



Pauls' Journey: A Students Tale

by Paul Monahan

Hi, my name is Paul and I'm studying Outdoor Education at Castlebar in Mayo, Ireland. While I was on transfer to Western Carolina University I went for a hike up in the Smokey Mountains with two other Irish friends from my class and a couple of Americans. We headed north from Newfound Gap on the Appalachian trail....

I don't think there are many better teachers than experiences. I thought I'd include this tale to remind us all of what it is like to be 'out there, doing it', at whatever level. All too often we think that we can teach the skills needed to be an 'outdoor practitioner' but there is no substitute for having a go ourselves. Undertaking a trip anywhere away from immediate help is fundamental outdoor practice, and coping when it goes wrong is a great learning experience.

Horizons Editor - Elspeth Mason

Planning

My journey began two weeks after my arrival in North Carolina, USA. I arrived over from Ireland in August '05 with two classmates, Shane and Jackie, to study at Western Carolina University for the year. We all enjoy a good hike and decided to go for a three-day hike along the Appalachian Trail. Our newfound friends Travis and Sara were only too delighted to help us out in our quest.

We had a basic map of the 2000 mile trail, they are all pretty basic, and found a route that would be ideal for our time available; a long weekend.

The plan was to travel from New-Found Gap and walk north on the North Carolina/ Tennessee Border until we met the highway.

We were well organised! Shopping together at Ingles, making sure our adventure was going to be a comfortable one with a few tasty feasts on route. We all bought new sleeping mats, Travis had a water filter, and I went to bed looking forward to our first taste of adventure in the States. I had heard about the need to set up a line to hang food from in case bears were in the area, with this I read up on what to do in case of contact with the local brown bears.

Getting out there

The five of us piled into Caroline's car, which we all just managed to squeeze into and headed for the hills, well, higher up the hills anyway. We pulled into the car park of New-Found Gap, Elevation 609 meters.

It was exciting; I was excited! One of the reasons I came to this collage on a year's transfer was to get in shape by hiking and kayaking, and this was the start of it.

The view was amazing! Looking across the State I was now living in, I felt that the times ahead would be good ones. We left the car park (which most visitors do not do strangely enough) and headed north on the trail. As the far away horizon disappeared due to the trees alongside, we all put our heads down and concentrated on walking. All our packs were pretty heavy but with a little adjustment to the straps, quite bearable.

We were moving at a fast pace and reached our first break stop after about thirty minutes. It was a small hut comprised of two sleeping decks that can sleep about a dozen people. With a fire pit and environmentally friendly toilet, It's a welcome sight for "through hikers" and walker alike. Through hikers are people that walk the whole trail in one attempt, about 2000 miles, getting their supplies from friends along the way.

After a toilet stop and a drink we headed back on the trail, next stop Charlie's Bunion.

This time the view looked over Tennessee, instead of a car park; we stood on a rough rock outcrop jutting out of the ridge. I could imagine all the people, family and friends, coming here and enjoying their surroundings. Stepping out onto the rock and carefully moving towards the edge. Thousands of Americans have come to this area! It is only a short drive to the Smokey Mountains National Park for most inhabitants, although most of them

don't visit past the car parks, those who do get the opportunity to appreciate this beauty and wonder.

For myself, I find remote and beautiful places like this inspirational, relaxing, therapeutic and satisfying. It is so nice to get away from busy streets, the noises of cities and the usual day-to-day influences.

The Appalachians have such a huge diversity of species. The growing glacier pushed down all of the creatures from the north of the continent and those that survived managed to set up in North Carolina.

Even out here there were many signs of people. The trees were showing the effects of pollution from distant cities. The section of trail we walked was made up of exposed earth with patches of rock and the odd fallen tree. Man-made drainage bars crossed the path occasionally to keep the trail from washing away.

Reality check

Just like that I tripped and on the way down I dislocated my left patella! I felt pain! I let out a large number of curses and 'Oh my God's' Many thoughts went through my head while at the same time my brain was looking at my knee! I thought what the hell am I going to do? I was realising what this meant for me over the next year and beyond. I was thinking how am I going to get out of here and I was thinking about my future in Outdoor Education. How this would affect my Future.



*Just like that,
I tripped and
dislocated my
left patella!
I felt pain!*

.....



*The machete
proved useful
making my
crutch*

.....

Suddenly Travis was by my side. He had thought that a snake had bitten me. Once he looked at me he saw what the problem was. He checked me out using his first aid knowledge, I told him there was only one problem and that I had to be sorted a.s.a.p.

DIY

I convinced him to straighten my leg with a smooth fast swoop to put the kneecap back into its socket.

Try one was not a success. The second time I helped out.

I got him to try the same again pushing my leg also but with one hand on my knee to make sure the cap went in to place. "Ouch" I said "that hurt." Well, actually I let out a large and long shout!

Shane was enthusiastic to go and make me a crutch, using the machete that Travis had brought. Everybody burst into action, I got pulled up back on to the path and we started making a splint. Using metal supports and a mixture of the contents of our first aid kits I had an excellent splint to go along with my brilliant crutch.

We all got some food and water and discussed our options. We didn't have much choice but to turn back.

Our phone wasn't working and it was nice of a passing doctor to lend us his phone! He didn't even look at my leg though. Another passing couple offered me a leg support which I didn't need but I appreciated the thought!

Learning from experience

I've got to say that people in general seem to be more hospitable while in the wilderness. It was 13 kilometres back to the car park and it was time we were moving. Taking five Ibuprofen was a good move! Just as important to me was the pillow I had under my armpit on the crutch.

We got in touch with the National Park service and told them what was going on. They informed us that all of their helicopters were helping with rescues in New Orleans and that they could not get anybody out to me until the next day.

Self-help

There wasn't much I could do but focus on getting back. It was decided. We started walking back to New-Found Gap. I had my head torch but the rest were sharing one head torch and a small spare light I had brought. Travis mentioned that we should start making some noise, to scare off the bears so, you didn't have to ask me twice, and I started to



sing away some wee tunes. I think I was just mumbling most of the time but I tried. We had walked about 14 hours in total. Over 10 hours since the accident happened. We needed to stop soon but I wanted to make it as far as possible while I could.

We reached Charlie's Bunion and stopped there for night. We slept in the fork of the path. It was a perfectly clear night and the stars were out. I fell asleep easily.

It all turned out ok

Well there wasn't any point in sleeping in! And the coffee I drank that morning was one of the best ever. A Medic arrived just after breakfast and checked out my leg. I was not happy cutting the splint we had made because I trusted it so much. The replacement was sufficient and we started on our way back. The medic called in the litter crew that comprised of 10 fit rangers. They were to meet us at the hut we knew from before. The reason they could not come all the way was due to the rough terrain. It took over two hours for me to get to them, and when I arrived I was ready to collapse.

I was strapped in and off we went, this was as hard as the walking or worse. There

Extreme relief hit me once we were back on the tarmac

.....

weren't a lot of thoughts running through my head except of getting home.

Extreme relief hit me once we were back on the tarmac, not a common feeling I have.

I had to wear a splint for a month afterwards and have been exercising and doing physiotherapy since. There is still a lot of muscle wastage now, a year later.

Well at least I had an extensive First – Aid and physiotherapy treatment experience.

Final thoughts

This whole experience has forced me to re-evaluate my prospects for working in the outdoors. My desire to go hill walking has decreased significantly since I got back to Ireland. The psychological reason for that is probably quite high, but I need to be practical as well.

I always liked sea-kayaking and would like to pursue a career in it. ■

Author's Notes

Paul Monahan's first adventures were wandering around the fields in his local village, 'Bearna' in the west of Ireland, where he learned quickly to appreciate the natural environment. He started kayaking around the canals of Galway City when he was around 12 and took up river kayaking a few years later. His first time sea-kayaking was with his sister at the Killary Fjord in Connemara and from then on he decided to do Outdoor Education as his degree. He completed his Mountain skills 2 after first year but his plans to continue on to do Mountain Leader were hindered by his injury.

Paul has, however, rediscovered sea kayaking and has fallen in love with the idea of pursuing a career in it. He would like to use it as a Recreational Therapy tool to help make people's lives a bit better or more enjoyable.

Photos

All from the author.