roles that non–activity participants serve in a given social world are too often overlooked, and their inclusion in studies will provide a more complete understanding of social world activity and the meaning that various subworlds assign to it.

Study purpose

Our study draws on the social world literature to describe characteristic styles of participation along the PCT. Our primary purpose was to understand the meaning long-distance hikers ascribe to their participation, particularly as it relates to activity legitimacy. Scholars have noted that hikers are divided in terms of the "right way" to hike (Dustin et al., 2017; Fondren, 2015; MacLennan & Moore, 2011), and these beliefs provide an important frame of reference for engaging in trail behavior and interpreting other hikers' behavior. Thus, our goal is to describe the subworlds of hikers along the PCT and explain how they coalesce on the basis of activity legitimacy. A secondary purpose of this study is to describe the role of shepherds (i.e., trail angels and veteran hikers) on the PCT and explain their views of appropriate activity on the PCT. Because these individuals provide indispensable support and assistance to hikers, it is in hikers' long-term interest to maintain shepherds' goodwill.

Methods

To guide this study, we used naturalistic inquiry (Salkind, 2010), an approach in which we observed, described, and interpreted experiences of individuals within the social world of hikers along the PCT. Previous researchers have noted that qualitative methods are especially useful in the exploration of social worlds (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Social worlds tend to be amorphous in nature, so qualitative field research yields nuances that would otherwise not be apparent to the researcher (Babbie, 2015). The data were

collected over the course of 45 days hiking in the field by the first two authors as they intercepted other hikers along the trail (though the researchers did not complete a thru-hike). Data were collected using participant observation techniques, which included informal conversations with hikers. Simultaneously, 15 extended in-depth interviews were conducted in the field. It was at this point that data saturation was achieved, whereas no additional data were found to develop further categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Field role and data collection

Participant-as-observer (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) field roles were adopted for this study, achieving an *emic* or "insider understanding" for the researchers (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The first two authors spent a combined 70 days in the field hiking the southern section of the PCT with participants (from Campo, California, to Yosemite National Park), which facilitated active membership "in the setting's central activities" (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 85). Furthermore, the participant-as-observer field role made it possible to develop an intimate understanding of the participants and the activity. The first two authors kept daily journals and described their experiences and feelings as they walked the trail together. They made other hikers (i.e., those they interviewed and interacted with) aware that they were collecting data for this study (the first author was given the trail name Survey).

Becoming "hiker-trash" was necessary to adopt the participant-as-observer field role (Miller, 2014). We supplemented participant observation with frequent unstructured/informal conversations. Informal conversations were flexible/exploratory and consisted of open-ended questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This allowed us to gain insight into the social world that would perhaps have been lost if in-depth interviewing were the sole source of data for this study—this helped ensure the trustworthiness of findings via data triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Given the nature of the study and the participant-as-observer field role taken, non-probability sampling guided data collection (Babbie, 2015). The decision to interview a given hiker was based on the belief, at the time, that he or she held situational knowledge and was representative of a subworld under investigation (Babbie, 2015). For example, some people voiced displeasure about other hikers, and we felt they would be a good source of information. Simultaneously, opportunistic sampling, in the form of informal conversations, occurred with hikers as they met along on the trail. Questions were refined throughout the entirety of the data collection process as new insights were developed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

In-depth interviews were conducted as if the researchers and informant were merely having a conversation. This type of interview technique is called "semistructured" and allows for the worldview of the respondent to emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). While the researchers in the field were experienced hikers and had understanding of the hiker social world, sources of segmentation within the hiker social world were unknown. Therefore, questions were purposively open-ended and flexible so the participants would be able to answer in their own words, which allowed them to give voice to their

understanding of PCT hiking culture. Interviews took place at locations where hikers were gathered (water sources, shade trees, and campsites) and were, thus, not hiking.

In addition, we collected data using *Yogi's Pacific Crest Trail Handbook* (McDonnell, 2013). We used the handbook to identify trail angels and veteran hikers for this study.

Recording and transcribing data

We used field notes extensively as a source of data for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) asserted that notes during observation must be transcribed as soon after the observation as possible. Since the researchers were in the field for the entirety of the study, time for transcription was set aside daily, most often in the afternoon or evening. Data were also transcribed throughout the day when necessary. For example, during conversation, when a participant made a comment that was especially insightful, the statement was recorded at the conclusion of the conversation and a member check was performed by confirming with the participant what had been recorded was indeed what was said. These transcription practices helped ensure data collected were both credible and consistent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data analysis

The qualitative design is by nature emergent. Likewise, data analysis was a dynamic process. While in the field, data were continually analyzed. This helped us edit interview questions as the study progressed. We often took time for data analysis sessions, which involved reviewing field notes and allowing them to inform data collection in the future.

Upon completing fieldwork, data were reanalyzed, and any data that were useful to understanding the PCT hiking social world were recorded and coded. This technique is referred to as "open coding" because the researcher considers anything that might emerge from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Open codes were then grouped into categories, known as axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data interpretation began during the axial coding process, after which core categories and propositions were developed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015); this is known as selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Although categories were emergent, we relied heavily on insights from the social world literature. Data continued to be analyzed until categories were exhaustive (enough categories included all relevant data), mutually exclusive (the units of data were placed in only one category), sensitizing (naming of categories was true to the data), and conceptually congruent (categories were at the same level of abstraction) (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Results

Before collecting data, we assumed we would find myriad hikers on the PCT with a number of attitudinal and behavioral tendencies. Unsurprisingly, these suspicions were confirmed. Like many other trails, there are day hikers and multiday hikers. Day hikers are individuals who hike along a trail without the intention of spending the night on

the trail, whereas multiday hikers intend to spend the night on the trail. One group of multiday hikers was long-distance hikers. These individuals came to the PCT with the express purpose of hiking the trail from beginning to end (thru-hikers) or completing the trail from beginning to end in sections over the course of multiple outings (section hikers).

We also assumed long-distance hikers compose a distinct subworld within the social world, which was confirmed by learning that insiders refer to them as the "herd." Significantly, they are quick to distance themselves from day hikers and other multiday hikers. A second major PCT subworld is "shepherds." Shepherds are the gatekeepers of the PCT and seek to maintain the social world primarily through teaching new members about what is expected of them. Shepherds may be experienced PCT long-distance hikers as well as "trail angels"—locals who volunteer along the trail and give hikers aid.

The subworlds of the PCT social world and their major characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The typology seeks to encapsulate major attitudinal and behavioral tendencies expressed by hikers and shepherds along the PCT and adjoining communities. Some hikers land in a rather gray area between various categories of the typology, as would be expected given previous social world research. Despite the lack of discrete subgroups within the larger context of the social world, hikers' constructed meaning of the trail is what grouped them into their particular subworlds. While other characteristics are associated with hikers of one subworld and not the other, the meaning hikers assigned to PCT and hiking is what most sets them apart from others.

The herd is divided into what we call *purists* and *social hikers*. These two categories are useful for understanding hikers' attitudinal dispositions and the meaning they ascribe to their participation. The purist hiker is motivated primarily by the actual hiking of the trail, whereas the social hiker is motivated primarily by the social interaction with his or her fellow hikers. Each hiker's ideal greatly influenced where they situated themselves within the PCT social world, their day-to-day behavior, and their interpretation of the PCT activity. After discussing purists and social hikers, we then discuss two types of shepherds: trail angels and veteran hikers.

Purists

We found two types of purist hikers: romantic and utilitarian. Both hikers were motivated primarily by being on the trail itself (as opposed to spending time in town or with other hikers). Romantic purists, however, were found to be motivated by the enduring benefits (e.g., experiential and existential) associated with long-distance hiking. By contrast, utilitarian purists were primarily concerned with the completion of the task at hand (i.e., hiking every inch of the official trail from beginning to end). Romantic purists viewed towns as an obstacle to get around to return to the trail, whereas utilitarian purists viewed the services found in towns as tools to help complete their task.

A distinguishing characteristic of romantic purists was their aptitude to stay on the trail. They actively avoided contact with civilization. One such romantic purist was Cool Hand Luke (pseudonyms used throughout). For Luke, the meaning of hiking entailed "someone who walks self-sufficiently, on trails, carrying everything they need," making towns and people necessary evils to endure in the endeavor to experience the sights,

Table 1. Typology of Pacific Crest Trail social world.

Member characteristics	The herd				Shepherds	
	Social hikers		Purist hikers			
	Party hiker	Gregarious hiker	Utilitarian purist	Romantic purist	Veteran hiker	Trail angel
Focus of leisure experience	Sociability	Sociability	Completion of task	Intimate physical and existential experience with trail	Social bonding	Stage for service volunteering
Intensity of participation	Important	Important	Important	Important	Central	Central
Level of life oriented toward hiking	High	High	High	High	Highest	Highest
Social setting	Tend to hike with other party hikers	Tend to hike with other gregarious hikers	Diverse	Tend to hike with romantic purists	Typically with friends they have made on the trail, other veterans	Long-distance hikers whom they take in
Constructed meaning of trail	Place to meet others and have a good time	Place to meet others and develop relationships	Current central life interest that is a challenge to be completed	Central life interest that is existentially beneficial	Central life interest, life is lived to make room for hiking	A means to practice altruism; family-type attachment

sounds, and smells of the trail. Luke did not "put up with the trail" to gain its benefits; for him being on the trail was the benefit. Luke said he mailed food to the trail from home, rather than going grocery shopping, so he would be able to spend the least amount of time as possible in town resupplying. Another romantic purist, Softwalker, said he would sometimes take "zeroes" on the trail to avoid going to towns (a "zero" refers to a day off from hiking, thus walking "zero" miles). Luke summed up a common thought among romantic purists by quoting a piece of literature that was familiar to him: "I smelled civilization and thought I'd scattle." Although hikers need towns to resupply food and supplies, romantic purists entered towns only when necessary. When these occasions arose, they were in and out as quick as possible so they could get back to living in the woods.

Romantic purists also tended to be more in tune with the existential benefits of the trail and hiked alone. For Luke, hiking was a "spiritual experience." One of his favorite things about the desert section of the PCT was to camp alone with nothing for miles around him because this helped him "get centered" and remain humble. Romantic purists were very sensitive to distractions from other hikers (especially party hikers), towns, and technology. They were, as a whole, less likely to depend on smartphones and other electronic resources that some hikers used to aid their trip planning. Romantic purists were primarily interested in whatever helped them experience the trail and the natural environment in which they were immersed—anything else they regarded as unnecessary and distracting.

In contrast to the romantic purists, the utilitarian purist largely viewed the enduring benefits of hiking as peripheral. Unlike the romantic purist, the utilitarian purist was task oriented and highly motivated by the challenge at hand (hiking every inch from Mexico to Canada). Backroads was an archetypal utilitarian purist. Backroads and Steeltoe (a romantic purist) had very different opinions about what constituted an authentic thru-hike. At the time of this study, a section of the PCT was closed due to fire damage. The reroute forced hikers to walk on the road for several miles (and thus not hiking on the technical PCT). Many hikers opted to hitchhike the section of the road, while others felt compelled to hike it. Backroads felt strongly that he must walk the section of road for him to authentically complete a thru-hike. Steeltoe said he hitchhiked the road section and felt no guilt for doing so: "I'm not walking roads—that's not the PCT." Backroads replied bluntly, "Well you are not thru-hiking then." Backroads later mentioned, "I can't skip; I have to make it a continuous walk … even if it's a crappy one." This was a common disagreement among hikers—the utilitarian purist believed that to be an authentic thru-hiker you must walk every inch from Mexico to Canada; anything less and it is not a thru-hike.

Utilitarian purists were interested in whatever resources helped them stay true to their task. Unlike romantic purists, utilitarian purists were more likely to hike with others, as long as they kept up the same pace as them. However, should a fellow hiker walk too slow, want to spend more time in town, or skip sections of the trail, the utilitarian purist would forge ahead and leave others behind. Utilitarian purists were also more likely than romantic purists to use smartphones and other resources to aid in the completion of their thru-hike.

In summary, purists were primarily motivated to stay connected to (and enjoy) the trail. Despite the shared motivation, romantic and utilitarian purists' constructed

contrasting views of what constituted authentic thru-hiking. Romantic purists saw hiking as fitting into a particular worldview, one that valued simplicity, contemplation, and solitude. The utilitarian purist viewed the essence of the hike altogether differently. A hike was a task to be completed; anything else (e.g., contemplation) was on the periphery.

Social hikers

The herd also consisted of social hikers. Social hikers actively sought out other hikers' company and had a great affinity for social interaction. They enjoyed the company of other hikers and derived satisfaction in the relationships they engendered while hiking the PCT. Social hikers are further divided into gregarious hikers and party hikers. Party hikers oriented their time spent with fellow hikers around the consumption of drugs and alcohol, while gregarious hikers tended to eschew these substances.

Gregarious hikers valued forming relationships and meeting people more than anything else associated with the PCT. In a world that has myriad personalities, the PCT was a place for gregarious hikers to belong to a group of like-minded individuals. This idea was espoused by Goldi. Despite previously hiking the A.T., Goldi noted the first couple of weeks on the PCT were difficult because she was hiking alone. She did not literally mean that she was hiking alone, for there were numerous hikers around her daily; what she meant was she had not found a smaller group to hike with consistently on a day-to-day basis. Micky, another gregarious hiker, claimed "running into people [on trail] is always a mood lifter." For gregarious hikers, the difficulty of long-distance hiking was worth it when they were able to experience the trail with others.

In addition to the physical investment of hiking with a group, emotional investment was required. Leonidas shared about the atmosphere of his group: "Everybody does whatever is necessary and there's always tension, like a family." Leonidas, and other gregarious hikers, repeatedly returned to the analogy of family to describe the group dynamic insofar as they, like a family, faced difficult times and remained intact. Leonidas claimed that "socializing with people and building teamwork" was what made hiking with a group worth it and reflected that "it's like a family … it really is." For the gregarious hiker, more than mere physical exertion was required to satisfy their long-distance hiking expectations; emotional commitment was also essential.

Other hikers found their hiking identity in their trail family. Slugger introduced himself to other hikers by telling them who he was hiking with—to which "family" he belonged. Goldi communicated a similar sentiment, contrasting purists and social hikers: "Some people come out with different expectations; some want solitude, I want a group of friends." Other hikers changed their hiking plans for the sake of staying with or catching up to their "family." Whether or not these trail families shared the same hiking style or pace, gregarious hikers stayed in these groups because they helped ease the burden of the long-distance hiking lifestyle.

For gregarious hikers, towns were a respite from the trail. Goldi felt that the reason she hiked was for "the challenge; it is sucky and rewarding. My happy time is to go in to town. That's where you meet people and socialize." Luke (a romantic purist) shared a similar insight about gregarious hikers: "There are hikers who *put up with* [emphasis

added] the trail for some other reason." Gregarious hikers looked forward to getting to town for their rest days as they offer amenities not available while on the trail (e.g., hotels and restaurants).

As with purist hikers, the data revealed the label "social hiker" to be one that was too simplistic. Various informants said the PCT included "party hikers." These hikers oriented their behavior around the consumption of drugs and alcohol, or at minimum incorporated it into hiking. One party hiker was Moby, who said hiking was all about "doing whatever makes you happy." To illustrate his understanding of long-distance hiking, he shared fond memories of his hiking career, one of which included him "passing out hiking because [he] was drunk" and waking to find his gear "scattered behind [him] on the trail." Party hikers sometimes ran afoul with purists over appropriate trail behavior. Moby, for example, said, "Screw those guys, hiking should be done however you want." Another party hiker, Breeze, was pleasantly surprised by the party-like hiking scene on the PCT. He noted the "social aspect has been huge and wild."

Party hikers were the object of much derision by other members of the herd and shepherds. In fact, no other group on the PCT came under attack as did party hikers. Featherlight, a trail angel, insisted that they were interested not in hiking, but in a "pub-crawl." Featherlight repeatedly referred to party hikers as the "entitlement generation." Victor, a trail angel, described a site along the trail where "party hikers trashed the place." Leonidas, a gregarious hiker, certainly identified party hikers as different from himself. In town, he encountered a group of younger hikers covered in dirt, drinking alcohol, playing music on a street corner, and dressed in the hiker "uniform" that makes them "as distinctive as people who ride Harleys," to borrow language from Luke. Leonidas began to laugh and said, "these dudes on the corner, dirty f***ing hippies!" Leonidas, along with many other gregarious hikers, rarely spent time with party hikers due to their disagreement of what quality social interactions should look like.

In summary, social hikers were motivated primarily by and interested in relationships with people along the trail. However, hikers varied markedly in terms of how this appetite for social interaction was satisfied. The party hikers tended to orient their time with others around the consumption of drugs and alcohol, while the gregarious hiker was oriented around creating family-like groupings where alcohol and drugs played little part.

Shepherds

Shepherds served as gatekeepers of the community along the PCT and were integral to its social fabric. Shepherds supported hikers and were responsible for maintaining the PCT social world by instructing new members about what they saw as the proper way to hike the trail. Shepherds are so named because they seek to protect and guide the herd. The PCT includes two types of shepherds. The first group are trail angels. They volunteer along the trail by welcoming hikers into their home, offering rides to and from trailheads, setting up barbeques in campgrounds or popular trailheads, and maintaining water caches in the desert (without water caches in several locations in the desert, hikers would have waterless stretches of trail approaching 100 miles). The second group are veteran hikers. They had hiked the PCT in the past and had continued their

involvement in the community. Both trail angels and veteran hikers are well known within the hiking community and generally admired by other hikers.

Many thru-hikers become acquainted with shepherds even before beginning their hike. Before a PCT hiker begins the hike, extensive planning is required. Many rely on *Yogi's Pacific Crest Trail Handbook* (McDonnell, 2013). Yogi is a veteran hiker who has hiked several long-distance trails, including the A.T., PCT, and CDT (Continental Divide Trail), and has provided an excellent resource to the hiking community in the form of a trail guide for the PCT. Yogi's guide is a logistical aid for hikers offering information regarding towns and transport, among other things. Yogi also offers a list of trail angels. One trail angel, Mayonnaise, was listed in Yogi's guide and provided transportation and lodging to hikers who were beginning their hike in Southern California. When hikers contacted him for his services, he sent them a list of items needed from them, including flight information, items required to purchase before hiking, and whether a post office trip was necessary. Many hikers compared his (and other trail angels') services to a professional guide service.

Upon retrieving hikers from the airport, Mayonnaise was quick to shepherd (advise) them into the long-distance hiking social world along the PCT. He was adamant that the PCT was a different trail (socially) from the A.T. In our conversation with him, he noted, "I hope those hooligans don't bring their trail out here … we've worked hard to have good relationships with people around the trail and that could all be gone." He added, "There are a lot of rookie hikers this year and it's up to the vets to teach them trail manners." Mayonnaise was adamant that there was a correct way of acting within the PCT community. Many shepherds had devoted a substantial portion of their lives to preserving those norms and were especially keen to teach newcomers about acceptable behavior.

Mayonnaise, like other shepherds, also taught hikers the language needed to help them transition into the PCT long-distance hiking social world: "First off, 'Sierra' [the mountain range] is plural, if you throw an 's' on the end of it, hikers will think you are backwards. Second, you guys are hikers, not backpackers; hikers wear packs while they hike." Shepherds, like Mayonnaise, felt that teaching the proper language of this social world was a key component of being part of the community.

Mayonnaise had invested 15 years of service to the PCT community and identified with the trail angel role within the social world. However, he was not a hiker. Nevertheless, the PCT was integral to his self-identity, and he was committed to the long-term well-being of the trail. Other trail angels along the trail provided timely pick-me-ups in the form of snacks and beverages, free to those who would appreciate a chilled beverage toward the end of their hike.

Featherlight was both a veteran hiker and a trail angel. He had been hiking the PCT for years and logged over 10,000 miles on the trail. He reminisced about his first time hiking the PCT and praised the first trail angels he met. He said they had taken him into their home when he was in need of a shower and place to rest before continuing to hike. Featherlight did not ask them for their help, rather the trail angels insisted on helping him by giving him a home-cooked meal, shower, laundry, bed, and ride back to the trail the next day. Positive experiences like this prompted him to serve hikers in a similar capacity. Among other things, Featherlight provided transportation, lodging, food, and advice to hikers.

Featherlight enjoyed sitting around the table and telling stories from his days hiking and about the different hikers he hosted over the years. He lamented the changing culture surrounding the trail, particularly as it related to party hikers. "This is the entitlement generation, you know. It is not so much about the hike as it is about the food and people feeding each other." He was particularly critical of party hikers, who he said "are not out here hiking, they are out here on a pub-crawl, hopping from bar to bar up the trail." Featherlight communicated his belief that "the PCT was a family who had traditionally supported itself by people going out of their way to help one another."

Featherlight's beliefs can be understood through the lens of his life experiences. After spending the majority of his adult life bouncing from job to job while dealing with a disability, he lamented, "I just couldn't take it anymore, I had to get out of there." In the early 2000s, he learned of the long-distance hiking culture of the PCT. Every year since, he hiked at least some of the trail and volunteered in the PCT community. In short, the trail had become his life and source of identity. This was why he was so negative about the changing culture. He bemoaned that the "all for one and one for all" mentality that he spoke so adamantly about was diminishing and was disgruntled about recent events of hikers taking advantage of trail angels' hospitality. He used this as an opportunity to guide participation in the social world by teaching that this was not acceptable behavior for the PCT. Although not every member of the social world ascribed the same meaning to the PCT as did trail angels and veteran hikers, their sentiments were respected by most members of the herd.

Discussion

This study provides insight into a previously understudied social world: the long-distance hikers along the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). With the increased growth of participants along the trail, management decisions will become increasingly important in the maintenance of its natural and social resources. Our study specifically sheds light on the social resources found along the PCT. A major focus of our analysis was to examine segmentation within this unique cultural area. Long-distance hikers constitute the major source of identification within the PCT social world, and insiders refer to them as "the herd." These hikers are readily recognizable by both members and nonmembers of the social world. The characteristic "thru-hiker uniform" consists of threadbare clothing, worn shoes, and need of a shower. Members of the herd, however, are far from homogenous in their interests and orientations. Indeed, we argue herd members can be further classified as purist or social hikers. We further noted there was division among both purist and social hikers.

A major subworld of the PCT consists of shepherds. These trail angels and veteran hikers have been described in other studies of hikers (e.g., MacLennan & Moore, 2011), but investigators have treated them as only providing support for hikers. We argue that they are integral members of the PCT social world. They support and facilitate hikers and are emphatic about how people should think about hiking the PCT. In many ways, they are opinion leaders along the PCT and promulgate a cultural ethos for others to follow. Ignoring this subworld provides an incomplete picture of the PCT social world and the hiking community in general. Future research on leisure social worlds should

seek to include these stakeholders in order to understand issues related to crowding, conflict, and other resource-related phenomena.

Our findings are congruent with other studies of leisure social worlds in that we discovered participants were divided in terms of what they saw as legitimate activity (Brown, 2007; Scott & Godbey, 1992). Romantic purists felt strongly that a PCT hike entailed staying on the trail and enjoying the experiential aspects of the trail. For example, in contrast to how most hikers spend their rest days (e.g., in towns eating, napping, socializing, etc.), romantic purists would sometimes stay on the trail for their rest days to avoid town. Purist hikers mirrored the attitudes and behaviors of purist hikers on the A.T. (MacLennan & Moore, 2011). This was particularly true among utilitarian hikers who, like purists on the A.T. (Fondren, 2015), felt a legitimate thru-hike entailed staying on the trail and walking every step. By contrast, social hikers, while enjoying the PCT and the hike, were drawn to the sociability within the herd. They sought out and nurtured community on the trail. Some social hikers cultivated communities that revolved around partying, but many did not and were primarily concerned with staying connected to fellow hikers regardless of whether it involved the consumption of drugs and alcohol. Social hikers routinely joined other hikers and developed family-like packs that gave meaning to their time on the trail.

The present study extends past research by suggesting there are distinctions among purists (e.g., MacLennan & Moore, 2011). Although we identified purists who insisted there was a right way to hike, they differed markedly about what this way was. Utilitarian purists affirmed the goodness of completing the trail; romantic purists, by contrast, were interested in collecting experiences. In addition, this study revealed further insight into social hikers. Studies have described them (Dustin et al., 2017; MacLennan & Moore, 2011) but have stopped short of exploring variability among them. Results from this study suggest there are two types of social hikers: gregarious hikers and party hikers. Differences between gregarious hikers and party hikers are nearly as stark as are the differences between purists and party hikers. Stakeholders along the PCT should be mindful not to assume that all social hikers are alike. Purists and trail angels sometimes disparage social hikers for drunkenness and destructive behavior (see MacLennan & Moore, 2011), but many of these offensive behaviors may be limited to what we have described as party hikers.

Purist hikers and social hikers interacted with one another, and civility typically characterized these interactions. However, purists (particularly romantic purists) sometimes went out of their way to avoid party hikers. Likewise, shepherds felt strongly that party hikers were a threat to the carefully manicured culture they felt prevailed along the PCT. Interestingly, the party hikers we interviewed were generally oblivious to this sentiment. They carried on with little insight into how other hikers and shepherds viewed their behavior. Intergroup conflict, which was central to the findings reported by MacLennan and Moore (2011) along the A.T., remains incipient on the PCT. This could stem from the fact that the A.T. has a longer history and attracts more hikers.

Most studies focusing on complex leisure activities focus exclusively on the range of participants involved. Likewise, we began this study with the idea that our focus would be on long-distance hikers along the PCT. We came to recognize that shepherds constituted an important subworld within the social world of the PCT.

These individuals—trail angels and veteran hikers—organized activity, supported long-distance hikers, and spoke adamantly about what constituted legitimate hiking on the PCT. In light of increased use of the PCT, these shepherds will face growing difficulty in maintaining the culture in places along the PCT in which they and others (purists and gregarious hikers) identify. Future studies on leisure social worlds should broaden their scope to focus on the roles of organizations, groups, and individuals that support and give structure to activity participants rather than merely the participants themselves.

As noted, the PCT differs from the A.T. in that the PCT has far fewer hikers. This means that PCT shepherds have been able to inculcate hikers into what they see as legitimate PCT culture. Things are now changing. In 2015, the Pacific Crest Trail Association reported 626 complete thru-hikes of the trail, which is four times the number in 2011 (PCTA, 2018). This growth meant that the annual kickoff party in 2015 had to take place in two sessions rather than one as in years past. With the growing popularity of the PCT—some of which stems from the publicity received from the film and book *Wild* (Strayed, 2013)—shepherds are worried that the trail will be "loved to death" by all of the new hikers traveling west to hike the trail. Researchers should conduct studies to provide a baseline for crowding and its subsequent effects (both physical and cultural).

Crowding may also result in the erosion of support of shepherds. Several trail angels and veteran hikers bemoaned the growing popularity of the trail and its impacts. Two quintessential trail angels along the PCT were a couple in a Southern California town who had been helping hikers for 18 years. However, since the 2014 hiking season, and after several years of serving as trail angels, they ceased participating in the PCT social world. They felt that crowding had changed the unique ethos of the PCT of which they were accustomed. Although lamentable, it could be that the increased popularity of the PCT will result in the infusion of new veteran hikers and trail angels. If so, these hikers may become the next generation of PCT shepherds. More research is needed to understand the dynamics of change along trails and other leisure social worlds.

To better understand intra-activity participant variability in the future will require leisure scholars to consider both behavioral and attitudinal variability. Many studies have segmented participants in terms of intensity of participation and have relied heavily on behavioral indicators (Scott & Shafer, 2001). In this study, we used the social world literature, which gives primacy to the meaning of the activity to participants. PCT users had definite ideas about the right way to hike, and subworlds coalesced along these ideas. Significantly, we did not observe major differences among hikers in terms of hiking history, experience, gear, and the like. Future studies of hikers and other leisure social worlds should strive to ascertain activity participants' ideas about what constitutes authentic activity. A more complete understanding of these differences may assist managers and stakeholders in making informed decisions about how to protect social and physical resources under investigation.

This study is not without limitations. We did not encounter long-distance hikers traveling south on the PCT. Long-distance PCT hikers who hike the trail southward may potentially constitute a different subworld unto themselves and would warrant investigation in the future. Although we did not complete a thru-hike of the trail, informants

(i.e., fellow hikers) affirmed the veracity of our findings. Future research could seek to quantitatively measure the segments we found within the PCT long-distance hiking social world. These limitations, along with suggestions, should be the focus of future research along the PCT as these questions are of prime interest to both researchers and practitioners.

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