

Hike Your Own Hike

NOTICING THROUGH ITERATIVE PHYSICAL DISORIENTATION

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Abstract

In recent years, interest in outdoor recreation activities has ballooned in popularity. In parallel, online discourse around how to “prepare” to enter the outdoors—e.g., buying the “correct” gear, finding scenic trails to hike, etiquette on the trail itself—has also proliferated. Dominant in this discourse is a view of nature as something wholly separate from humans. Building on interest in “disorientation” as a methodological strategy, we examine, through retrospective autoethnography, how hiking and backpacking trigger extreme oscillations between the human-centered and more-than-human. We found that while many aspects of hiking have been molded into a human-centered framing—including not only technology and information, but also human-built waymarks and the trail itself—the vastness of landscapes, intense forces of weather, and fragility of our bodies force us to notice the more-than-human. We reflect on how consecutive hikes can represent a practice of *iterative physical disorientation*, continually revealing new ways to embrace the more-than-human.

Author Keywords

hiking; nature; disorientation; more-than-human;
noticing; retrospective autoethnography

CCS Concepts

•Human-centered computing
~Interaction design process and methods

Introduction

The ephemerality of the White Mountains of New Hampshire, in the Northeastern United States, is alluring. Every fall, millions of tourists crowd the White Mountain National Forest and nearby state parks to catch brilliant peak foliage for a week or two [27], and the expansive, fragile alpine terrain is particularly unique compared to the rest of its parent range, the Appalachian Mountains. At the same time, the region boasts some of the most variable, tumultuous weather anywhere: a hot summer day in the valley can turn into near-freezing temperatures at only 4,000 feet high, and the fastest wind speed ever outside of tornadoes and hurricanes was recorded at Mount Washington [6], the highest peak of the Whites.

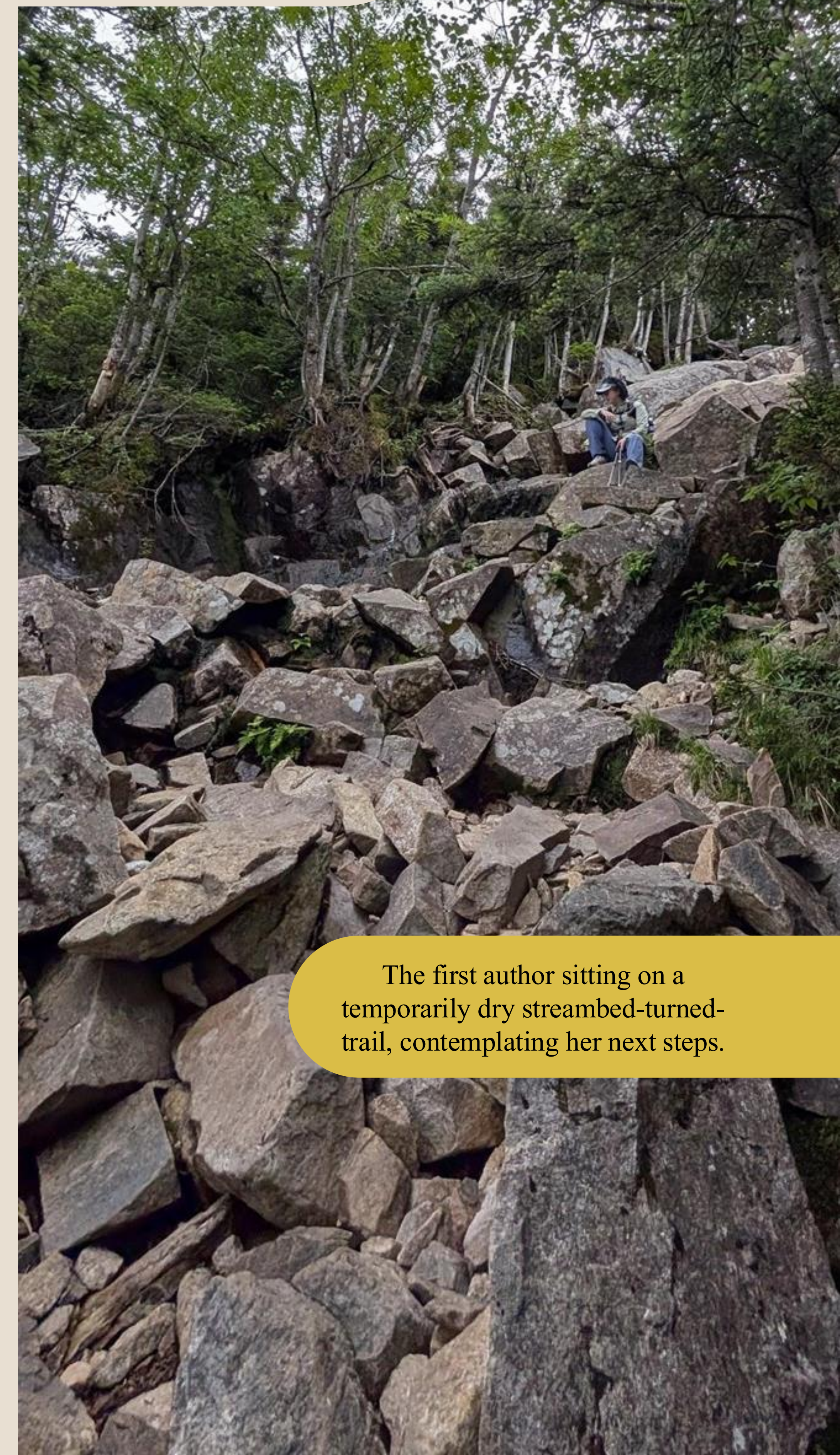
Humans have long-depicted nature and the outdoors as something wild and not-human. We head outdoors to as an interruption to “real” human life, which feels distinctly separate from and incongruent with nature [25]; we “need” to prepare for entering the wilderness with specialty gear and technology that keeps us safe from the elements; to access specialized, localized information to properly, safely hike; to activate a different version of ourselves to “be” outside.

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The first author sitting on a temporarily dry streambed-turned-trail, contemplating her next steps.

On the other hand, researchers are increasingly trying to make sense of the connections that humans do make with nature and the more-than-human [1-5, 10, 12, 13, 17, 18, 21-26]. Recent work has explored how trail navigation apps like AllTrails might force normative views of outdoor recreation on users through metrics and body expectations, potentially marginalizing novice hikers [24]. Others have examined how long-distance hikers' practices of resilience—through technology or not—are highly contextualized in an “iffy” socio-technical-natural system [23], and tried to depict “co-experiences” of nature through data physicalization [1].

Scholars have also highlighted the struggle of trying to connect ourselves more to the non-human even when disconnection, or “separability”, from nature seems to be a precursor to Western and Eurocentric notions of

modernity [21]. For example, Biggs et al. [4] described how an iterative exploration of greater attunement to the ubiquity of birds—hearing and seeing them everywhere, constantly—led to a sense of abjection, or a “primal and visceral rejection” of something that is connected to the self but ultimately cannot be cut off [4].

In this work, we apply a lens of *disorientation* to retrospectively analyze the first author's experiences hiking and backpacking in the White Mountains. As Biggs and Bardzell write, “*Operationalizing disorientation embraces embodied experiences of strange, difficult, unexpected, or totally new experiences that broach novel ways of thinking, acting, and designing beyond what was initially understandable or imaginable*” [5]. Through photography, we build on past work depicting the visual language of “natureculture”

[18]—e.g., how human-made structures and human framings of hiking intersect with “wild” surroundings and influence how we experience nature—and reflect on how nature might arrest, humble, and even reject us.

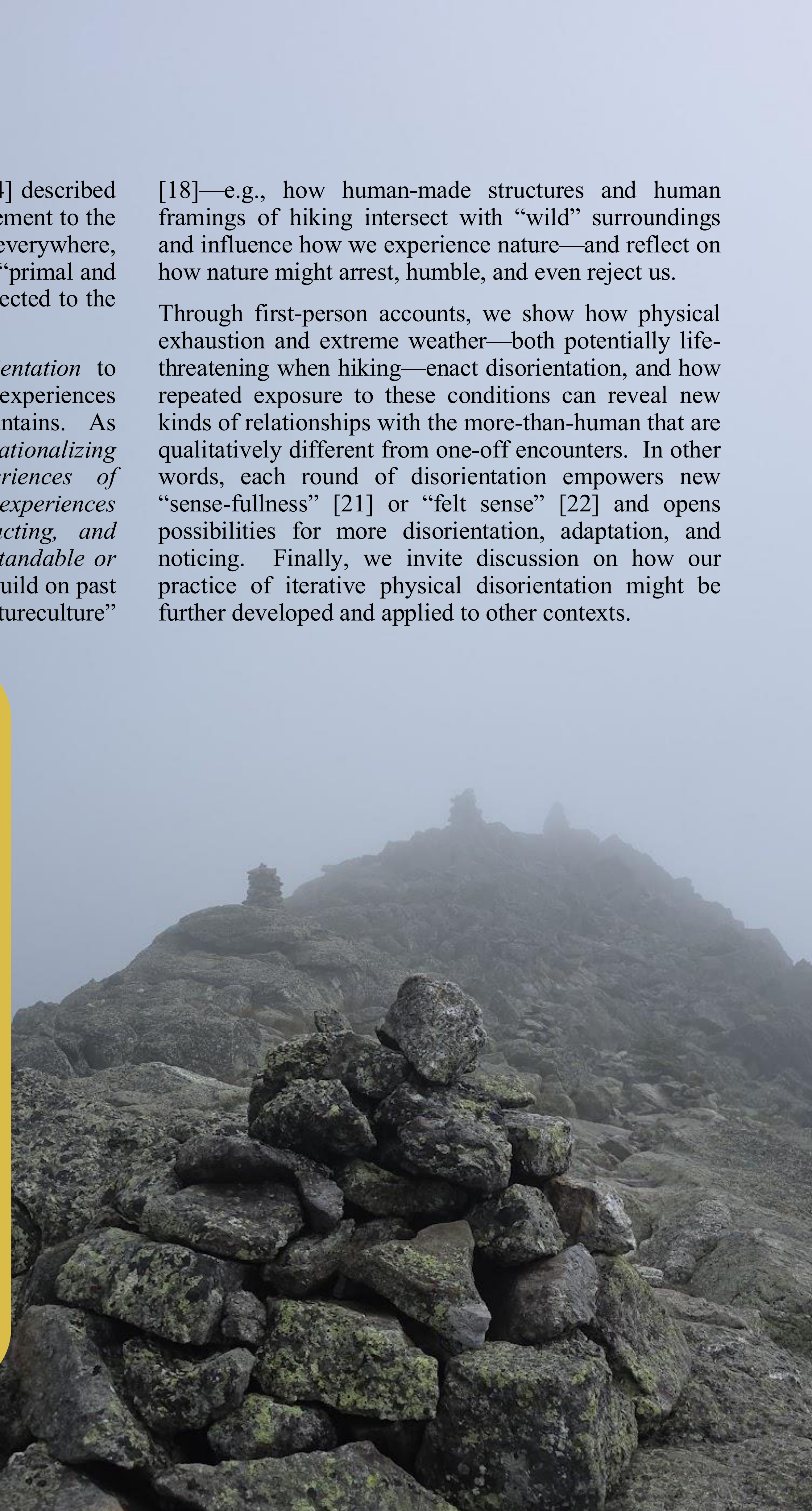
Through first-person accounts, we show how physical exhaustion and extreme weather—both potentially life-threatening when hiking—enact disorientation, and how repeated exposure to these conditions can reveal new kinds of relationships with the more-than-human that are qualitatively different from one-off encounters. In other words, each round of disorientation empowers new “sense-fullness” [21] or “felt sense” [22] and opens possibilities for more disorientation, adaptation, and noticing. Finally, we invite discussion on how our practice of iterative physical disorientation might be further developed and applied to other contexts.

Background: Hiking and the White Mountains

The first author (A1) had developed a love for hiking in the Southern Appalachians Mountains, where the primary threats were rain and storing food properly from wildlife. Upon moving to New England, A1 was taken aback by the difficulty of trails in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Hazards seemed endless: freezing temperatures in the summer, wind speeds that made it physically impossible to walk or even stand up straight, fog that obscured the trail, to name a few. A1 found herself triangulating information on weather and trail conditions from dozens of sources to prepare (page 3).

The natural deadly forces, however, were overshadowed by a more immediate challenge: A1, who had considered herself an experienced, fit hiker, no longer felt like one. In many national parks across the United States, trails are often gravel or dirt paths with moderately graded switchbacks traversable by horses. After some steady cardio efforts of ascending, A1 used to rest assured that reaching the ridgeline meant smooth sailing onwards. The Whites comprised a different pattern language—elevation gains of 1,000 feet or more per mile, ankle-twisting boulder fields, slick granite slabs **RIGHT**—designed for constant stimulation rather than a relaxing walk in the woods.

The terrain existed alongside the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), an outdoor recreation group that advocates for the conservation of the Whites through trail and shelter maintenance. The AMC owns, operates, and maintains a significant majority of wilderness shelters in the Whites, including mountain huts that serve hikers with slightly modern amenities. The huts are the only legal sites for staying overnight above tree line in the Whites due to fragile alpine vegetation; however, the boarding rates can run over 200 USD per person per night. This cost constraint added new layers of pressure: A1 felt compelled to push herself physically, as not finishing a hike could mean forfeiting hundreds of dollars.



Higher Summits Forecast

Mountain weather is subject to rapid and extreme conditions. This forecast is one tool to help you plan a safe trip (no doubt, turn around!). Always travel with adequate clothing, shelter, food, and be prepared to make your own assessment of travel and weather. You should never visit the higher summits unprepared.

The warmth that was so unusual in the adieu as a cold front associated with an incoming low pressure system moved through town. The drop in temperature was early in the morning.

Extended Forecast for 6 Miles NE Wildwood NH

Day	Weather	High	Low
Friday	Mostly Sunny	14 °F	7 °F
Friday Night	Partly Cloudy	7 °F	25 °F
Saturday	Chance Snow	25 °F	10 °F

Extended Forecast for 6 Miles NE Wildwood NH

Day	Weather	High	Low
Thursday	60% Precip	21 °F	-6 °F
Thursday Night	30% Precip	-6 °F	10 °F
Friday	Very Windy, Scattered Showers	10 °F	10 °F

NewEnglandTrailConditions.com: MA | ME | NH | RI/CT | VT | Ski

Search: State [dropdown], Peak [input], Trail **lonesome lake**, Search

Month [dropdown], Year [input], User [input]

Peaks/Trails	Date of Hike	Surface Conditions
North Kinsman, South Kinsman via Lonesome Lake Trail, Cascade Brook Trail, Fishin' Jimmy Trail...		Ice - Black, Snow - Trace/Minimal Depth,...
Cannon Mountain via Lonesome Lake Trail, Around...		Snow - Trace/Minimal Depth,...
Cannon Mountain via Lonesome Lake Trail, Hi...		
North Kinsman, South Kinsman via Lonesome Lake Trail, Ca...		
Cannon Mountain via Lonesome Lake Trail, Hi...		
North Kinsman, South Kinsman via Lonesome Lake Trail, Ca...		
Cannon Mountain via Lonesome Lake Trail, Hi...		

Reviews: 4.7 stars, 5,247 reviews, 8,058 activities

Linda MacLean, Nov 28, 2025 • Backpacking

Easy to park • Dog-friendly • Great conditions

Very icy cold winter day. Spikes door to door except in the Yummy Thanksgiving sandwiches with a view!

Difficulty: Moderate

Review trail

WHITE MOUNTAIN GUIDE, 31ST EDITION, AMC's Comprehensive Guide to Hiking Trails in the White Mountain National Forest

Weather Map, Mountain Info, Climbing Notes, Photos (2)

MountainPro

Methods

The Documented Hikes

From August 2024 through December 2025, A1 embarked on three day-hikes and four backpacking trips with their partner to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. These trips ranged from 4 to 36 miles in distance and up to 3 days in duration. A1 was motivated by four goals: three mostly physical, and one mental. First, she had a long-term goal of completing all sections of the Appalachian Trail, a 2,197.4-mile hiking trail ranging from the state of Georgia through the state of Maine. Second, A1 hoped to train for an eventual hike of the Long Trail, another long-distance trail nearby in New England. Third, A1 hoped to peakbag—the activity of hiking to a set list of summits and completing the list—a group of 48 mountains in New Hampshire called the “4000 Footers” (the NH48), i.e., those above 4000 feet tall. Finally, A1 was surprised by the difficulty of hiking in the White after moving to New England. She found herself questioning if she still enjoyed hiking and backpacking; as a final goal, she hoped to discover new ways to find joy and fulfillment from her trips.

Data Collection: Photography and Noticing

During these hiking trips, A1, who was also a hobbyist photographer, documented things she noticed on the trail with a combination of cameras: an iPhone 15 Pro using Halide Process Zero, various 35mm film cameras, and a Nikon Z6II mirrorless digital camera. The usage of the cameras directly correlated with A1 following an

“ultralight” approach to backpacking, focused on lightening the weight of A1’s backpack over longer distances. In other words, A1 iteratively considered factors like comfort on body or backpack, cost efficiency (e.g., having to buy and develop 35mm film), durability against the elements, packability, and ease of use. The most common devices used were the iPhone and Kodak Ektar H35, a cheap, plastic 35mm film camera (recalling [13]) that can shoot 72 exposures on a single roll of film, instead of 36 on a standard camera.

Data Analysis

Although we did not deliberately set out to conduct an autoethnography, A1 already held an established personal practice of photographing during and notetaking in Google Docs after hikes. After each hike, A1 looked through the images she had captured and took notes on how they physically felt during and after the hike. A1 and the second author (A2), both researchers in human-computer interaction and design, also frequently discussed social, information-seeking behaviors within personal hobbies. These practices motivated us to analyze A1’s photographs, screenshots, and notes (collectively, “the data”). Together, we constructed retrospective accounts of A1’s hikes from A1’s memory and data, forming the basis of our retrospective autoethnography [15, 20, 21].

We engaged in reflexive thematic analysis [7-9] over fortnightly discussions. To familiarize ourselves with the data, we conducted an informal content analysis of

photos and screenshots (arranged in Google Photos) focused on the mechanics of noticing while hiking: whether the noticing was intrinsically derived or externally forced; how iterative engagement with the terrain disoriented A1’s capacities for noticing; and the human-centeredness or lack thereof in both noticed subjects and noticing mechanics.

As A1 did not record continuous footage of their hikes, she noticed some significant time jumps between photos, causing them to reflect on what was not captured. She recalled in one discussion that physical hardships on the trail—e.g., difficult terrain with little open views, thunderstorms, hunger—often occupied these gaps in documentation. When she was physically engaged, she could not devote mental attention to noticing outside of her body. In other words, physical hardship created a survivorship bias in what A1 noticed [19]. In another discussion, A1 noted that the only technologies she used on trail were the physical devices she brought in her pack; once she was hiking, other people’s historical trail reports were largely irrelevant, especially given the physical challenges described. This orthogonality between extensive technical preparation in the “human” world and actual physical presence among the more-than-human evolved into one aspect of our “oscillations”. In the next few pages, we present our findings in A1’s first-person voice.

ABOVE Screenshots of weather sources and trail reports, including one of A1’s browser with dozens of trail-related tabs open—a common sight the week leading up to a hike.

PLUNGING INTO A NON-HUMAN EXPANSE

Before starting a hike, I try on my backpack to see how the total weight wears and check if any straps need adjusting. When I do this at home, I'm optimistic and confident. In the trailhead parking lot, my sense of a human/wilderness divide suddenly surges. *I can't carry this for the next few days. I'm not meant to be out here. Let's go home.* The human-centered regrets of sunk costs—of driving, preparing, perhaps even the shame of already sharing plans with my family—push me forward. I send a satellite message to family saying that we're starting our hike; it does not betray my fear.

The first time I hiked in the Whites, I didn't hold this sense of dread. I thought I was a strong and fast hiker. After slipping down a slab like a cartoon on a banana peel, I developed a genuine sort of trauma from descending boulder piles, checking my footing at each step. Other hikers, passing us, seemed to *just know* how to walk. Over multiple hikes, I started to intentionally notice where hikers before me stepped, grabbed handholds, or even placed their trekking poles due to scratches and discoloration in the rocks. On boggy, muddy trails, I adroitly hopped over rocks and branches.

My rapid noticing was a "sense-fullness", as described by Mackey et al. [21], that allowed me to essentially autopilot through large sections of trail. This "exiled capacity", on one hand, felt like an animal instinct bred out of me by modernity. On the other hand, it made me a non-living machine, my body merely a vehicle to transport me from campsite to campsite and my backpack the trunk. Sometimes, when I arrive at a viewpoint where I can retrace the steps I had just made, I wonder how long it would have taken to drive the distance I just walked and feel a little insignificant.

BACKGROUND Looking back on my previous day's progress on the Pemigewasset Loop.



Am I stupid?
Why do I need this
ladder when there's a
clear open path to
the right?



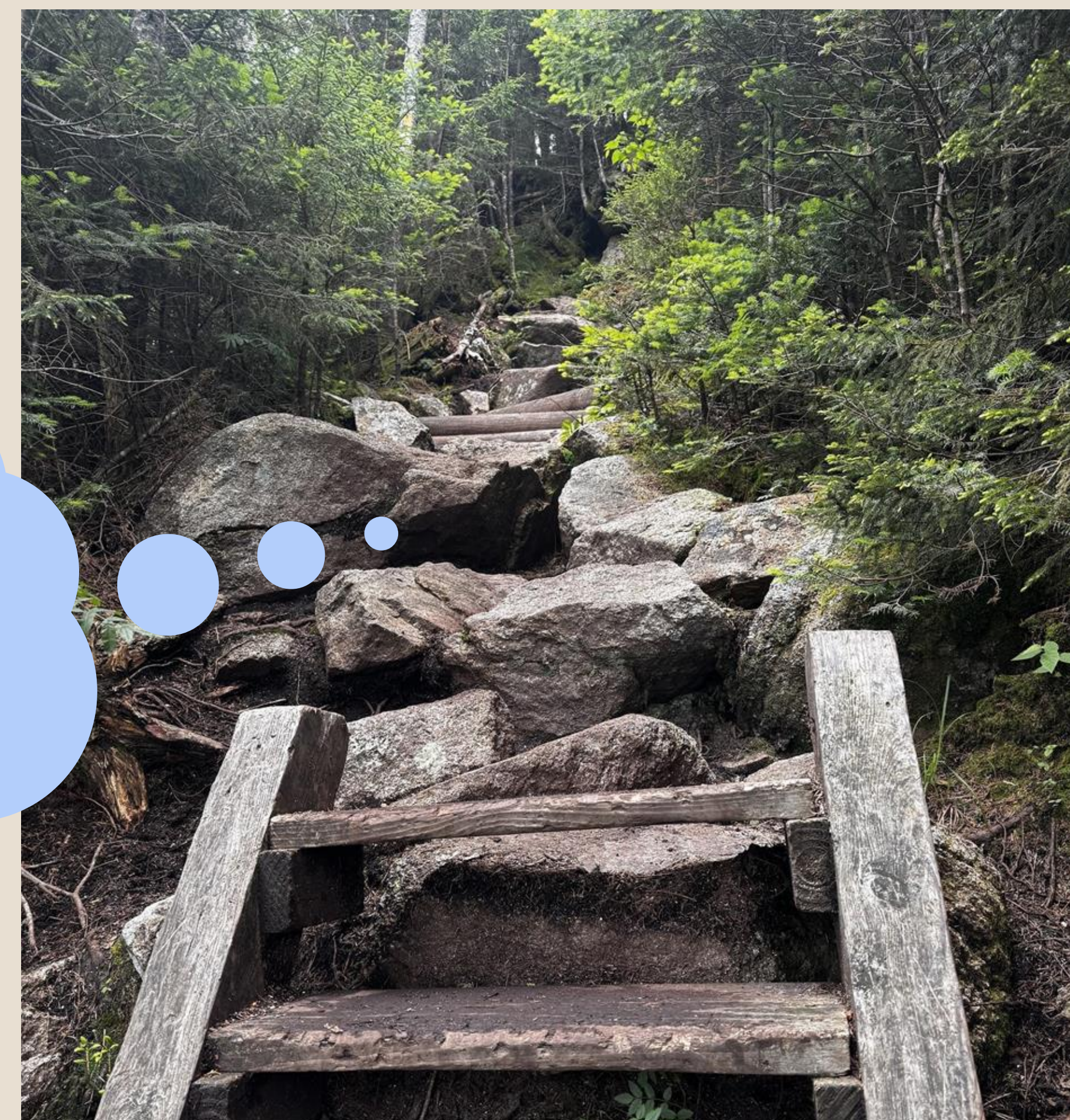
SPECTRAL SCAPEGOATS IN MATERIAL TRAIL OBSTACLES

As I feel myself disappearing more into the rhythm of hiking—counting down the remaining feet of elevation I have left to climb at an approximate rate of two steps for every two feet of ascent, controlling my breathing to calm down my heart rate—I start to accept the continuous visual and physical processing as a matter of fact in my existence, but not without complaint.

When I come across an anomalous design in the trail—a ladder, a set of stairs, a granite slab that requires me to use my hands—I unwittingly engage in a dialogue with imaginary ghosts of humans that created these structures. I wonder about the trail builders' intentions and my own intuitions when I come across a seemingly useless ladder; I curse at them when the boulder piles suddenly turn into a near vertical wall.

The materials of these trail elements raise further questions: *Did the dry creek bed rocks always*

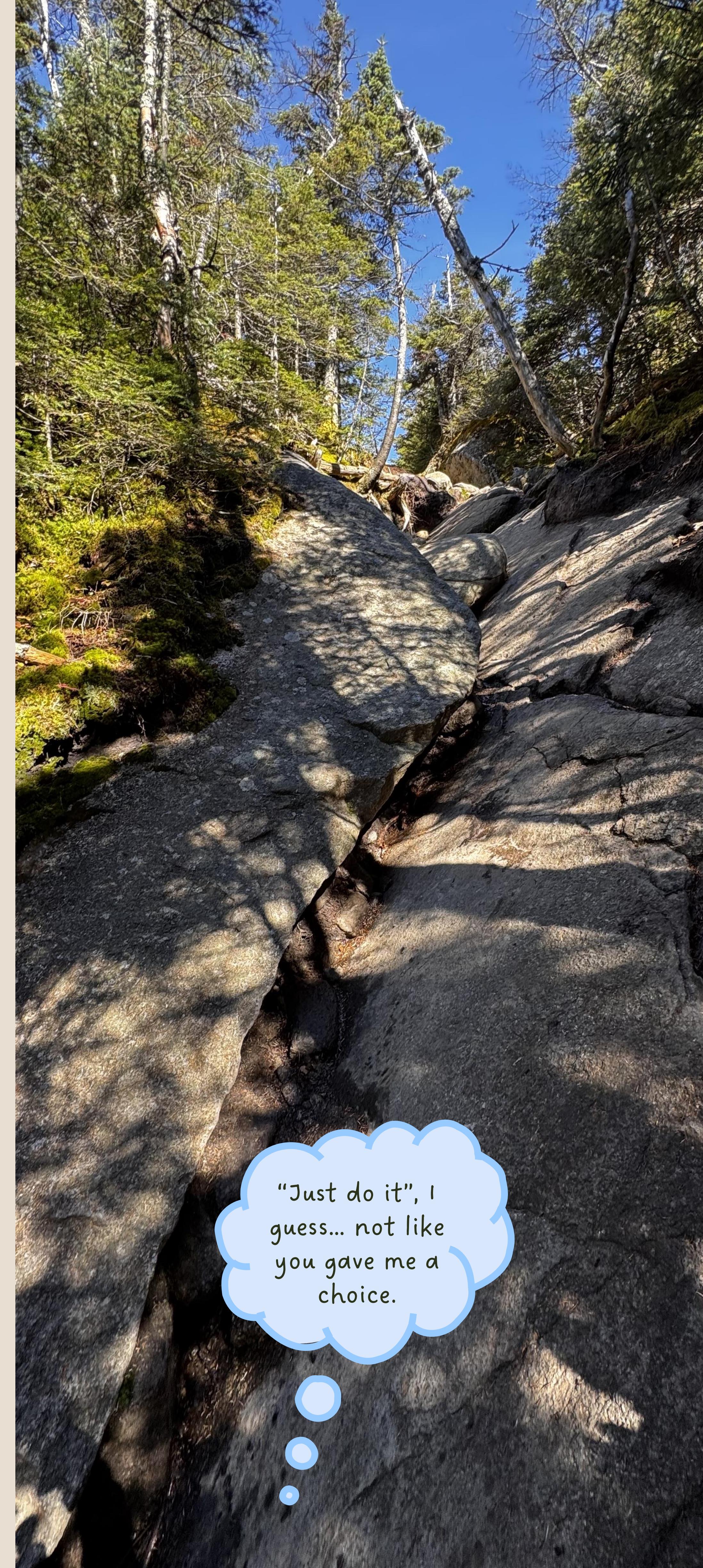
Why bait me with the
luxury of stairs if you're
just going to make me
climb on rocks again two
seconds later?



conveniently feel like a staircase, or did humans manipulate them to be so? How many pairs of trekking poles stabbing through did it take to create permanent dimples in the granite slabs?

Traversing these obstacles also creates a false sense of hiking progress. When I check my smartwatch, wishfully thinking I'd covered significant ground, I instead see that it took me 15 minutes to advance less than a quarter of a mile; I melodramatically decry the trail builders for choosing to punish me specifically.

"Just do it", I
guess... not like
you gave me a
choice.

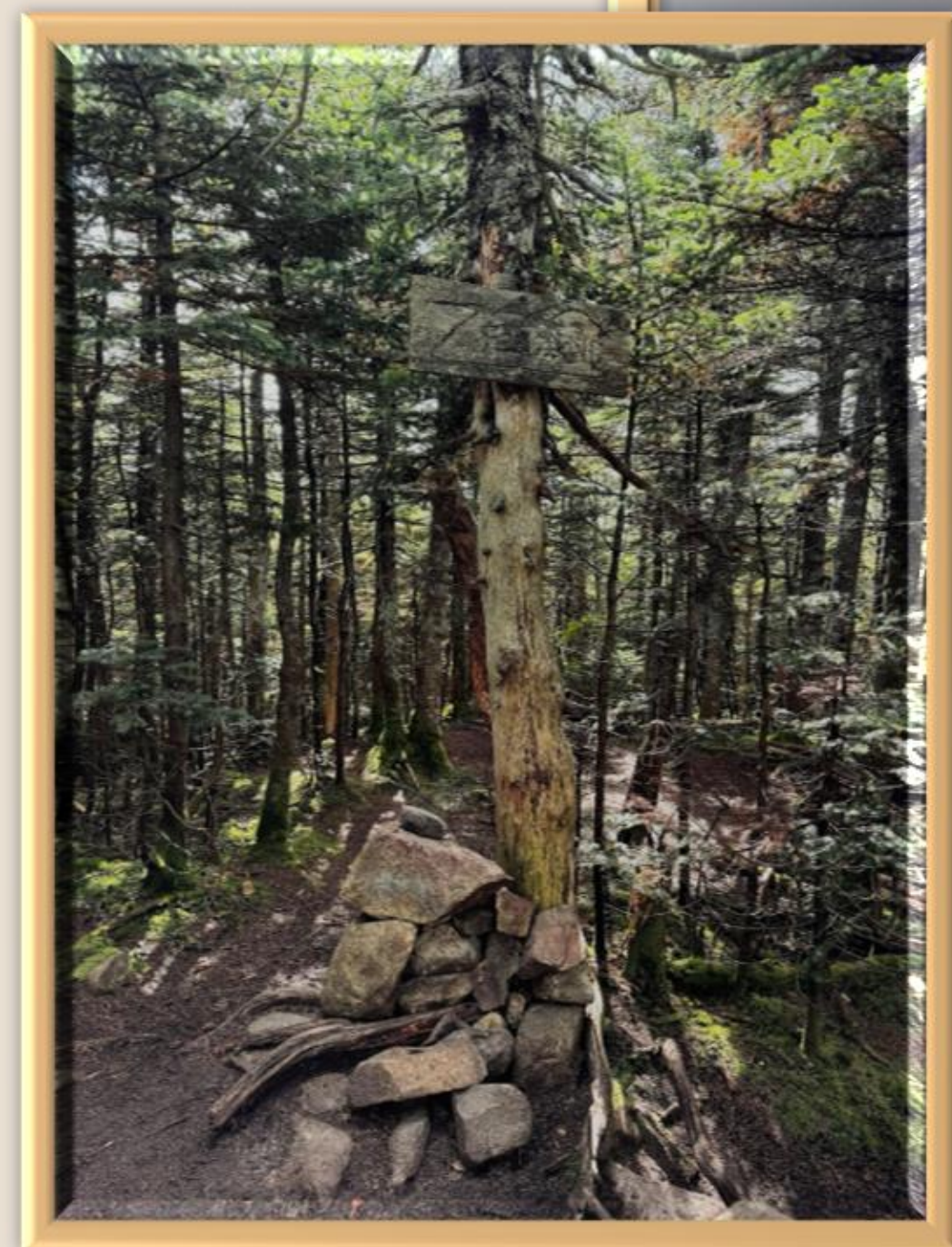




The first author contemplates yet another viewless summit.



VIEWLESS SUMMITS AS SITES FOR VALUE CLARIFICATION



On the trail, humans tell me, either through their presence or through built signage, that I've reached a point that is prominent and worthy of stopping for a look or photo. Because the physicality occupies my mind, I have, over time, become conditioned to look for built human-built signage as a mark of a peak or vista. An extreme consequence of this conditioning is that I often beeline to take a photo of the signage before acknowledging any view. **ABOVE** is a sample of my collection of various stone cairns and metal National Geodetic Survey (NGS) markers at NH48 peaks. (The NGS markers often denote the location of the "true" peak and add another layer of gamification to peakbagging and completing the NH48).

At these peaks, I usually plan for a snack or meal break to allow myself more time to take in the views. Due to the volatile weather—precipitation was recorded on nearly two-thirds of all days in 2025—I often encounter a total lack of both views and comfortable picnic spots. **LEFT** are viewless summits of three of the NH48, after at least 3,000 feet of ascent and hours of hiking, with wooden signs variably weathered by pummeling wind, rain, and snow. When signs become worn to near illegibility, the Appalachian Mountain Club retires and auctions them for thousands of dollars to fund trail maintenance measures, including installing new signs—an indirect reincarnation.

The first time I arrived at a viewless summit, I felt bitter: why did I waste so much effort if I couldn't take a post a pretty Instagram photo? I then immediately felt embarrassed by my shallowness. As I went on more hikes, I reflected often on how I was one in a long line of humans to have tread here and tried to make art. Throughout the 19th century, hundreds flocked to the Whites to paint landscapes. Winslow Homer's 1868 work, "Artists Sketching in the White Mountains", depicts just that: three artists and their easels in a row, en plein air [14]. It's unlikely that my iPhone photos of the Franconia Ridge, heeded as one of the most "beautiful hikes in America" [11], were uniquely spectacular. This deflating realization prompted me to, at future sub-optimal peaks, fight to notice things that were *not* expansive landscapes: waterfalls that flowed more abundantly after storms; atmospheric fog that flattened trees into monochromatic layers; rain saturating the ground and plants in deeper colors than when dry; shifts in how the air felt and smelled.



EXHAUSTION-INDUCED SOMAESTHETIC TUNNEL VISION

From about 3,000 feet above sea level—fairly high for New Hampshire standards—I can notice obvious shifts in elevation through my physical senses being externally alerted. When I smell balsam fir, I’m at least halfway up to the nearest peak. When I can see above the tops of trees and feel a chill in the air, it means I’m approaching treeline, the point where trees no longer grow. Each time I hike, I make the same note of how I feel throughout these changes at higher elevations: mentally salivating at my imminent reward of a vista.

The changes at lower elevations, however, are less overt; I often only notice when physically exhausted. Sometimes, when tree cover is dense and towering, I feel like the forest might be actively suffocating me, particularly when ascending. I use stream crossings as an excuse to stop for a water break. I only take time to look around me when stopping to catch my breath, slumped over my trekking poles and boring my eyes into the ground off trail. While the photos I take are mostly distractions from being tired, after each hike, I

look up what plants I photographed and try to notice them more intentionally the next time.

ABOVE (1) Bunchberry flowers in bloom. (2) Sunlight beaming on bark peeling off a birch tree. (3) Sphagnum moss and bare trees off-trail. (4) Labrador tea flowers in bloom. **BELOW** (5) Windswept juniper shrubs on the trail to Mount Guyot. (6) Foamy ripples in a stream at the base of small cascades. (7) Krummholz, or trees twisted and bent by harsh winds at higher, exposed elevations.

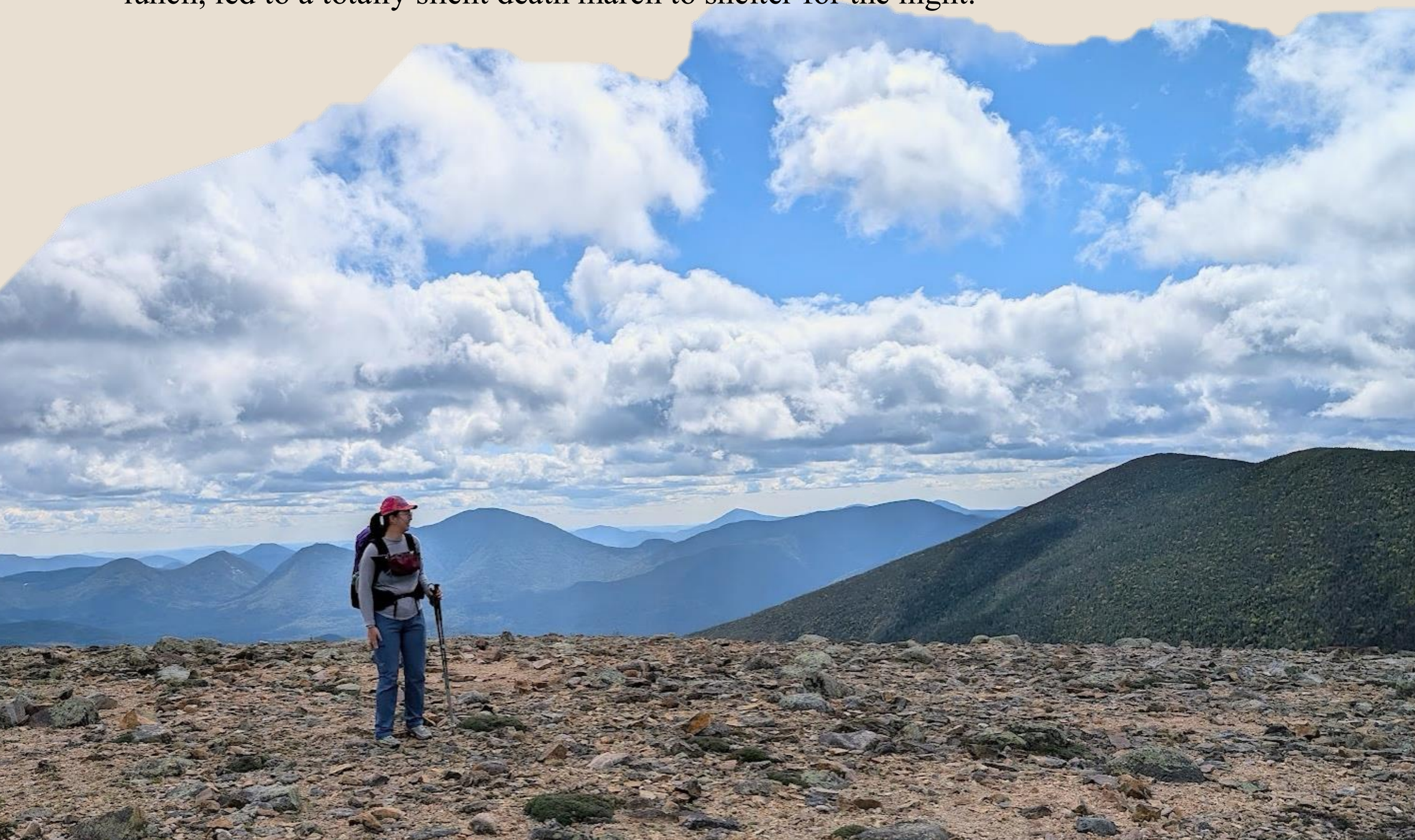


HUMBLING, ARRESTING, ILLEGIBLE VASTNESS

When I feel wind and wide-open sky above me, it means I'm in the alpine zone—a cold, treeless expanse at above 4,500 feet in the Whites with fragile and rare vegetation—and about to be smacked in the face with a view. The landscape forces me to visually confront it. **BELOW**, I gaze out at open ridgelines from a peak; I did not bother photographing any summit marker due to being totally occupied by the view. This was the first time I had experienced non-manmade openness in the Appalachians; in the southern range, similar views—“balds”—were only clear due to deforestation.

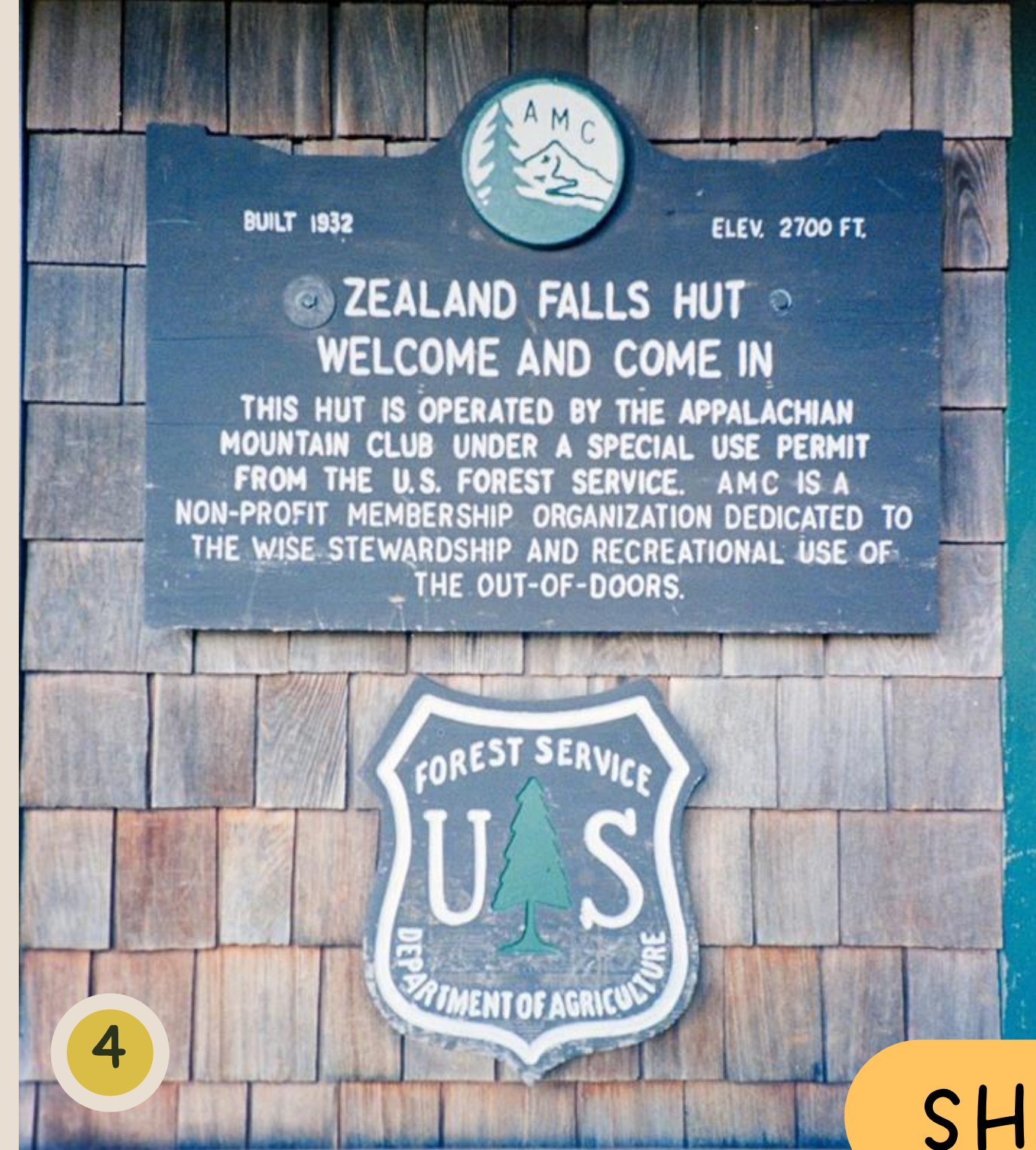
RIGHT, I trace a trail leading to the highest peak in the Pemigewasset Wilderness, Mount Lafayette, and notice the ant trail of other hikers ahead of me. Because Lafayette was the tallest peak in the area, I thought my remaining six or so miles would be straightforward after this ascent. One complication was the ongoing drought in New Hampshire, which tangibly affected my access to water in an area typically known as a temperate rain forest. I made a mental calculation that descending from a peak would be less exhausting than ascending; to conserve water, my partner and I opted to eat dry, carb-heavy snacks on trail instead of cooking a water-intensive, balanced lunch.

In contrast with the image from page 5, where I could easily approximate trails from simply looking at the ridgeline, the size of Lafayette obscured a steep and grueling ascent and descent of another peak, with *another* ascent to our stopping point—what hikers call “pointless ups-and-downs” (PUDs). These changes were not obvious when viewing a zoomed-out elevation profile on my offline topographic map. The severe descent meant we were back under the suffocating tree cover. The taste of my sugary snacks started making me nauseous on the ascents. These unexpected PUDs, coupled with our choice to forgo lunch, led to a totally silent death march to shelter for the night.





3



4



5

SHELTERS AS HUMAN TETHERS

Sometimes, lost in the rhythm of hiking, I get surprised by manmade structures seemingly emerging out of thin air on trail—the AMC huts (1-5). Because they provide composting toilets, drinking water, durable shelter from weather, and hot meals for overnight guests (1), the huts are hubs of human activity at all hours. Social interaction is essentially mandatory (5), since bunks sit less than five feet apart (3). A hut full of dozens of hikers, in contrast with only seeing two to three per hour on trail, triggers an abrupt code switch of sorts, from dialoguing exclusively with my body and the trail to chatting with other humans. With strangers, I share meals, stories, and a tacit understanding of suffering on the trail; when I leave, I never see them again.



6



2

On a couple backpacking trips, I reserved a bunk at these huts to guarantee at least one night of hot food and cushy sleep. However, the huts also prompt an adjustment of my hiking pace and mileage, due to both the monetary constraints described earlier (page 3) and because dinner and breakfast are served promptly at 6pm and 7am, respectively. I needed to ensure I could make it to the hut by dinner time on the the first night and also have enough daylight to hike after breakfast the next morning.

Similarly, due to the rocky, steep terrain, AMC campsites (6-7), with level wooden platforms and proximity to springs, are often the only viable (and legal) locations to camp. A quarter mile from a campsite, I encounter paper notices emphasizing human separation from nature, warning to store food properly from bears and to cook and camp only in designated areas (6). Just as in a hut, I sleep feet away from strangers, but a 20 denier sheet of plastic (7) somehow makes the experience less intimately intrusive.



1



7



2

On one trip, my partner and I bailed on plans for backpacking, opting for a day hike due to hurricane force winds, low visibility, and painful sideways rain hitting our faces upon reaching the first summit. On our way back to the parking lot, we saw blue sky ahead of us and storm clouds behind. We questioned our decision to turn around the whole way down; I read trail reports of sunny and calm peaks the day after. One week later due to drought, the hut ran out of water, and the nearby glacial lake had also dried up. A month earlier, rain had made trails hazardously slippery, and storm-downed trees blocked the trail (1).

Some sort of direct confrontation with the more-than-human is almost guaranteed on hikes. In summer of 2025, a bear started aggressively approaching campsites for food, and occasionally, trail signs explicitly alert us to the more-than-human actors living nearby (4-5). Canada Jays hop right up to hikers and beg for treats (2). On the rare occasion I can comfortably picnic at a viewpoint, the juxtaposition of my modern cooking materials—a titanium pot; an aluminum butane canister; plastic-packaged, ultra-processed, calorically-efficient food—against the vista feels hilariously unnatural (3). The more hikes I complete, the more I wonder how my human presence might be unwelcome or even hostile.

DIRECT, DISSONANT CONFRONTATIONS



3



4



1

5
"Hi! =)
I am a black-backed wood pecker.
This is my home!
Please do not disturb; we are very
easily spooked! (Stress makes it
hard to live our lives normally!)"
Handwritten notice posted to a tree on trail

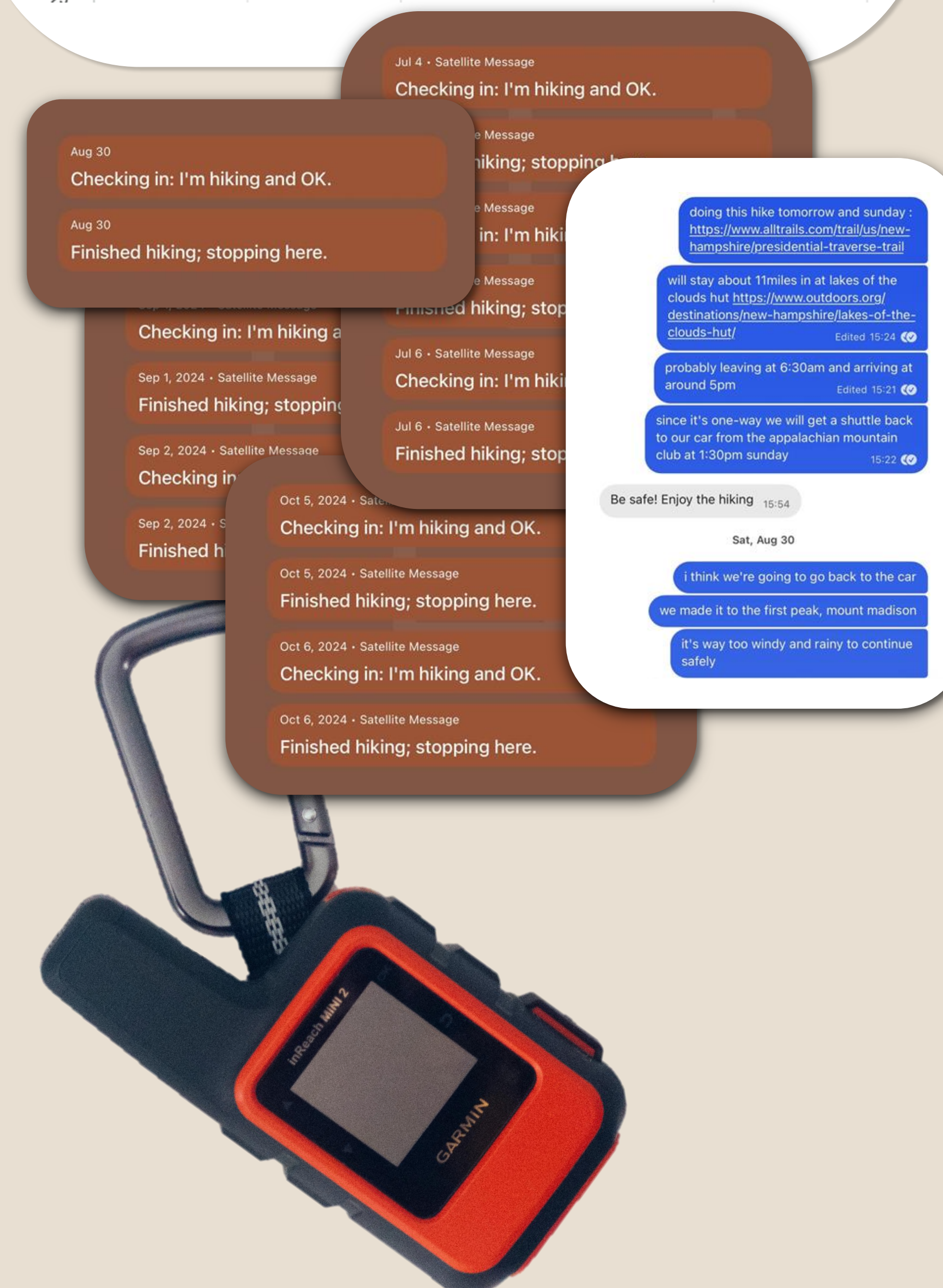
THROWN BACK TO MODERNITY

When my hiking partner and I are close to completing a hike, we automatically start analyzing our experiences. The prospect of wiping off dirt from my face and body, freeing my feet from close-toed hiking shoes, and simply sitting down in a comfortable, climate-controlled car—i.e., human comforts—provides partial fuel for these conversations. The rest comes from no longer being physically distressed: nearing a trailhead, the terrain is predictable, even smooth, and I no longer need to engage trail sense-fullness at full capacity to avoid falling. In other words, my more-than-human, *hiker* identity morphs back into a modern human *just walking*.

Back in modernity, I update a spreadsheet of the gear I takes on trail, with weights for each item **UPPER RIGHT**, looking for opportunities to shave ounces or grams and lessen the physical challenge on my next hike. I examine my planned meals and note how much food was leftover, which meals I would enjoy eating on a future trip, and what snacks I can never stomach again. I scroll through the photos I took on my phone, look at the health and location data recorded by my smartwatch, and attach a few images and notes to my AllTrails and Strava activity posts. Months later, when I develop the film from my hikes, I repeat some of the same steps.

The return to modernity, to humanness that is fully separate from nature, is swift and instinctive and strange. While I find traces of hiking bleeding into my everyday, through using the same water bottles or seeing suggested hiking social media content, I continue to struggle to reconcile my more-than-human-connected hiker self and “normal” self. Several times throughout our discussions, A2, who did not hike, characterized my experiences as “insane” and “unimaginable”; my own friends and family, many of whom also do not hike, respond similarly. The only live glimpses they have of me on trail are through satellite messages confirming that I’m safe **LOWER RIGHT**. Rarely, I encounter hikers I met on trail posting public trail reports online; I leave a comment saying hello and feel a sense of identity affirmation when they recognize me.

	A	B	C	D
1	type	item	name	weight (lbs)
2	backpack	backpack	ULA circuit	2.33125
3	bathroom	trowel	tentlab #3 heavy duty	0.0625
4	bathroom	pee cloth	kula cloth	0.025
5	clothing	down puffy	katabatic tarn	0.64375
6	clothing	underwear	bra and underwear	0.2
7	clothing	raincoat	arcteryx beta SL	0.75
8	eating	stove and pot	olicamp vector stove w/ XTS pot	0.60625
9	eating	spork	snowpeak long spork	0.05
10	eating	fuel	fuel canister	0.81875
11	safety	headlamp	nitecore NU20 classic	0.0837757
12	safety	compass	suunto a10	0.06625
13	safety	battery bank	iniu 20k	0.8
14	sleeping	pad	nemo tensor UL insulated	0.9375
15	sleeping	pad	GG thinlight	0.16875
16	sleeping	quilt	katabatic flex 22	1.494
17	sleeping	pillow	s2s aeros premium inflatable large	0.25
18	sleeping	tent	durston x-mid 2	2.4
19	water	filter	sawyer squeeze	0.1875
20	water	tablets	iodine and neutralizer	0.375
21	water	bottle	smart water 1L	0.075
22	water	bottle	cnoc 1L	0.15
23	water	bladder	cnoc 2L	0.175
24	base weight			12.3252757
25				



Discussion and Reflections

“Hike your own hike” is a mantra oft-repeated by hikers on long-distance trails. It relays a sense of freedom and self-determination for the liberal human to define their own journey, rather than hiking to the expectations (e.g., of pace, schedule, gear) of other humans. This notion is inherently human-centered. Preparing for wilderness hiking often means taking actions and seeking information that foregrounds our modern human vulnerabilities and desires: *I wonder if the view is going to be nice. How will I contact my family to let them know I’m safe? Can I trust other people’s ratings of this trail as “easy”, or will I be huffing and puffing? Where and how do I go to the bathroom? Did I remember to pack my rain coat?*

On the other hand, this mantra, while noble-sounding, might simply not be possible. As we have documented, the places we stop for shelter at night are legally-delineated, and one person’s snoring echoes in a bunkroom full of hikers. Large parts of the physical materials of the trail—the worn-down paths, the ladders, the conveniently placed stepping stones—are both curated by other human trail-builders and trail-maintainers and washed away by rain and snow. One hiker forgetting to lock up their food from bears can lead to an entire campsite being closed. With these offstage maneuvers and considerations in mind, a hike cannot be solely “*your own*”.

Prior work has created opportunities for people to inhabit these interconnected nature experiences, often through playful interactions [2]. In video games, Spors et al. [25] reflected on how taking on the role of non-human actors, such as the wind “sweeping over grass” or a “badger mother in a hostile environment” can lead to genuine senses of connection with nature. In 2023, Altarriba Bertran et al. [1] also presented an installation at DIS that allowed people to walk through the data collected from the first author’s experiences hiking El Camino de Santiago, a long-distance trail in Spain. Through the installation, users could walk through a sensor surface that revealed different kinds of data collected on the journey.

Our contribution, in this autoethnography, centers on how immersion in the collective experiences of a *hard, unforgiving* trail can overwhelm and push us into engaging with the more-than-human in ways that shorter, playful encounters with nature might not. For example, arriving at an obscured or cloudy summit by funicular elicits very different processes of reflection and noticing from arriving at that same point after hiking for hours or days, through rocky hurdles and suffocating tree cover. In the former, a person might experience fleeting disappointment and simply leave. In the latter, the hiker must, at the very least, hike back out and retrace their physical journey. To compensate for the guilt of wasted efforts, their minds might wander outside of their disappointment and lead them to notice new details around them. If the hiker faces a similar guilt on future hikes, they might reevaluate and evolve their approaches to hiking to be more dialectical [28], less focused around achieving a human-desired state of affairs (e.g., a pretty Instagram story) and more engaged with their environmental surroundings.

The aggregate experiences of being on a physically-challenging trail—sustained physical exertion and constant visual processing of our paths ahead; disappointment with a socked in view; weather patterns and climate change forcing us to forgo lunch or a water fill-up—overwhelm our human-centered senses, throwing us toward ways of noticing that are decidedly more-than-human. This disorientation leaves us no choice but to grow somatically attuned to changes in elevation and biome; relinquish control over finding the perfect lunch break or selfie spot; and engage gear as agentic materials rather than human-centered tools [10].

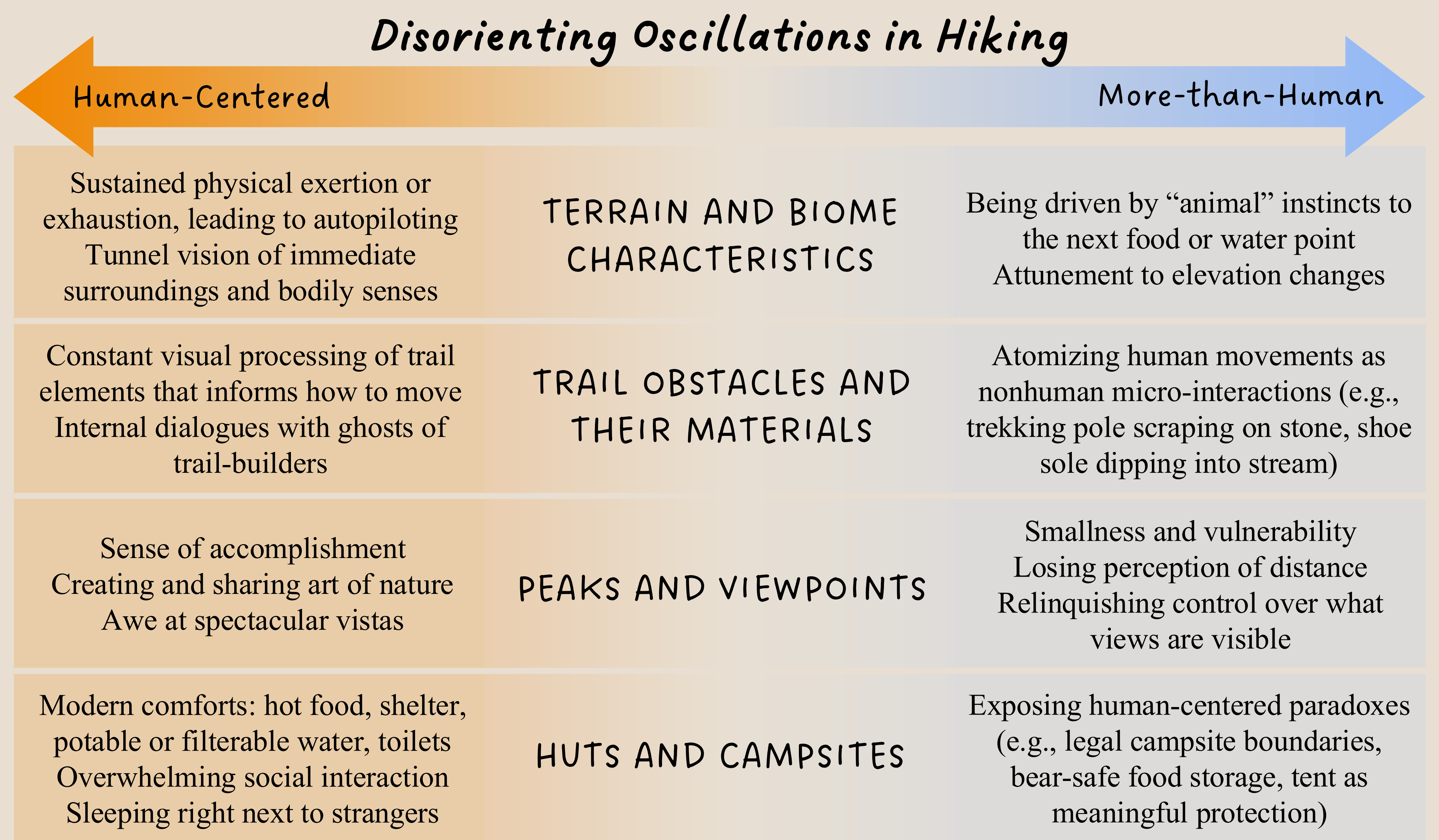
The material elements of the trail—the terrain and biome, the trail obstacles, the peaks and viewpoints, and the huts and campsites—do not manifest as one-off encounters with the more-than-human. They scatter themselves throughout hikes as continuous confrontations, and through this arrangement, they repeatedly force us to oscillate between the human and more-than-human **RIGHT**. With each consecutive wilderness hike—couched in a sharp exit of and reentry

into modernity—we must re-learn sense-fullness [21] and reposition ourselves into a “felt sense” viewpoint [22]. This composition of continuous exposures and re-adaptations to overwhelming trail elements—not unlike contrast therapy cycles between a sauna and an ice bath—is what we term *iterative physical disorientation*.

Aside from infrastructural failures as forcing functions, however, it’s unlikely that many people in modernity would actively choose to repeatedly subject themselves to physical exhaustion and fragility to the elements. Boulder fields and hurricane gusts simply do not appear out of nowhere on a city street to force us to rethink basic body movements. We acknowledge that our current working definition of iterative physical disorientation—involving multiple extreme, near-life-threatening experiences in the “wild”—might not be

fully replicable except by those with the privileges of being able-bodied and able to afford gear, and having reliable transportation access to wilderness areas.

However, we still hope that our findings can inform future disorientation methods. For instance, we could extend the sauna/ice bath analogy and investigate how culturally-situated activities like ice swimming or polar plunges might repeatedly spike disorientation. Another line of research could explore how variances in hiking cultures force different kinds of oscillations: e.g., across Europe, long distance trails pass through towns much more frequently than in North America, and in Central and South Asia, hiking often requires hiring local guides. In the future, we hope the design research community can explore these opportunities and draw inspiration from our immersion in the White Mountains.



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