

# Wilderness Pilgrimage in the Midst of Pandemic: Appalachian Trail in the Wake of Trail Closure and Infrastructure Shutdowns

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**Abstract:** This paper presents research conducted both on the Appalachian Trail and through reading hiker blogs written between March and June of 2020. The Trail research happened between Beauty Spot, Tennessee and Mountain Harbor Hostel, Tennessee, about 50 miles. Both Virginia and North Carolina had restricted access to the Appalachian Trail, but Tennessee was open. I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork amongst long-distance hikers still in the midst of their trek. In addition, I interviewed a hostel owner. In late June, after Virginia opened access to the Appalachian Trail, I traveled to Damascus and conducted more interviews. I also accessed hiker blogs, gathering first-hand accounts of experiences related to the Appalachian Trail during the initial stage of the pandemic. This paper investigates the social and environmental forces that shaped pilgrim/hiker experiences during the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Wilderness, Environment, Space, Place, Pilgrimage, Self-Discovery, Pandemic.

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*Peregrinación por la naturaleza en medio de una pandemia: la ruta de los Apalaches tras el cierre de itinerarios e infraestructuras*

**Resumen:** Este artículo presenta una investigación realizada tanto en la ruta de los Apalaches como a través de la lectura de blogs de senderistas escritos entre marzo y junio de 2020. La investigación del itinerario se realizó

entre Beauty Spot, Tennessee y Mountain Harbor Hostel, Tennessee, alrededor de 50 millas. Tanto Virginia como Carolina del Norte tenían acceso restringido a la ruta de los Apalaches, pero Tennessee estaba abierto. Me involucré en un trabajo de campo etnográfico entre senderistas de larga distancia que todavía se encontraban en medio de su viaje. Además, entrevisté al propietario de un albergue. A finales de junio, después de que Virginia abriese el acceso a la ruta de los Apalaches, viajé a Damasco y realicé más entrevistas. También accedí a blogs de senderistas, recopilando relatos de primera mano de experiencias relacionadas con la ruta de los Apalaches durante la etapa inicial de la pandemia. Este artículo investiga las fuerzas sociales y ambientales que dieron forma a las experiencias de los peregrinos/senderistas durante la pandemia.

**Palabras clave:** Naturaleza, medio ambiente, espacio, lugar, peregrinación, autodescubrimiento, pandemia.

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## Peregrinación pola natureza no medio dunha pandemia: a ruta dos Apalaches tras o peche de itinerarios e infraestruturas

**Resumo:** Este artigo presenta unha investigación realizada tanto na ruta dos Apalaches como a través da lectura de blogs de sendeiristas escritos entre marzo e xuño de 2020. A investigación do itinerario realizouse entre Beauty Anuncio, Tennessee e Mountain Harbor Hostel, Tennessee, ao redor de 50 millas. Tanto Virxinia como Carolina do Norte tiñan acceso restrinxido á ruta dos Apalaches, pero Tennessee estaba aberto. Involucreime nun traballo de campo etnográfico entre sendeiristas de longa distancia que aínda se atopaban no medio da súa viaxe. Ademais, entrevistei o propietario dun albergue. A finais de xuño, despois de que Virxinia abrise o acceso á ruta dos Apalaches, viaxei a Damasco e realice máis entrevistas. Tamén accedín a blogs de sendeiristas, recompilando relatos de primeira man de experiencias relacionadas coa ruta dos Apalaches durante a etapa inicial da pandemia. Este artigo investiga as forzas sociais e ambientais que lles deron forma ás experiencias dos peregrinos/sendeiristas durante a pandemia.

**Palabras clave:** Natureza, medio, espazo, lugar, peregrinación, autodescubrimiento, pandemia.

### *Pilgrimage and Covid*

Looking into the rearview mirror at the destruction and disorientation wrought by the Covid pandemic, we might not see clearly, back into the early days when the virus rapidly spread. As it began, the virus seemed so far away, on the other side of the world. If it were to reach beyond China, we might have time to prepare ourselves. The onslaught caught us off guard. Before we could process what was unfolding,

nations began to lock down with shelter in place orders given. This phenomenon was even more bewildering for those who were already engaged in long-distance hiking through the wilderness. Whereas pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago through Spain had access to daily communication as they passed through towns and villages along the way, sleeping in albergues in those same places, connected to news feeds, long-distance hikers in the wilderness were more isolated.

Research shows that many long-distance hikers in wilderness, such as the Appalachian Trail, compare to pilgrims on routes such as the Camino de Santiago.<sup>1</sup> In addition, wilderness has been interpreted as a sacred space. Just as Abraham, Jacob, and Israel sojourned in the wilderness, contemporary backpacker experiences in wilderness are consistent, giving rise to an interpretation of long-distance hiking in wilderness as spiritual journey.<sup>2</sup> The identifying phrase, pilgrim/hiker, recognizes the potential for long-distance wilderness hikers to experience their journey as a pilgrimage.

The Appalachian Trail is a footpath, announced by the invitational bronze plaque on Springer Mountain, Georgia: "A Footpath for Those who seek Fellowship with the Wilderness." Since 1948 the path has become a destination for long-distance hiking.<sup>3</sup> Those who set out aim to hike either from Georgia to Maine heading north or from Maine to Georgia heading south. They carry all their gear over the 2,200 miles along the ridges of the mountains. There are public shelters, maintained by volunteer clubs, about 10 miles apart, but some choose to pitch tents in the forest. Hikers go into towns along the way for resupply, ranging from 3 to 6 days in between such places. Some go out for weeks at a time and engage in "section" or short segment hiking. Even though long-distance trails through the wilderness place hikers beyond civilization, there are government agencies and volunteer organizations overseeing the sites, important social forces influencing long-distance hiking. The Appalachian Trail tracks through 14 states, additional government agencies that interacted with the trail during the pandemic. Ian Reader shows the importance of understanding

1 Bratton, Susan, *The Spirit of the Appalachian Trail: Community, Environment, and Belief on a Long-Distance Hiking Path*. Knoxville, Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2012. Fondren, Kristi M., *Walking on the Wild Side: Long-Distance Hiking on the Appalachian Trail*, New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2016. Redick, Kip, "Pilgrimage as Self-Discovery in an Ecological Community." *Religions* 14, no. 434 (March 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040434>. Redick, Kip, "Kenotic Walking, Wilderness Sojourning, and Hospitality." *Special Issue: Religious Experience and Ecology*; in the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*, 7, no. 2 (2021). Redick, Kip, "Interpreting Contemporary Pilgrimage as Spiritual Journey or Aesthetic Tourism Along the Appalachian Trail", *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 6, no. ii (2018), pp. 78-88. Redick, Kip, "Spiritual Rambling: Long Distance Wilderness Sojourning as Meaning-Making", *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 30, no. 2 (2016), pp. 41-51. Redick, Kip, *American Camino: Walking as Spiritual Practice on the Appalachian Trail*, Lanham, Maryland, Lexington Books, 2024.

2 Redick, Kip, "Wilderness as Axis Mundi: Spiritual Journeys on the Appalachian Trail", *Symbolic Landscapes* eds. Gary Backhaus and John Murungi, Springer (2009), pp. 65-90.

3 See Redick, Kip, *American Camino: Walking as Spiritual Practice...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53, for a brief overview of the rise of long-distance hiking on the Appalachian Trail, starting in 1948 with Earl Shaffer's hike and extending through Ed Garvey's 1970 hike. The popularity of the hike continues to increase each year.

the influence national agencies have on pilgrimage sites.<sup>4</sup> Simon Coleman and John Eade also point to a “much wider landscape of connection, communication, competition, fractal-like replication, networking, mobility, infrastructure and governance” in relation to political economy and pilgrimage.<sup>5</sup> In addition, with the continuing expansion of digital access, as cell phone signals reach further into the wilderness, long-distance hikers receive communication concerning contemporary events and spread the news to friends both by word of mouth and via their devices.<sup>6</sup> In this light, important questions arise: how did these social forces help shape the experiences of hikers during the pandemic? What happened out there in the wilderness as long-distance hikers began to hear about the pandemic via cell phone communication? More specifically, what were their experiences in the immediate wake of Covid-19?

This essay will chronicle pilgrim/hiker responses to the pandemic in the immediate wake of its spread and in relation to trail infrastructure, such as the Appalachian Trail Conservancy’s attempts to communicate to those on the trail or those who were planning a hike. I employ a phenomenological hermeneutic through rhetorical analysis involving a close reading of 37 blog entries and several informal interviews in the field. While interviewing hikers I kept fieldnotes. Merleau-Ponty characterizes phenomenological description writing, “To turn back to the things themselves is to return to that world prior to knowledge of which knowledge speaks,”<sup>7</sup> and “The real must be described and not constructed or constituted.”<sup>8</sup> This essay attempts to turn to hikers on the Appalachian Trail as the pandemic began to alter their experiences. Employing phenomenological description is a gesture of opening the researcher to the world of things, in this case the unfolding of the pandemic on the Appalachian Trail in the very wake of its unfolding. Phenomenological description also opens the researcher to the knowledge of hikers in the immediacy of their experience and prior to the same hikers’ knowledge constructed through conceptualization after time and space distances them from the unfolding event. In this way the phenomenological approach focuses on knowledge that exists prior to conceptual framing imposed by human beings after the experience.

To capture interactions that unfolded prior to filtering, that is, to understand them before thematization in after-thought or reflection by hikers, I will use a narrative

4 Reader, Ian, “Constructing Identities through the Shikoku Pilgrimage”, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 48, no. 2 (July 2021), pp. 308-311.

5 Coleman, Simon and Eade, John, eds. *Pilgrimage and Political Economy: Translating the Sacred*, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2018.

6 Kathleen Jenkins and Ken Chih-Yan Sun point to the influence of digital media on pilgrimage writing, “Pilgrims’ electronic devices and access to the Internet enable constant communication with the people they meet online, while walking, as well as friends, family and work colleagues back home” (527); Jenkins, Kathleen and Ken Chih-Yan Sun, “Digital Strategies for Building Spiritual Intimacy: Families on a ‘Wired’ Camino”, *Qualitative Sociology*, 42 (2019), pp. 567-585.

7 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, “What is Phenomenology?” *Cross Currents*, 6, no. 2 (1956), p. 60.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 61.

approach to communicate the data, letting the various communications unfold chronologically. Jenkins and Chih-Yan Sun point out that pilgrims curate their stories after their pilgrimage, posting these edited scripts on blogs months later.<sup>9</sup> They continue, “Memories can be partial, selective, and illusionary, and the ways in which stories are told might be highly conditioned by current life situations.”<sup>10</sup> In trying to understand pilgrim interactions with the pandemic as it unfolded, prior to them being curated, I will let their “voices” tell the story in the immediacy of their hike using blog posts and email documents composed in situ and concurrent rather than weeks or months later. The Covid pandemic washed over pilgrims in waves as they moved from the solitude of the trail to pockets of civilization where they were confronted by intense messaging about the invisible dangers. The very civilization they had hoped to escape seemed to demand that they return. This essay catalogues their confusion, resentment, and for most the unwilling abandonment of their journeys. In addition, I employ autoethnography, my own interaction with the situation in the very beginning of the outbreak on the Camino de Santiago and through embedded research conducted on the Appalachian Trail after some of the trail opened back up.

### ***Autoethnographic Reflection as the Pandemic Began along the Portuguese Camino***

My own pandemic adventure started while on pilgrimage. In February before anybody in my home state of Virginia had been infected, I flew to Portugal in order to conduct research on the Camino Portuguese. From February 28-March 10, 2020, I walked the coastal route of the Camino Portuguese, arriving in Porto on February 29 and entering Santiago on March 8.

My pilgrim companions and I—relationships that formed along the way—started our last day on the Camino in Padrón, 7 of us walking together. After our joyous arrival in front of the cathedral, we sprawled out in the plaza, very few other pilgrims present, and reflected on our journey (Fig. 1).

I then led four members of the group to the pilgrim office for our compostelas. We had heard almost nothing of the pandemic while on the Camino, only that a couple of cases had been reported in Porto a few days earlier. We didn’t even have a thought of pandemic. Arriving at the pilgrim office, it was clear that arrangements were being made to accommodate pilgrims in light of the spread of the virus.

Our first encounter with Covid-19 protocols met us there at the pilgrim office when a guard had us use hand sanitizer at the entrance. We were the only pilgrims present and went right into the office, where a barrier of yellow tape prevented us from getting close to the counter. The volunteers behind the desk handed us sheets so that we could fill out the information that they usually entered themselves in

9 Jenkins, Kathleen and Ken Chih-Yan Sun. “Digital Strategies for Building Spiritual Intimacy...”, *op. cit.*, p. 580.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 582.



Fig. 1: We arrive at the cathedral on March 8, 2020, with no evidence of Covid-19 protocols.

response to oral questions. We then received our compostelas and went to our hostel. As a person who had walked the Camino multiple times in previous years, these changes were an alteration of long-established protocols at the pilgrim office.

We flew out the next day, no issues crossing borders or getting through security at airports. There was a little buzz about the virus but very few people were wearing masks. My father, who had succumbed to a year's long struggle with Parkinson's

Disease, passed the day after we returned, March 11. A few days later, the full-care facility where my father lived closed to visitors. We were able to have the funeral just as Virginia shut down to prevent the spread of the virus. The Navy honor guard performed their last ceremony at the funeral.

My daughter had come for the funeral from Milwaukee, where she was a Ph.D. candidate at Marquette University. She has been my pilgrimage assistant and fellow professor/researcher on many trips to both the Camino and the Appalachian Trail (hereafter cited as the AT). Since she was prevented from going back to Wisconsin by the pandemic, we decided to plan a research trip on the AT, to discover how the virus had affected the hiking community. Between March and May, state and federal agencies issued directives that impacted the AT.

### *Covid-19 and Long-Distance Hikers on the AT*

As states along the AT went into lockdown, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (hereafter cited as ATC), the organization overseeing the National Scenic Trail, sent email messages to members. I received my first email, titled “Our Covid Plan,” on March 13. I had only returned from Spain three days earlier and the spread of the virus was beginning to ripple out, even reaching the wilderness of the Appalachian Mountains. The first paragraph of the email reads:

As more cases of COVID-19 (commonly referred to as “Coronavirus”) are diagnosed, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy is monitoring the situation closely to ensure we are taking the appropriate actions, not only for our staff, but also for the community of volunteers and hikers who actively use and work on the Trail. While the risk of contracting COVID-19 is still considered to be low, we are taking this situation very seriously and are incorporating the guidelines provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization into all we do to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.<sup>11</sup>

With this email from the ATC, I thought about those hikers, who like myself while on the Camino, had started their trek from Georgia to Maine before the tidal wave of Covid crashed ashore. The window for the start of a northbound thru-hike on the AT falls between February and April. By the end of February and through mid-April approximately 40 hikers start each day, showing the potential for a social journey on this wilderness trail, the social and wilderness environment intertwining.<sup>12</sup> So, by

<sup>11</sup> Appalachian Trail Conservancy, “Our COVID-19 Plan,” March 13, 2020. See the appendix for a full text of this email.

<sup>12</sup> The Trek. <https://thetrek.co/appalachian-trail/why-february-is-the-best-month-to-start-the-appalachian-trail/>

March 13, when the ATC sent this notification, there may have been as many as 500 hikers making their way north from the southern terminus at Springer Mountain, Georgia, many of whom would have been camping and walking in small groups.

The March 13<sup>th</sup> email, in addition to offering a caution, only issued notification of cancelling some events and giving guidelines for safe hiking. On March 16, the *Washington Post* published an article about thru-hikers heading north and complications that Covid-19 might bring.<sup>13</sup> On March 18, the ATC sent out another notice, updating their response, excerpted here:

- The ATC's visitor centers will be closed until further notice.
- The ATC's ridgerunners and caretakers have been recalled from the Trail for the next two weeks.
- Guidance has been issued to all section and thru-hikers to cancel or postpone their hikes.<sup>14</sup>

In the more than twenty years I have been researching long-distance hiking and pilgrimage, cell phone reception has steadily increased.<sup>15</sup> From 2000 up through 2010 there was very little cell phone service for hikers while they were immersed in the wilderness. I thru-hiked the AT in 2011: walking the entire trail from terminus to terminus in a single year. At that time there was some service along the route, depending on one's cell phone provider. If the pandemic had happened in the early 2000s, long-distance hikers would have been mostly ignorant of the rapid spread of the virus until they descended the mountains for resupply in one of the many trail towns (Fig. 2).<sup>16</sup>

A hiker whose trail name is Two-Cans—long-distance hikers often receive a new name, known as a “trail name” that is unique to the journey—evidences the tenuous phone service and communication writing, “People back home have been giving me small bits of COVID-19 mania going on, but because I haven’t had very consistent mobile service I am having a hard time piecing it all together. I’m trying to head into town tomorrow, and I don’t really know what to expect at this point.”<sup>17</sup> In 2020 a great number of long-distance hikers employed smart phones for communication

13 Antonia Noori Farzan, “Hikers are starting their annual trip north on the Appalachian Trail. Coronavirus could make it complicated,” *The Washington Post*, March 16, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/03/16/appalachian-trail-coronavirus-backpacking/>

14 Appalachian Trail Conservancy, An Update on COVID-19 and the A.T., March 18, 2020. See the appendix for a full text of this email.

15 For a recent study on cell phone use in relation to the Appalachian Trail see Rogers, Andrew Glenn, and Yu-Fai Leung, “‘More Helpful than Hurtful?’ Information, Technology, and Uncertainty in Outdoor Recreation”, *Leisure Sciences*, January 3 (2021), pp. 1-19; and Rogers, Andrew Glenn, and Yu-Fai Leung, “‘Smarter Long-Distance Hike: How Emerging Technologies Shape Information Use and Spatial Decisions on the Appalachian Trail”, *International Journal of Wilderness*, vol. 26, no. 2 (August 2020), pp. 88-103.

16 “Recently, hikers have begun to supplement or replace paper with smartphone-based guides” (Rogers, Andrew Glenn, and Yu-Fai Leung, “‘More Helpful than Hurtful?’ Information, Technology..., *op. cit.*, p. 2). Rogers and Leung also point out that researcher find smartphone usage increasing amongst recreationists (3).

17 Armenio, Dominic, *Two-Cans's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627080>



Fig. 2: Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, a trail town near the midway point.

and navigation. As evidenced from digital journaling sites containing hiker blogs, the March 13th and following emails sent by the ATC were received and talked about within days of transmission.

A hiker whose trail name is G also mentions cell service in relation to the pandemic writing:

There was great cell coverage. One girl saw a letter from the ATC (Appalachian Trail Conservancy - the keepers of all things AT) recommending that all thru and section hikers should discontinue their hikes due to risks associated with Coronavirus (it even comes up as a known word on my phone in Apple's Word equivalent). Not an edict to stop but pretty close coming from the ATC. We have already seen and heard about closures and resource limitations along the trail. With the towns getting smaller or nonexistent for the next 150+ miles, lack of resupply, motels and hostels closing, it makes little sense to continue my hike. I may make it to these small towns and get stuck as they don't have Uber and other things we take for granted. Even private shuttlers are stopping driving.<sup>18</sup>

A hiker whose trail name is Carolyn writes:

We are all a little stressed out here after receiving notice from the ATC strongly advising us to leave the trail in response to COVID-19. No one in my Tramily [trail family] including myself, want to leave the trail. We are all happy and healthy out here. One might think being

18 Gary Sanderson, "Day 8 – Down And Up And Down Again" *G's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog). *Trail Journals*. March 17, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627084>

out here in nature would be the best possible place to be. However, if we choose to stay on trail, we will be faced with limited support and supplies. Already, some of the hostels have temporarily shut down, the NOC is closed and so is the ATC Conservancy in Harpers Ferry. The other concern is being able to resupply. We are hearing essentials like fuel for our stoves, hand sanitizers, toilet paper and certain foods are becoming scarce. We will be in town tomorrow and will regroup and reassess. For today, I'm on trail.<sup>19</sup>

Two days later Carolyn continues to express mounting anxiety writing:

I'm feeling stressed due to all the logistics we are faced with now because of the virus. Overwhelmed quite frankly. Thru-hiking itself is hard, now we have the added layer of planning days ahead. It's a minor thing to be worried about with all that's going on in the world and I recognize how lucky I am even to be out here. Nevertheless, I couldn't control the tears today.<sup>20</sup>

The next day she notes that the group has split, some continuing the journey and others going home, "I was sad to leave the rest of my Tramily behind, but couldn't stay in town any longer with all the pandemonium."<sup>21</sup> Clearly Carolyn and her "tramily" were influenced by the emails that came to their cell phones from the ATC. Her blog entry evidences both the environmental dynamics of hiking in the wilderness as well as the social interaction amongst hikers whose strong bonds form quasi families.

G echoes the concern over resupply writing, "It seems the C word is now affecting the trail and resorts and resupply options are closing. This could very negatively affect me and all the hikers. Without resupply options the hike will be over. I will deal with this in 2 days when I get to Franklin."<sup>22</sup> A hiker with the trail name Ausy also expresses concern over resupply and social dynamics. Ausy decides to call an end to the hike:

Although I am not overly concerned with the possibility of my contracting the virus or my ability to cope with it on the trail I have become increasingly concerned with the ability to resupply, closing of hostels, ability to hitch hike to and status of establishments in trail

19 Carolyn, "Day 13." *Carolyn's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627218>

20 Carolyn, "Day 15." *Carolyn's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627220>

21 Carolyn, "Day 16." *Carolyn's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627222>

22 Gary Sanderson, "Day 7 – And Then There Were 13" *G's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 16, 2020. <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627023>

towns, and the bigger societal aspect of contributing to the potential of knowingly or unknowingly spreading the virus through interaction along the trail, hostels and towns. I will be heeding the ATC call to postpone my hike. That means I will not be living the dream this year. I can't selfishly think only of myself, and I hope others make the difficult right choice.<sup>23</sup>

Another hiker whose trail name is Tree also thinks about the challenges, especially the environment in the remote sections of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park:

Please know that due to the CV, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy is advocating all hikers get off of the trail. I shall make my decision soon... My concern is that all rangers and ridge runners have been pulled from the park which is a safety line I am reluctant to cross given the elevations and potentially severe weather conditions up there. Trail towns are closing down with limited services and dwindling supplies.<sup>24</sup>

Two-Cans, after receiving information about the ATC communication writes, "The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) is now suggesting that all hikers postpone or cancel their thru hikes due to precautions over spreading COVID-19." Many blog entries in mid-March mention this same information evidencing hikers reflecting on the ATC notification. Two-Cans continues, "They aren't forcing anyone off of the trail, but there is a real decision to be made here. I think it still makes sense for me to continue to hike. There is no information on how hiking will pose any greater a danger than attempting to return home."<sup>25</sup> G also references social media, specifically FaceBook:

I read a lot of the FB posts from folks that are for or against leaving the trail. You all need to simmer down. It is a hard decision and a personal one. I know first hand as I just thought through this problem. I understand that people have planned for years, saved up funds, put life on hold, etc. to make this happen. There are others that feel the risks are too big for themselves and the small town communities that may get the infection from hikers and make matters worse. You're both right and you're both wrong. Just agree to disagree and move on while also thinking about the repercussions your decisions will have. Ultimately,

23 Ausman, David, "Cancelled for this year", *Ausy's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 19, 2020. <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/24104>

24 Goodspeed, Susan, "Happy Trails – Part A", *Tree's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog). *Trail Journals*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627127>

25 Armenio, Dominic, *Two-Can's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627445>

I hope, you will make the best decision for you and those around you.

I will monitor the situation and hope to get back on trail this year.<sup>26</sup>

A hiker whose trail name is Rodof mentions the effects happening a little further north where the AT enters Hot Springs, North Carolina. On March 19, he writes, "I knew that lodging was limited due to several Corona virus driven closures."<sup>27</sup> The next day he arrived in Hot Spring and writes:

There is one hostel open, run by Blue Ridge Hiking Company. The owner, a young lady named Lindsay, explained that although the ATC cannot force anyone to close, the owners of the other hostels in town are well over 60. She believes their motivation for closing was due to their risk of exposure from hikers, given they are part of the higher risk demographic.<sup>28</sup>

He continues, noting that though others are leaving the trail, he is still hopeful, "It appears that many hikers are dropping off the trail. Our numbers are dwindling. I remain optimistic that those of us who want to keep hiking can make it work."<sup>29</sup> The next day Rodof posts a reasoned reflection, convincing himself the stay the course:

As I mentioned yesterday, more and more hikers are bailing due to the coronavirus. I just do not see the logic. Our risk of being infected or infecting someone else has to be much lower than the general population. I'm not saying there is zero risk, nor that we should not be taking precautions. I even understand why hostels may shut down, since they are congregation points. But it does not make sense to me... My intention is to continue, so long as I can get the necessary services I need, such as resupply. Onward and upward!<sup>30</sup>

Though Rodof decides to stay on the AT, others, like Ausy, resolve to go home. A hiker whose trail name is Metatron writes, "I'm ending my hike, at least for now. The ATC is asking all hikers to leave the trail. National parks, other services, and many facilities are closed northbound."<sup>31</sup> Two hikers with the trail names Swamp Irish and Sugar Gal write almost the same message.<sup>32</sup>

26 Sanderson, Gary, "Home But Not So Sweet", *G's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627125>

27 Michael V., "Day 25" *Rodof's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627199>

28 Michael V., "Into Hot Springs", *Rodof's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627201>

29 Michael V., "Into Hot Springs"

30 Michael V., "Down Day #3", *Rodof's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627412>

31 Pennepacker, Jesse, "Cold and Rainy Hot Springs to the Nolichucky River", *Metatron's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627259>

32 Brady and Fran Tripp, "Screeching Halt", *Swamp Irish and Sugar Gal's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627115>

Some whose intension was to thru-hike in 2020 and had not yet started were also receiving these notifications from the ATC. On March 17, A hiker whose trail name is Bugeater writes:

My, had the world changed in the six days I was gone. I could not hardly believe what was going on with the Covid-19 virus! Shortly after arriving home I received a post (via email) from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) (they oversee the entire length of the trail from Georgia to Maine) concerning the Covid-19 virus. The ATC recommended that for people who had not started their hike to wait until 2021 and for those out hiking to come off the trail. WOW. I could not fathom getting back on the trail and leaving my wife (and family) to face this national (and world) crisis on their own. I need to be home to be responsible and to lead my family through these trying times. I am HUGELY disappointed but am making the absolute correct decision.<sup>33</sup>

Two hikers with the trail names Further and Yonder also decide to postpone their hike after reading the ATC emails, "We have decided to heed the ATC's warnings and stay off trail until further notice. Our original start date of April 28<sup>th</sup> is not going to happen."<sup>34</sup>

On March 23 the ATC again issued an updated notice, excerpted here:

**In these unprecedented times, I am making an unprecedented request: please stay away from the Appalachian Trail (A.T.). Whether your hike is for a couple of hours or a couple of days, staying away from the Trail minimizes the spread or contraction of COVID-19.**

Hiking the A.T. has become, in other words, the opposite of social distancing.

Many day hikers see the outdoors as an escape from the stresses of these difficult times. But with crowding from day hikers reaching unmanageable levels and the lack of any staff or volunteers to manage this traffic, it is necessary that all hikers avoid accessing the Trail.

**The ATC does not want to do too little, too late. We cannot close the Trail. We cannot physically bar access to trailheads or connecting trails. We can and do, however, urge everyone to please stay away from the Appalachian Trail until further notice.**

33 Reandeau, Mike, "Thru Day 6", *Bugeater's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627141>

34 Steve and Deb Galloway, *Further & Yonder's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627576>

**There is an unfortunate truth about this virus: unless everyone is safe, no one is safe. So, take a walk around the block. Spend time with your loved ones. And, please, stay home.<sup>35</sup>**

The day after this email was sent Carolyn writes:

I'm still trying to process all my feelings. The reality of remaining on trail was just not possible. Despite the enormous hurt in my heart, my head knows it was the right and responsible thing to do. With that said, I'm still having a difficult time believing this dream I've put so much time and energy into preparing for has come to such an abrupt ending. The Covid-19 crisis has currently changed the world. Every single person has been affected by this pandemic. My thoughts go to all of the health care workers putting their lives in danger. I think of all the small business that were forced to close, whose livelihood depends on customers and clients.

Carolyn goes on, in this same entry, to outline in some detail, the hiker community reaction to the quickly unfolding situation:

When my trail family and I first learned that the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) put out a request strongly urging all hikers to get off trail, we didn't quite understand; wasn't being outside, removed from society, breathing fresh air exactly where we should be? We quickly discovered that although all of that is true, there was so much more to consider. I will admit, for the first few days, the biggest concern was the availability of resupplies and support on trail. Slowly, we started getting word that stores, restaurants, hostels and shuttles were beginning to close. Support that hikers rely on was becoming limited and yet, I still wanted to push on, not wanting, or ready, to believe that my thru-hike could realistically be over. Word continued to come in with more and more closures and cancellations. The NOC closed, the ATC Headquarters closed, Fontana Damn Lodge closed. At first, they closed the Smokey Mt National Park to everything but foot traffic but within days, it was shut down to that also, leaving no way to hike that section of the trail. Maryland and New Jersey closed all shelters and privies on the AT indefinitely. Trail Days in Damascus was cancelled and little by little any hope of staying on trail began to diminish. With all of that, there was even more to consider. The ATC was asking us to comply with their request to leave the trail.<sup>36</sup>

35 Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Please Stay off the trail, March 23, 2020. See the appendix for a full text of this email.

36 Carolyn, "Home", *Carolyn's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627353>

Tree also weighs in on the situation on March 23, noting further closings, “we had heard the county was holding a meeting this very night to decide if the General Store at the Nantahala Outdoor Center should remain open in light of the virus threat. Tonight might be their last and I had a package to pick up!”<sup>37</sup> Rodof describes the trail in the wake of many hikers going home writing, “I was alone at the shelter last night. It looks like I will be alone again tonight. This is unheard of for this time of year. As a matter of fact, prior to this hike I do not recall ever being at a shelter site without other hikers.”<sup>38</sup> Two-Cans exemplifies those who begin to react negatively to the ATC’s emails writing, “It’s pretty ironic to me that people who have homes very nearby feel like it’s cool to just go out for a hike, when it feels like the entire hiking community has it out for we thru-hikers who are pressing on despite the precautions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.”<sup>39</sup>

Again, on March 31 another notice was issued, excerpted here:

**While we continue to advise everyone to stay away from the Trail, we want to help ensure the A.T. continues to provide the inspiration, solace, and calm it’s always provided.**

**Trail closures continue to expand**

**Key Trail events and volunteer opportunities have been cancelled or postponed.**

**For now, our guidance is still in effect. The ATC urges everyone — visitors, volunteers and Trailside community residents alike — to stay off the A.T. to keep both the Trail and its broader community safe and healthy.**

Two-Cans writes about town closures after this ATC warning, “Due to COVID-19 Stay At Home orders, there really wasn’t anything going on in town.”<sup>40</sup> A few days later Two-Cans considers the pros and cons of staying on the AT:

This evening I faced a very big decision. I have been considering getting off the trail for a few weeks, to try to wait out the pandemic. The many shutdowns and statewide bans are becoming increasingly worrisome. I don’t know how difficult it will be too [sic] make progress. I truly believe I am at a much lower risk of catching the virus by continuing to hike, and it is pretty easy to keep distance away from people out here. So I have decided to press on, but I am not ruling out a hiatus at some point. It may just come to that.<sup>41</sup>

37 Goodspeed, Susan, “Farewell For Now”, *Tree’s 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627767>

38 Michael V., “Day 29”, *Rodof’s 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627337>

39 Armenio, Dominic, *Two-Can’s 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627634>

40 Armenio, Dominic, *Two-Can’s 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627637>

41 Armenio, Dominic, *Two-Can’s 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627639>

Two-Cans then continues the reflection in light of an awareness of digital media:

The internet hiking community has convinced itself that hikers who continue during this time will cause harm to small trail towns by spreading the virus to them. I'm not convinced that they have any ground to stand on, because in my estimation the virus is being spread on highways and airplanes, at least in most part. Hikers move at about 2-3 mph, even if some people on trail are carrying the virus, it must be spreading more quickly than they can walk it from town to town. Furthermore, if one is at lower risk of CATCHING the virus, by necessity they are at even lower risk of SPREADING the virus. These are just my thoughts on the matter, I could be completely mistaken, but if I believed that I was a potential harm to others, I would stop.<sup>42</sup>

Rodof writes another reflection on March 31, considering the national parks in light of the situation:

The next month will be challenging. As the lockdown screws tighten, goods and services are becoming less available along the way. Smokies and Shenandoah are closed. State parks are closing. In several cases I feel like I just got through on the trail before the door shut behind me. My hope is that by May 1, many of the restrictions will be lifted. I have over 400 miles until I get to Shenandoah National Park. I am thinking the situation will be manageable between here and there. As best as I can tell, I am not violating any statute. So, I will keep on keeping on!<sup>43</sup>

A couple of days later Rodof notes the ATC's recommendation to the Department of the Interior, "I am saddened and disturbed to see the news that the ATC is recommending trail closure to the Department of the Interior. We shall see how this develops."<sup>44</sup> A week later Rodof notes "that the shuttle into Marion, Virginia is still running."<sup>45</sup> Virginia's stay at home order began on March 30, so this shuttle was operating against state regulations.<sup>46</sup> Clearly the larger community supporting the AT did not all agree on the policies proposed by both the ATC and the individual

42 Armenio, Dominic, *Two-Can's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog).

43 Michael V., "Double zero", *Rodof's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627455>. Shenandoah closing: <https://www.whsv.com/content/news/Shenandoah-National-Park-closing-additional-facilities-due-to-covid-19-569130611.html>. Accessed 12/14/22

44 Michael V., "Day 39", *Rodof's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627510>

45 Michael V., "Day 46", *Rodof's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627572>

46 Virginia data for Covid: <https://www.wtvr.com/news/local-news/a-timeline-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-virginia>. Accessed 12/14/22



Fig. 3: Woods Hole hostel in central Virginia.

states through which the trail passes. Another week later Rodof mentions staying at a hostel, Woods Hole, in Virginia (Fig. 3).<sup>47</sup>

### *The AT Starts Reopening*

States along the southern portion of the AT issued stay at home orders in late March.<sup>48</sup> My daughter and I drove up to the Roan Highland area of the AT after Tennessee opened.<sup>49</sup> On May 13 we arrived at Mountain Harbor, a hostel, bed and

47 Michael V., "Day 54", *Rodof's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/627658>

48 Georgia issued a "shelter in place" order on March 23; North Carolina issued a stay-at-home order on March 30, as did Virginia. Tennessee closed on March 20. North Carolina data for Covid: <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/news/press-releases/2020/03/27/governor-cooper-announces-statewide-stay-home-order-until-april-29>. Accessed 12/14/22. Georgia data for Covid: <https://acluga.org/timeline-of-georgia-government-actions-regarding-covid-19/#:~:text=The%20Governor%20closed%20all%20public,2020%20to%20March%2031%2C%202020>. Accessed 12/14/15. Virginia data for Covid: <https://www.wtvr.com/news/local-news/a-timeline-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-virginia>. Accessed 12/14/22. Tennessee data for Covid: <https://www.tn.gov/governor/covid-19/covid19timeline.html#:~:text=Gov.%20Lee%20urged%20all%20school,remain%20closed%20through%20March%2031>. Accessed 12/14/15.

49 Tennessee opened on April 30. Tennessee data for Covid: <https://www.tn.gov/governor/covid-19/covid19timeline.html#:~:text=Gov.%20Lee%20urged%20all%20school,remain%20closed%20through%20March%2031>. Accessed 12/14/15.

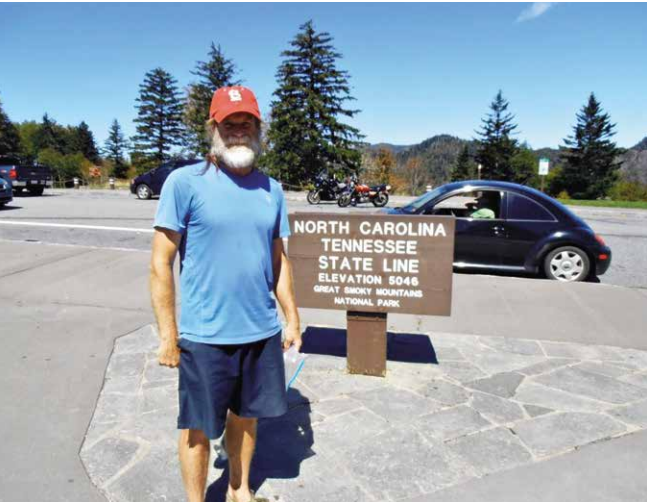


Fig. 4: Newfound Gap, Smoky Mountain National Park, the author pictured with the sign showing the border of North Carolina and Tennessee.



Fig. 5: View looking south from Beauty Spot.

breakfast in Roan Mountain, Tennessee. The hostel is a few hundred meters down highway 19 East from where the AT crosses the road, and another few hundred meters from the North Carolina state line. The proprietors at Mountain Harbor indicated that both the ATC's issued warnings and North Carolina's law enforcement had reduced the number of hikers significantly. After leaving Georgia, the trail leads hikers through North Carolina. In the Smoky Mountain National Park, the trail tracks the state line between North Carolina and Tennessee (Fig. 4).

After the Smokies, the trail crosses into each of these states multiple times. The proprietors of Mountain Harbor reported that North Carolina law enforcement had been removing hikers from the trail and had been blocking trail entrances. Mountain Harbor disagreed with both the ATC and state officials' policies and practices. The proprietor's opinion, similar to some of the hiker blogs, was that the trail was safer for hikers than if they were to go home.

We were shuttled south about 50 miles to a place known as Beauty Spot on a ridge top overlooking Erwin, Tennessee. We started hiking at Indian Grave Gap and walked a few miles up to Beauty Spot, an unwooded area with views in every direction (Fig. 5).

Cars were at a parking near the clearing and lookout, and we saw a few female day hikers enjoying the scenery. We made camp just below the bald in the shelter of the trees and next to a spring.

On May 14 I woke before sunrise and went back up to the bald. The female day hikers had slept in their vehicles and walked up to the summit to view the sunrise, coffee in hand. After returning to our camp, I made a fire, and we ate breakfast (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Camp near Beauty Spot at sunrise.



Fig. 7: Our camp in the old apple orchard at sunset.

Two section hikers, heading north, came to our camp and asked for any extra bear line for hanging food. I had some line and gave them enough to hang their food to keep it away from bears. They were out on the trail for several days and had just started.

We left camp in the late morning and hiked north, climbing Unaka Mountain, 5180 feet. At lunch we stopped at Cherry Gap Shelter, which was right on the trail. Just as we were about to leave, a man and woman hiked up, heading north. They were a retired couple. The man had been a general in the Air Force, serving for 39 years. A rain shower began, and the couple headed on down the trail while we prepared our gear for a walk in the rain.

A few miles down the trail we ran into the retired couple. Their trail names were Slider, the man, and Granger, the woman. We discovered they were thru-hikers, the first we had seen. After embarking on their journey from Springer Mountain, Georgia, they had been forced to get off the trail in Hot Springs, North Carolina due to the state closing the trail. Hot Springs is 270 miles north of Springer Mountain, the southern terminus of the trail. They had returned to the trail a few days before we met them, entering where the trail crosses the state line from North Carolina into Tennessee near Erwin. The four of us set up a camp for the evening in an old apple orchard (Fig. 7).

We made a fire and chatted. Slider and Granger told us that they had sold their house in Arlington, Virginia after retiring. They had been at the Pentagon at the time and were going to fulfill their dream of thru-hiking the AT. After being removed from the trail they had to move in with their daughter, who also lived in Arlington. From their perspective, they were forced to leave the relative safety of the



Fig. 8: Camp in the old apple orchard before heading north.

wilderness and go back to a virus hot spot in Northern Virginia. After a little over a month of this, and after Tennessee opened back up, they decided to get back to the AT, which was much safer than living in Arlington.

In the morning Slider and Granger left camp before we did as they were going to walk more miles than we were (Fig. 8).

We did not see anyone else until after lunch. We climbed up Little Rock Knob, 4,918 feet, and there at an overlooking outcrop sat a female hiker. She was from Maryland and was a student studying nursing at Towson University. She had started her hike in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, back in February. Her plan was to walk south to Springer Mountain, then return to Harpers Ferry and walk north to Katahdin, Maine. She made it through Shenandoah National Park just before it closed due to the pandemic. She heard that Virginia was closing all the trail but did not want to stop her hike. So, she remained on trail and proceeded in stealth. She walked from Shenandoah to Damascus, 386 miles, avoiding the authorities so she could continue her hike. The Tennessee state line is just 3 miles south of Damascus and 90 miles further south from where we met her on Little Rock Knob. Clearly, the wilderness environment helped conceal this hiker, allowing her to remain on trail even though it was officially closed in Virginia.

We then climbed up to Ash Gap, over 5000 feet, and made camp in the fir forest (Fig. 9).

We were alone until evening when a south bound section hiker arrived and set up camp near us. The next morning, after lingering in camp after breakfast, we climbed

up to Roan High Knob, at 6285 feet, the highest shelter on the AT. We started seeing day hikers as we were only 2 miles from the parking at Carvers Gap. It was Saturday, May 16, and a very sunny day, attracting large numbers of scenic tourists.

We descended to Carvers Gap, which is situated on the state line between North Carolina and Tennessee (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9: Camp in Ash Gap at sunrise.



Fig. 10: Carver Gap, border of North Carolina and Tennessee in the Roan Highlands.



Fig. 11: Parking area in Carvers Gap seen from a ridge above. The left side of the parking area is in North Carolina.



Fig. 12: Concrete gun bunker near the frontier of France and Spain along the Camino de Santiago.

Most of the parking is in Tennessee, but there are some spaces on the North Carolina side. We saw that yellow tape was stretched along a fence next to the North Carolina side of the parking. There were signs prohibiting parking in this area. People were ignoring the signs as the parking area was full. It seemed strange that part of a parking area would be closed, and people warned not to hike in this space between states. Hikers from Tennessee had no restrictions, unless they had to park in North Carolina (Fig. 11).

We did see license plates from both Tennessee and North Carolina. Here on this mountain top is a wilderness trail that in normal circumstances does not evidence rules and regulations, but the pandemic makes the frontier between state borders a visible presence. I am reminded of the frontier between France and Spain on the Route Napoleon. There are still concrete gun emplacements evident from less peaceful times (Fig. 12).

High up on the mountaintops above the Fountain of Roland, I have seen earthworks evidencing iron age fortresses (Fig. 13).

Pandemics and war bring out these lines of conflict.

As my daughter and I walked north over the balds in the Roan Highlands we saw many day hikers (Fig. 14).

We then walked further north past the range a day hiker might travel and descended to the Stan Murray Shelter to take a break (Fig. 15).

There we came across a half a dozen section hikers who had started their hike that day. We walked another 5 miles to Bradley Gap and made camp. There was another hiker in the gap, but we did not get to talk with this person.



Fig. 13: Remains of an Iron Age fortress on a mountain top above the Fountain of Roland. This site cannot be seen by pilgrims unless they climb the mountain just across the border into Spain.

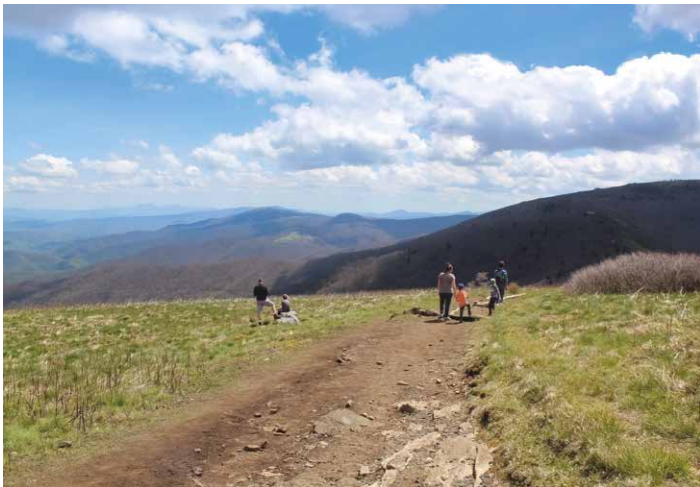


Fig. 14: Day hikers along the balds in the Roan Highlands.

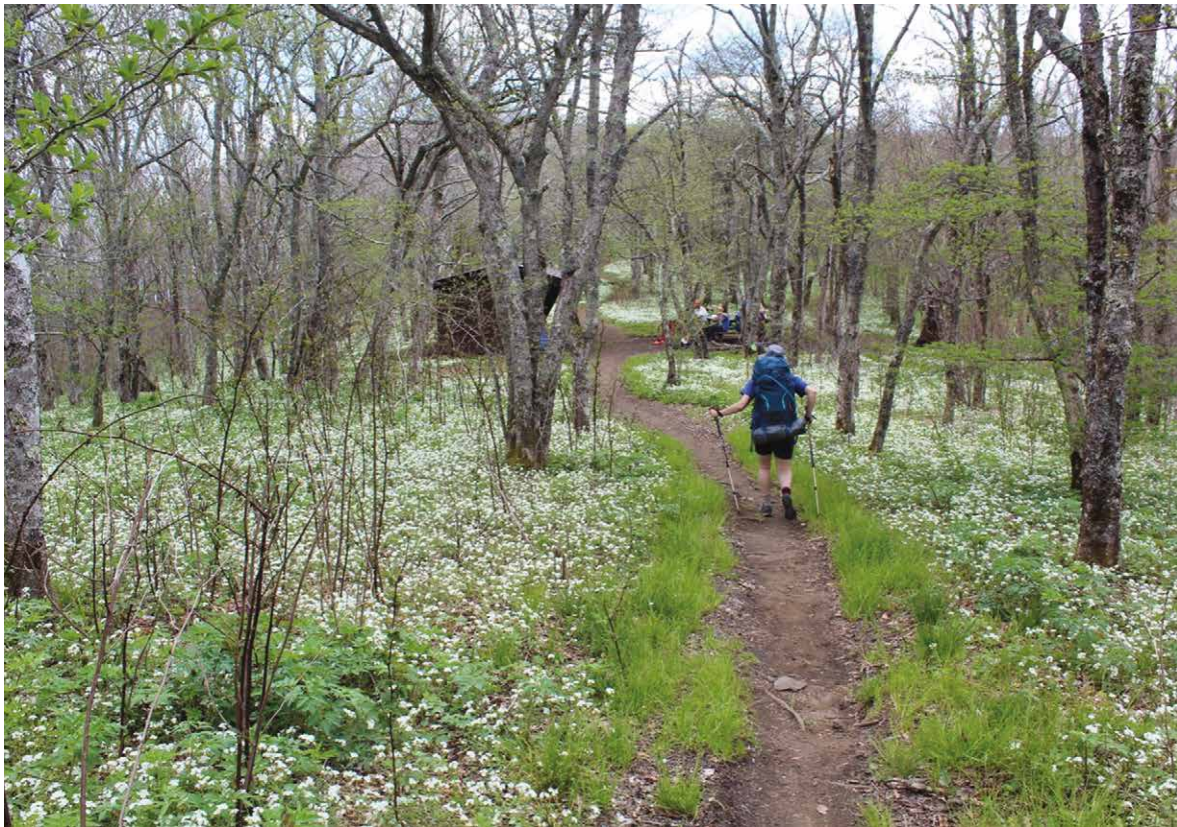


Fig. 15: Walking toward the Stan Murray Shelter with hikers having lunch.



Fig. 16: Camp with tents on Hump Mountain.

In the morning we walked over Hump Mountain, past two camp sites, each with a tent (Fig. 16).

We then descended to Doll Flats where we came across a few more section hikers (Fig. 17).

From Doll Flats to Highway 19 East is 3 miles and we encountered several day hikers. We interviewed a couple who were from New Jersey. They had retreated to the south because of the virus. They rented a cabin just a few miles from the AT and were working via internet from the cabin. They were taking advantage of the location and hiking every day. We then exited the trail at Mountain Harbor. There were many people at the hostel getting ready to start a section hike.

### *Virginia after the AT Reopened*

In late June I returned to the AT at Damascus, Virginia. The governor had partially opened the state. I interviewed an outfitter in Damascus who had strong opinions about how both the State of Virginia and the ATC had handled the virus situation. He referred to the ATC as a bunch of bullies. His opinion was that people were safer on the trail than they would be in a city. In the area around Damascus, I encountered dozens of section hikers but no thru-hikers.

Several of the bloggers already quoted in this essay also returned to the trail in June. Carolyn writes, "After leaving the trail on day 17 due to Covid-19 and nearly three

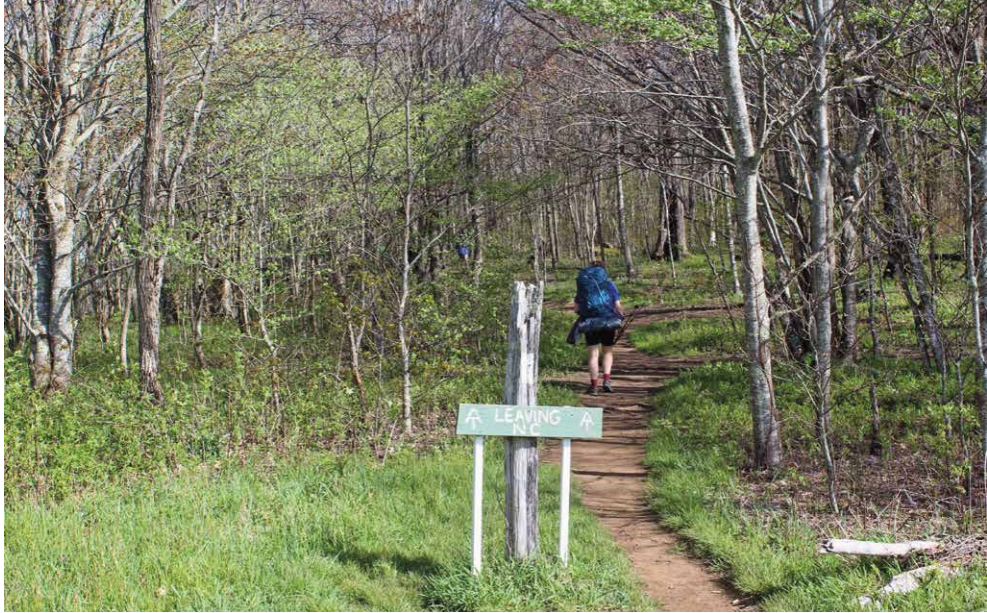


Fig. 17: Doll Flats, border of North Carolina and Tennessee.

months under a stay at home order, today I have returned to the trail.”<sup>50</sup> Though Further and Yonder had decided not to hike this year, they changed their mind in June.<sup>51</sup> Later in June they note the lack of maintenance on the trail, “As a result of this whole COVID situation parts of the trail have gotten really overgrown. Today we walked a few miles through grassy trails where we often could not see the ground.”<sup>52</sup> Carolyn also mentions other facilities that had not returned to normal, “Unfortunately laundry facilities were not open due to Covid-19 restitutions [sic] so we washed our clothes in the bathroom sink and hung them on the porch rail to dry.”<sup>53</sup> Carolyn also writes about the overall change of the journey:

There is a very different vibe on the trail now. It’s quite [sic]. We have been back on trail 4 days now and have seen very few people. There were times in March where 20 or 30 hikes [sic] would be staying at the same shelter. Now the feeling is of more solitude. I wouldn’t want to be out here now without Insight, Carebear and Turtle. I would be very lonely.<sup>54</sup>

50 Carolyn, “Appalachian Trail Take 2.” *Carolyn’s 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/628641>

51 Steve and Deb Galloway, *Further & Yonder’s 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/628561>

52 Steve and Deb Galloway, *Further & Yonder’s 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/628788>

53 Carolyn, “Day 20.” *Carolyn’s 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/628645>

54 Carolyn, “Day 21.” *Carolyn’s 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/628646>

Others opted to return to the trail later in the year or push their hike to the next year. Bugeater writes, "Hello! After Covid did in my thru-hike in March I am back on the trail, yay!"<sup>55</sup> Back in the Saddle writes:

Waaaaay back in March of 2020, my daughter and I were super excited to start our AT thru hike with a departure date of April 11. COVID had other plans and rather than get stuck out on the trail in the early and crazy days of the pandemic, we chose to push it off another year and start in 2021. While COVID is still a major issue (and the ATC is still not recognizing thru-hikers in 2021... not that we care), it looks to be smoother sailing, albeit with a much larger class of 2021 (if the trail registrations are to be believed).<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

We have seen several contrasting approaches to hiking and supporting hikers in the wake of the early spread of Covid 19. Some ended their hike and did not return. Some businesses and hostels along the way shut down. Other hikers returned to the trail after states such as Tennessee reopened. Some businesses and hostels remained open throughout the pandemic. Some hikers remained on the trail and walked in stealth, completing the journey in its entirety. Finally, there were hikers who engaged in section and day hiking. In addition, divergent points of view concerning what constitutes an appropriate response to engaging the AT during the pandemic were given. The greatest difference between the way pilgrims interact on the Camino and hikers on the AT is in the settings of dense culture in Spain versus wilderness along the Appalachian Mountains. In Spain pilgrims must use albergues, hostals, pensions, and hotels. Pilgrims also congregate in cafes and restaurants, as well as purchasing some supplies in supermarkets. On the AT hikers may choose to wild camp or stay in the rustic shelters. Hikers come into villages and towns for resupply about every 4 to 6 days. From the perspective of the ATC, hundreds of long-distance hikers and thousands of section hikers use the AT on any given day and over an extension of 2000 miles. These congregate at shelters, popular viewpoints, and trail-head parking. The ATC views the trail in some ways similar to the way administrators of the Camino might view the pilgrimage in Spain. From the perspective of hostel owners and other types of trail infrastructure, the viewpoint is more local, and each entity feels some autonomy in dealing with the pandemic in a responsible way. From the perspective of the individual hiker, some think

55 Reandeau, Mike, "Back onto the Trail!" *Bugeater's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog), *Trail Journals*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/630668>

56 Long, Brian, "Back in the Saddle." *Chabacco's 2020 Appalachian Trail Journal* (blog). *Trail Journals*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.trailjournals.com/journal/entry/632203>

there is no need to congregate or to break social distancing protocols. Some hikers worry about support such as resupply and safety. While other hikers are influenced by digital messaging from both the ATC and fellow hikers. Phone cell service in the wilderness clearly influences long-distance hiker knowledge of ATC emails and social media information. As evidenced from hiker blogs, the first response to the pandemic was in most cases a reluctance to leave the trail. As emails and social media information became more widespread, some hikers left the trail and others decided to remain. In most cases, whether ending the hike or continuing, hikers expressed the stress felt as the virus spread. Those who continued their hike thought the trail was the best place to be in a pandemic. Others felt the deep sorrow of ending a dream. Finally, some who did leave the trail returned when states opened back up.

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## *Appendix*

Full text of emails.

Appalachian Trail Conservancy

Our COVID-19 Plan

March 13, 2020

Dear Kip,

As more cases of COVID-19 (commonly referred to as "Coronavirus") are diagnosed, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy is monitoring the situation closely to ensure we are taking the appropriate actions, not only for our staff, but also for the community of volunteers and hikers who actively use and work on the Trail. While the risk of contracting COVID-19 is still considered to be low, we are taking this situation very seriously and are incorporating the guidelines provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization into all we do to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

In order to reduce the risk of contracting or spreading this highly contagious virus to others, ATC staff members and volunteers will postpone all non-essential travel and

conduct meetings and conferences digitally whenever possible. Any in-person meetings or work trips – including volunteer Trail maintenance projects – will be limited to no more than twelve people in one location to reduce the risk of infection. Any staff member or volunteer who displays the symptoms of COVID-19 infection will be asked to stay home until cleared to return to work by a medical professional. We are also encouraging staff members and volunteers to work from home whenever possible. While we do not anticipate this will significantly reduce our ability to quickly respond to emails, phone calls, membership requests, donor acknowledgements and other important communications, we appreciate everyone's understanding and patience as we transition to this new structure. Beginning today, **the ATC Visitor Center in Harpers Ferry will be closed until at least March 20** as we assess the best methods to ensure all visitors, staff members and volunteers are kept as safe and healthy as possible. We will reassess this closure next week to determine if more time will be needed before the Visitor Center reopens.

Due to the risks inherent with large gatherings, **the 2020 Flip Flop Festival has also been canceled**. We still welcome any aspiring flip flop thru-hikers to begin or end their hikes at ATC headquarters. Should the Visitor Center still be closed, we ask that hikers take a selfie in front of the ATC sign and send them along with their name and starting date to [info@appalachiantrail.org](mailto:info@appalachiantrail.org). We will then add your photo to our official album of 2020 hikers.

For Appalachian Trail hikers, distancing yourself from others and maintaining good hygiene is the best defense for reducing your chances of contracting any illness:

- **Wash your hands** frequently with biodegradable soap at least 200 feet from water sources. When soap is not available, use hand sanitizer that contains 60-95% alcohol.
- **Avoid sharing food**. Do not eat out of the same food bag, share utensils or drink from other hikers' water bottles.
- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth**.
- **Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing**. Use the crook of your arm (inner elbow) or use a tissue and dispose of it using Leave No Trace Principles.
- **Keep some distance between you and other hikers** whenever possible, especially if anyone shows signs of being sick. Avoid shaking hands or other close contact – instead, elbow bumps or waving are safer ways to greet others.
- **Avoid congregating in groups along the Trail**.
- If you are an older adult or have serious chronic medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes or lung disease, you are at a higher risk of serious complications from COVID-19 disease. **Hike and camp away from others to minimize the likelihood of infection**.
- If you begin to feel sick, **stay away from others and get off the Trail** until examined and cleared for return to the Trail by a medical professional.
- If you are diagnosed with COVID-19 while on the A.T., please **submit an incident report at [appalachiantrail.org/incidents](https://appalachiantrail.org/incidents)** detailing when you got sick, when and where you got off the Trail and any other helpful information.

For volunteers working on the footpath, the additional guidelines are also recommended:

- **Minimize carpooling to work locations.** While this is not ideal regarding environmental impacts, personal safety and health take priority.
- **Work in groups of no more than 12 people in any location.**
- **Avoid sharing tools and equipment whenever possible.**

For additional guidance and downloadable handouts, please visit [appalachiantrail.org/covid-19](https://appalachiantrail.org/covid-19).

The health and wellbeing of the greater A.T. community is our top priority. As the situation continues, the ATC will provide frequent updates and guidelines for remaining safe and healthy on the A.T. and beyond. For any questions or concerns, please contact us by email at [info@appalachiantrail.org](mailto:info@appalachiantrail.org) or by phone at 304.535.6331.

Appalachian Trail Conservancy  
An Update on COVID-19 and the A.T.  
March 18, 2020

Dear Kip,

In this letter, I am doing what we are all doing with our friends and family right now: checking in, seeing how we are coping with a new reality that is both unprecedented and full of uncertainty, and making sure we are all keeping safe and healthy. We find ourselves physically distanced not only from each other, but also from the spaces that we love like the Appalachian Trail (A.T.). While we cannot gather as we typically would in a crisis, I will commit to regularly connecting with you and prioritizing the health and safety of everyone in the A.T. ecosystem.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) continues to monitor the situation closely; to issue guidance to ATC's staff, members and the Trail's visitors, volunteers and communities; and to take appropriate actions to mitigate the spread or contraction of COVID-19. We are committed to following the advice from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](https://www.cdc.gov) and the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](https://www.who.int) and incorporating their guidance into all of our communications and actions.

Since my [previous letter](#), we have taken additional actions in light of the continued spread of COVID-19:

- **The ATC's visitor centers will be closed until further notice.** We will continue to assess this closure and prioritize the health and safety of our visitors, staff members, and visitor center volunteers. We will send a notice through all of ATC's communication channels as soon as our visitor centers reopen.
- **The ATC's ridgerunners and caretakers have been recalled from the Trail for the next two weeks.** This decision was made following the ATC's guidance to not congregate with large groups and to avoid Trail shelters, which prevents ridgerunners from fulfilling their assigned responsibilities in the field. Ridgerunners are now assisting with ATC's communications around COVID-19 while working remotely.

- **Guidance has been issued to all section and thru-hikers to cancel or postpone their hikes.** In a letter to all registered multi-day hikers, we shared our concern that the practices necessary to support a section or thru-hike may make A.T. hikers susceptible to spreading COVID-19 – whether by congregating at shelters or around picnic tables, traveling to trailheads in shuttle vans, or lodging at the various hostels up and down the Trail. We know this is not an easy decision to make, but in the interest of preventing the continued spread of COVID-19, we urge all section and thru-hikers to come off the Trail until the CDC announces that it is once again safe to return.

This situation is constantly evolving, and we will do our best to keep you informed. For additional guidance and downloadable handouts, please visit [appalachiantrail.org/covid-19](http://appalachiantrail.org/covid-19). For any questions or concerns, please contact us by email at [info@appalachiantrail.org](mailto:info@appalachiantrail.org) or by phone at 304.535.6331.

As always, the health and well-being of the greater A.T. community is our top priority. Please let us know what we can do to keep you safe and healthy during this difficult time.

Appalachian Trail Conservancy

Please stay off the Appalachian Trail

March 23, 2020

*The Appalachian Trail, given its ever-increasing popularity over the past weeks, is no longer a viable space to practice social distancing.*

**Kip, we value your health and safety.**

**In these unprecedented times, I am making an unprecedented request: please stay away from the Appalachian Trail (A.T.). Whether your hike is for a couple of hours or a couple of days, staying away from the Trail minimizes the spread or contraction of COVID-19.**

In a time when social distancing is necessary to minimize the spread and contraction of a dangerous virus, many have escaped to nature seeking isolation and unpopulated spaces. On the A.T., however, what they've found are trailhead parking lots exceeding their maximum capacities, shelters full of overnight hikers, day hikers using picnic tables and privies, and group trips continuing as planned. Popular spots along the Trail like Blood Mountain in Georgia, the McAfee Knob area in Virginia, and Annapolis Rocks in Maryland have seen day use reach record-breaking levels. Cars line the highways leading to popular day-hiking spots on the Trail. Hiking the A.T. has become, in other words, the opposite of social distancing.

These same crowds accessing the A.T. may not know how a simple half-day hike can spread COVID-19. While hiking, they may have eaten lunch at a picnic table, taken a break in a shelter, used a privy, or shared a map or food with someone unknowingly infected with COVID-19 and carried this highly contagious virus back to their communities at the end of the day. They may not have realized that ATC staff and Trail volunteers have been recalled from the A.T. and cannot maintain the footpath,

trailheads, shelters and privies that may be heavily (or permanently) impacted by increased visitor use. And, they may not be aware of the rural communities adjacent to the Trail that may not have the healthcare resources to help a sick hiker or volunteer or manage a COVID-19 outbreak should a hiker transport the virus in from the Trail.

Many day hikers see the outdoors as an escape from the stresses of these difficult times. But with crowding from day hikers reaching unmanageable levels and the lack of any staff or volunteers to manage this traffic, it is necessary that all hikers avoid accessing the Trail. The A.T. is not a separate reality from the communities in which hikers live – so, until the risk of spreading COVID-19 has reduced significantly, hiking on a heavily-trafficked trail like the A.T. potentially increases rather than reduces harm.

The ATC does not want to do too little, too late. We cannot close the Trail. We cannot physically bar access to trailheads or connecting trails. We can and do, however, urge everyone to please stay away from the Appalachian Trail until further notice.

There is an unfortunate truth about this virus: unless everyone is safe, no one is safe. So, take a walk around the block. Spend time with your loved ones. And, please, stay home.

Appalachian Trail Conservancy  
March 31, 2020

While we continue to advise everyone to stay away from the Trail, we want to help ensure the A.T. continues to provide the inspiration, solace, and calm it's always provided. The recently-launched Walk the Distance app ([available for iPhone users here](#)) allows you to connect virtually to the Trail by tracking your steps and showing how far you would have walked on the physical A.T. It is free to download on iOS for a limited time.

If you are looking to travel the entire length of the Trail in one sitting from your computer, try [Backpacker Magazine's Appalachian Trail in 3D](#). Follow the contours of the Trail's landscape on a topographic map or trace the A.T.'s route on paper with a pencil. Acquaint yourself with the Trail's history and ecology.

These are a few of the many ways to connect to the Trail remotely while waiting for this pandemic to clear. While they will never replace the reality of walking on the A.T., we hope it will help you connect with the Trail you love while sheltering in place.

And, as always, please keep yourself updated on the latest ATC and Trail updates:

- **Trail closures continue to expand** with access to the A.T. (e.g. trailheads and connecting trails) closed on Forest Service land south of Virginia; shelters and privies closed on [National Park Service](#) land across the Trail; state park shelters and privies closed in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and all overnight camping closed in Maryland; and perimeter closures for [Great Smoky Mountains National Park](#) and Graham County, North Carolina. [Stay up to date on Trail closures here.](#)

- **Key Trail events and volunteer opportunities have been cancelled or postponed** including the Appalachian Trail Days Festival in Damascus, Virginia (now scheduled for May 15-17, 2021) and the Konnarock Trail Crew season.
- **Updated hiker and volunteer guidelines have been posted** to ATC's COVID-19 page. Please continue to access this page for all matters related to the Appalachian Trail and COVID-19.
- **The ATC is mapping all confirmed cases of COVID-19 along the A.T. corridor and has published a GIS map [here](#)**. The Trail, as evidenced in the map, is not a separate reality from its adjacent cities, towns, and villages.

Nowadays, we are reminded constantly of what not to do and how the world will change post-pandemic. However, we at the ATC would encourage you to hold fast to your connection to the Trail and know, when we come through this crisis, the Trail will be – with your support – a haven for us all once again.

On May 1, the ATC updated their response in light of some states opening back up:

Now over a month has passed since we made this request, and many have asked an important question: **when will it be safe to return to the Trail?**

For now, our guidance is still in effect. The ATC urges everyone – visitors, volunteers and Trailside community residents alike – to stay off the A.T. to keep both the Trail and its broader community safe and healthy.