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Thru-hiking the John Muir Trail as a modern pilgrimage: implications for natural resource management

Sarah Hitchner^a, John Schelhas^b, J. Peter Brosius^c and Nathan Nibbelink^{a,d}

^aCenter for Integrative Conservation Research, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA; ^bSouthern Research Station, USDA Forest Service, Athens, GA, USA; ^cDepartment of Anthropology, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA; ^dWarnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, University of Georgia, USA

ABSTRACT

In many religions, the simple act of walking from one point to another, sometimes over great distances, becomes a life-changing event, often undertaken only once in a lifetime at great financial and physical cost. In recent decades, walkers often label themselves or are labeled by others as pilgrims, and their walks parallel traditional religious pilgrimages such as the Hajj or the Camino de Santiago. In this article, we examine 26 travel blogs of thru-hikers (or intended thru-hikers) of the John Muir Trail in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, U.S.A., for elements of spirituality that correspond to discussions of religious pilgrimages. We also examine the ways that thru-hikers discuss management of the trail; like pilgrims on other trails, John Muir Trail (JMT) thru-hikers convey simultaneous annoyance and appreciation of rules that restrict behaviors on the popular trail. We contend that understanding a thru-hike of the JMT as a form of pilgrimage has important implications for natural resource management and can help wilderness managers better meet the needs of this type of trail user, one who crosses multiple administrative boundaries, often seeks a distinctive combination of comradery and solitude, and for whom a backcountry hike may be a transformative experience.

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All that is necessary to make any landscape visible and therefore impressive is to regard it from a new point of view, or from the old one with our heads upside down. Then we behold a new heaven and earth and are born again, as if we had gone on a pilgrimage to some far-off holy land ... (John Muir)

1. Introduction

Intentional immersion in natural places, and specifically hiking long distances through parks and wilderness areas, can be interpreted as a form of modern pilgrimage in which people temporarily disengage from their daily life activities, enter a liminal period of attempting to complete a journey for personal reasons, and then re-enter the outside world, often with a changed perspective as a result of spiritual or personal

CONTACT Sarah Hitchner  slhitchn@uga.edu  Center for Integrative Conservation Research, University of Georgia, 321 Holmes-Hunter Academic Building, 101 Herty Drive, Athens, GA 30602, USA

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growth gained during the experience (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Ptasznik, 2015; Turner, 1969; Turner & Turner, 1978; Van Gennep, 1960). There are many modern examples of pilgrimages through federal lands in the United States, including reenactment of important cultural journeys such as the Trail of Tears, following in the footsteps of important naturalists such as John Muir or William Bartram, or thru-hikes (hikes from one endpoint to the other) of long-distance hiking trails such as the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail. Pilgrimages have renewed importance in the modern world as people seek meaning, and many pilgrimages have close ties to landscapes as people grapple with the meaning of the human relationship with nature (Frey, 1998; Maddrell, della Dora, Scafi, & Walton, 2015; Stronza, 2001). Journeys to and within these natural areas, even when conducted with non-religious motivations, resemble religious pilgrimages in that they are transformative experiences undertaken by individuals or groups for the purposes of spiritual or emotional benefit along well-defined routes in places that are considered 'more sacred than the environment of everyday life' (Margry, 2008, p. 17). As noted by Ross-Bryant (2013) and Schelhas (2014), national parks are considered by many U.S. citizens to be sacred places, and the performance of secular pilgrimages within or between them both reflect and create meanings of the sacrality of these spaces.

Because of the importance of these journeys to the individuals that undertake them, there are numerous sites on the internet where one can read detailed blogs of natural pilgrimage experiences. Such blogs remain a largely unexplored resource for understanding the environmental thought and in-person nature experiences (with the notable exception of Champ, Williams, & Lundy, 2013). In this article, we analyze 26 publicly available blogs of thru-hikers of the John Muir Trail (JMT), an ~211-mile trail that mostly overlaps with the Pacific Crest Trail, in terms of how the thru-hiking experience meets the criteria of a modern pilgrimage. We also explore the tensions, as well as the overlaps, between the desire of hikers for solitary communion with nature and the social nature of the trail, as well as between annoyance at the rules regarding the JMT and an appreciation of the need for these regulations. Understanding a thru-hike of the JMT as a type of pilgrimage has implications for wilderness management. As noted by Cole and Williams (2012, p. 15), who summarized 50 years of research on wilderness experiences, managers must understand that visitors' experiences in wilderness areas are 'diverse, situational, and idiosyncratic,' making it difficult for managers to know how to best manage these areas for the highest quality visitor experiences. They emphasize the need to 'delve more deeply, through in-depth interviews, into the meanings people attach to experience' (Cole & Williams, 2012, p. 16). We suggest that managers of the parks, forests, and wilderness areas through which the JMT passes can better serve the segment of the users who view a thru-hike of the trail as a pilgrimage by understanding their spiritual motivations and experiences, and we contend that ethnographic analysis of thru-hikers' blogs both lays the foundation for future interviews and offers insights not obtainable by other data collection methods.

2. Background: John Muir and the JMT

John Muir (1838–1914) was a Scottish-American naturalist and author who advocated for the federal protection of wilderness areas, especially in the Western United States (and specifically in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California). He co-founded the Sierra

Club in 1892 and helped encouraged the passage of the 1890 Congressional National Park Bill, which led to the establishment of Yosemite National Park and other parks and wilderness areas. Many natural sites have been named for him (e.g. Muir Woods National Monument, Muir Pass, Muir Beach, Mount Muir, and Muir Glacier), and his writings have inspired millions of people to both protect natural places and experience nature first-hand (Sierra Club, 2017). A Christian who claimed to know much of the Bible by heart, Muir saw the beauty of nature as a great gift from God, and he often expressed his love for wilderness in religious terms. Worster (2008, p. 8) wrote in his biography of Muir that: “‘God’ for Muir, was a deliberately loose and imprecise term referring to an active, creative force dwelling in, above, and around nature’ (Worster, 2008, p. 9). As we discuss in this article, many JMT thru-hikers share Muir’s views of nature as the physical manifestation of a divine presence both within and outside the confines of the label of Christianity.

The JMT is an ~211-mile trail in the Sierra Nevada mountain range of California, U.S.A. For 160 of those miles, it follows the longer Pacific Crest Trail that runs from Mexico to Canada. Construction on the trail began in 1915 when the Sierra Club received \$10,000 in governmental funding from the state of California, and it was completed in 1938, the year of the 100th anniversary of John Muir’s birth (<http://www.pcta.org/>). Most people hike the trail from north to south, starting at Happy Isles in Yosemite National Park and ending on the summit of Mount Whitney, the highest point in the contiguous United States. The JMT passes through different adjacent and overlapping management areas with different types of regulation: national parks (Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and Sequoia), national forests (Inyo and Sierra), wilderness areas (Ansel Adams), and national monuments (Devil’s Postpile) (see [Figure 1](#)).

Hikers intending to travel the entire length of the JMT must obtain permits from the administrative entity (National Park Service (NPS) or Forest Service) where they begin their hike, which is usually the northern terminus of the trail, Happy Isles in Yosemite National Park. This is challenging because permits for this area become available 24 weeks in advance of the hikers’ intended start date, and given the short window of time available for a thru-hike due to seasonal restrictions, these spots fill quickly. Some permits, such as those needed to summit Mount Whitney, the southern terminus of the JMT, are given out almost exclusively through a lottery system. For both southbound and northbound hikers, permits can be elusive, as demand is higher than available supply. The NPS has noted a 100% increase in demand for JMT permits from 2011 to 2015 and an increase of 242% from January 2014 to January 2015 (NPS, 2017). [Figure 2](#) shows the average number of people annually using the JMT, while [Figure 3](#) shows the number of permits given to exit Donahue Pass from Yosemite Valley, a stretch required to thru-hike the JMT. These statistics indicate the total number of users of the trail and possibly the hikers who intend to complete the JMT; however, the number of people who complete a thru-hike is difficult to ascertain. Clearly, the blogs we analyzed were written by people who had obtained permits, but many others intending to thru-hike are not able to because of limited permits. In essence, the legal ability to thru-hike the JMT is dependent on a combination of careful planning and good luck.

Although there is administrative coordination among agencies for JMT hikers, each agency must also balance thru-hiking with other hiking interests and experiences (e.g. day hiking, other backcountry users, and Mt. Whitney ascents) and environmental concerns (NPS, 2017). As Mitchell (2016) emphasizes, these agencies represent the state in

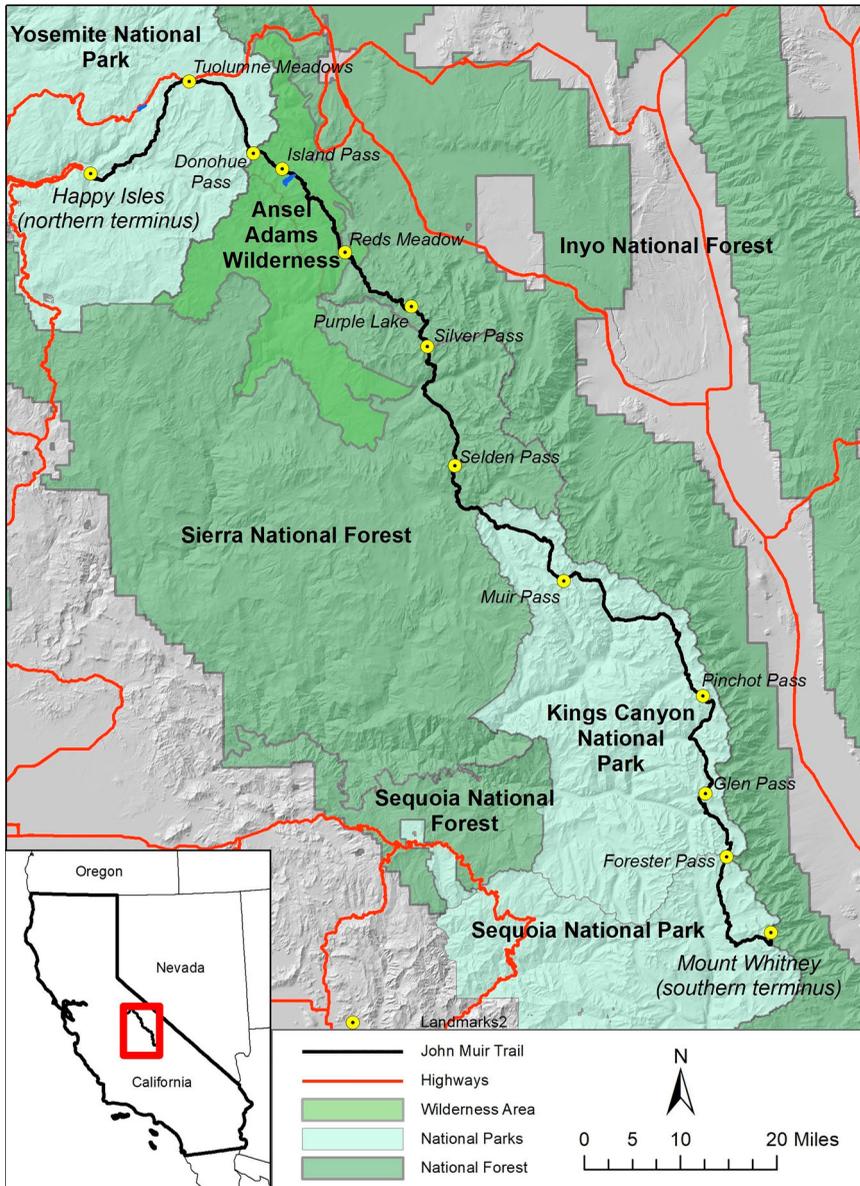


Figure 1. JMT. Credit: Nathan Nibbelink.

shaping the spiritual experiences of hikers on two levels. First, backcountry policy and management structures the pilgrimage experiences of hikers, and second, national parks and wilderness areas have historically been promoted by the state and others as places that provide opportunities for what can be considered public religious activities, including pilgrimage. As Mitchell (2016, p. 177) notes of JMT hikers: ‘In the public, state-managed space of wilderness, hikers attested to a sense of spiritual liberation from the burdens of civilized life. In this way, their spirituality takes on the character of a liberal, progressive public religion.’ It is the explicit exclusion of private enterprise that creates the opportunity for spiritual experience (Mitchell, 2016).

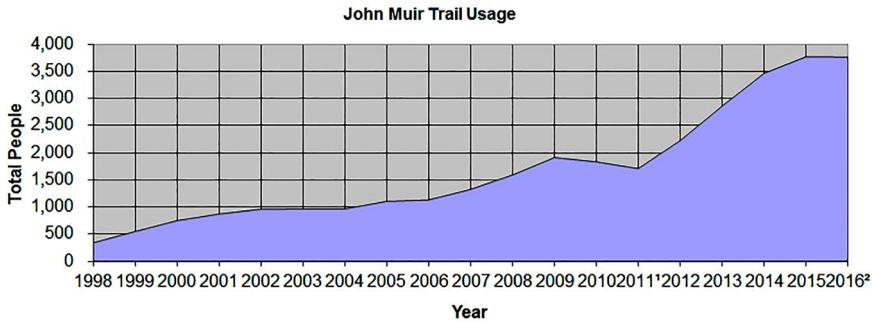


Figure 2. Number of people using the JMT (from NPS, 2017).

Note: 2002–2006: average number of people using the JMT was about 1000 per year. 2006–2009: number of people nearly doubled to almost 2000 per year. 2009–2014: the number of people increased to 3500 per year. 2015–2016: number of people leveled out just above 3500 per year.

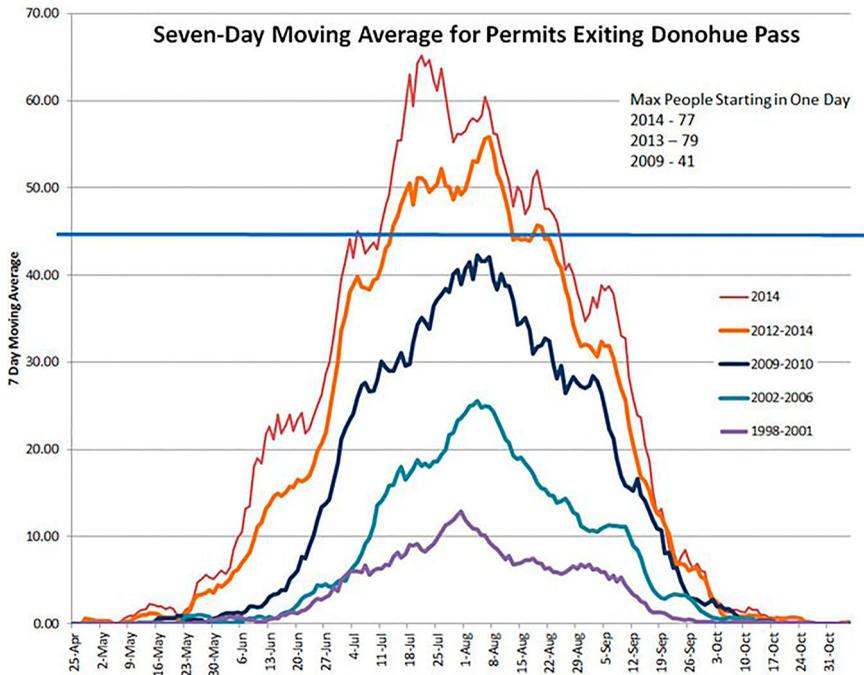


Figure 3. Graph showing increase in permits exiting Donohue Pass (NPS, 2017).

Note: Reservation data as of 9 January 2015 show an approximate year-to-date increase of 242% as compared to last year for JMT permits and an overall increase in permit requests of approximately 165%.

The popularity of this trail by many different types of users requires regulations and trail management practices that may infringe on those long-distance hikers seeking solitude, freedom, a temporary escape from urban life, and spiritual experiences through natural immersion. However, many thru-hikers grudgingly accept the rules enforced by natural resource managers (and occasionally break them), similar to pilgrims on more traditional religious pilgrimage routes in which overuse and improper management threaten

the physical integrity of the landscape and have detrimental effects on people's spiritual experiences in these areas.

3. Pilgrimage studies

Barber (1993, p. 1) describes a pilgrimage as 'a journey resulting from religious causes, externally to a holy site, and internally for spiritual purposes and internal understanding,' and the practice of traveling long distances to sacred places, often by foot, is common to many of the world's religions. Many people associate the term with religious pilgrimages such as the Hajj, a once-in-a-lifetime journey to Mecca for Muslims, or with Catholic pilgrims to Lourdes in France or Hindu pilgrims to the Ganges River in India (Barber, 1993; Collins-Kreiner, 2010b). Other well-known pilgrimages include the Christian Way of Saint James along the Camino de Santiago (Road to Santiago) in Spain (some routes include France and Portugal) and the Way of 88 Temples/Shikoku Buddhist pilgrimage in Japan (Westwood, 2003).

Many scholars have noted that modern tourism is rooted in pilgrimage (Cohen, 1992; Collins-Kreiner, 2010b; Graburn, 1989; McIntosh & Mansfeld, 2006), and numerous studies addressing the differences between pilgrims and tourists or travelers have found the lines between them to be blurry (Badone & Roseman, 2004; Collins-Kreiner, 2010a, 2010b; Jirásek, 2014). Tourists often call their own journeys 'pilgrimages,' and non-religious tourists (or adherents of other faiths) often visit sacred sites. Terms such as 'pilgrimage tourism' (Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000), 'secular pilgrimage,' and 'sacred tourism' (Singh, 2005), 'religious tourism' (Collins-Kreiner, 2010b), or 'pilgrimage as tourism' (Rountree, 2002) reflect the lack of clear distinction between tourism and pilgrimage. Collins-Kreiner (2010b, p. 156) says that 'the polarities on the pilgrimage-tourism axis are labeled sacred vs. secular, and between them range an almost endless list of possible sacred-secular combinations.' Tourism thus is not simply hedonistic consumerism devoid of meaning, and is instead understood to be rooted in the history of pilgrimage and a modern adaptation of it, often accompanied by a modern, more expansive view of religion (Ross-Bryant, 2013, p. 6). Badone and Roseman (2004, p. 2) claim that as Geertz (1973) conceptualized religion as a search for meaning and the 'really real,' 'touristic travel in search of authenticity or self-renewal falls under the rubric of the sacred, collapsing the distinction between secular voyaging and pilgrimage.'

People of all faiths (or without faith) continue to conduct pilgrimages for a variety of reasons. Religious reasons can include a vow or promise, reflection or meditation, prayer, atonement for sin, or a demonstration of faith (Frey, 1998, p. 32) or spiritual reasons, which are 'more vaguely defined personal searches or inner journeys of transformation' (Frey, 1998, p. 33). Other motivations include a desire to see and experience places of cultural and historical significance and places of folklore and legend, to advance causes (social, political, personal, religious), or as a personal challenge, the path to self-discovery, or temporary escape from everyday life. As ethnographers continually remind us, knowing the motivations of 'the Other' is difficult if not impossible (Badone & Roseman, 2004). The motivations of travelers rarely fit into discrete categories, and multiple reasons for undertaking a particular journey are most likely the norm rather than the exception. Badone and Roseman (2004, p. 2) point out that this has always been the case; they state: 'among the large number of medieval Europeans who traveled to Santiago de

Compostela and Canterbury, it is not likely that all were propelled by uniquely pious motives' (see also Smith, 1992). Frey (1998, pp. 4–5) notes that:

Although the Santiago pilgrimage has a religious foundation based in Catholic doctrine regarding sin, its remission and salvation, in its contemporary permutation these religious elements endure, but they also share the same stage with transcendent spirituality, tourism, physical adventure, nostalgia, a place to grieve, and esoteric initiation. The Camino can be (among many other things) a union with nature, a vacation, an escape from the drudgery of the everyday, a spiritual path to the self and humankind, a social reunion, or a personal testing ground. It is 'done' and 'made' as a pilgrimage, but what does that mean now? The glue that holds these disparate elements together seems to be the shared journey, the Camino de Santiago.

A pilgrimage is done alone but also communally; everyone on the path overcomes personal challenges, but the challenge itself becomes a shared experience, both in the physical presence of other people and in the knowledge that many other people have literally walked the same path. Everyone must overcome his or her own challenges on the way. Citing work by Turner (1969) and Van Gennep (1960) on rites of passage, and applying it to long-distance thru-hiking, Ptasznik (2015, p. 20) notes that: 'During the state of liminality, social distinctions cease to exist, creating a camaraderie between those undertaking the ritual.' The shared nature of this physically and emotionally intense experience creates a sense of kinship with others facing the same challenges, although it is simultaneously a personal journey of self-discovery and self-reflection in which many hikers seek solitude. While seeking solitude, many long-distance hikers also recognize and appreciate the social component of the hike. It is a shared journey, one that some hikers complete together in the same space and time and that other hikers share virtually through social media, blogs, videos, books, and other forms of communication. Peterson (2017) notes that while some early nature writers and explorers such as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau did seek solitude in nature, hiking clubs were formed in the late 1800s because 'what most early hikers sought was not solitude; it was fellowship.' For hikers today, the experience is collective whether a person hikes alone or with partners, and many people choose to share their experiences. Regardless of how the experience is shared, whether physically or virtually, the camaraderie that results is part of what makes the journey a pilgrimage.

Other scholars have researched modern hiking and backpacking as a spiritual practice. For example, Bratton (2012) writes about hiking the Appalachian Trail as a spiritual experience, and the trail itself as both a physical and social environment. She notes the 'growing academic interest in nature religion, pilgrimage from secular to sacred, wilderness spirituality, and the meaning of walking' (Bratton, 2012, p. xv). She maintains that long-distance walks have been a key element in many of the world's religions and that modern long hikes on established trails such as the Appalachian Trail confer similar spiritual benefits to traditional pilgrimages associated with mainstream religions. Theologian Belden Lane (2014, p. 4) notes that 'spiritual practice – far from being anything ethereal – is a highly tactile, embodied, and visceral affair,' and it is precisely the physicality of the journey that leads to spiritual renewal and, in some cases, redemption. Further, Peterson (2017) notes that for long-distance trails such as the Appalachian Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail, 'the lack of utilitarian function also made the trails' ideological purpose

more evident.’ Since the process of undertaking a long hike is for most people unnecessary, these hikes serve as means to fill emotional, and in many cases, spiritual needs.

Ptasznik notes how the use of the term ‘pilgrimage’ when applied to hiking long distances reflects a diversified approach to spirituality in the United States; among many hikers, there is less a focus on organized, mainstream religions and more emphasis on ‘diffuse and individualized forms of spirituality common to the United States’ (Ptasznik, 2015, p. 6; see also Mitchell, 2016; Taylor, 2010). Similarly, McIntosh and Mansfeld (2006, p. 118) note that the conventionally Western distinction between the external world of objects and events and the inner world of spirituality and religion is also becoming less clear as ‘we are now seeing a major integration of outer and inner life’ (see also Neal & Biberman, 2003). With this in mind, trail maintenance organizations have frequently adopted language that reflects the spiritual aspect of the trails and the desire of users of the trail to experience spiritual moments while immersed in nature (Ptasznik, 2015, p. 16). For example, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy states that their vision ‘is to connect the human spirit with nature We are committed to protect this sacred space through education and inspiration’ (<http://www.appalachiantrail.org/>).

The internal and external worlds of people intersect in specific places at specific moments, and the landscapes through which journeys take place are also a key element of the definition of a pilgrimage. Pilgrimage routes often contain layers of cultural, historic, and religious or spiritual significance. Specific sites along the pilgrimage paths are socially constructed as sacred, secular, or both at once (Collins-Kreiner, 2010b, p. 157, see also Gatrell and Collins-Kreiner, 2006; Sarmiento & Hitchner, 2017). Scholars have noted the restorative and therapeutic aspects of the physical landscapes in which spiritual pilgrimages take place (Conradson, 2007; Maddrell et al., 2015), and these landscapes are also often considered sacred. Maddrell et al. (2015, p. 1) focus on the intersection of pilgrimage and landscape studies, noting that ‘the shrine, pilgrim route and their wider surroundings are often deeply intertwined as part of the pilgrim experience.’ Ross-Bryant (2013, pp. 17–18) notes that travelers in the United States often visit national parks, which are still seen by many Americans as pristine, untouched places of natural beauty that embody American values and ideals and to which people can go in order to spiritually recharge and even be ‘born again.’ Recognizing the critique of ‘pristine wilderness’ articulated by Cronon (1996) and other scholars, she states that: ‘The national park is nature that has been made culture, while claiming to be pure nature’ (Ross-Bryant, 2013, p. 2). Mitchell (2016) interviewed 32 JMT hikers at access points along the trail, focusing on the extent and nature of religion and spirituality among the hikers and their relationships to nature and place. Hikers identified more with spirituality than organized religion, emphasized the importance of ‘wilderness’ in contrast to ‘civilization’ and the opportunities for reflection and spiritual experiences afforded by stepping out of ‘civilization,’ and contrasted ‘community’ of hikers with non-wilderness users (Mitchell, 2016). While not directly invoking the idea of pilgrimage, Mitchell (2016) notes that the experience is a temporary retreat from ‘civilization’ for spiritual refreshment that is then carried back into ordinary life. In this sense, visitors to national parks and other federally regulated areas such as national forests and wilderness management areas can be considered pilgrims, and their journeys to and within these parks can be labeled pilgrimages.

4. Ethnographic analysis of thru-hiker blogs

Anthropology can help understand the ‘full story’ of what happens to those who engage in all forms of tourism (Stronza, 2001, p. 278), and ethnographic analysis of travelers’ narratives is a key method of investigating the meaning of their experiences. As noted by Doostdar (2004, p. 653), ‘calls are increasingly being made for an ethnographic and anthropological approach to the study of computer-mediated communication and online communities’ (see also Escobar, 1994; Hakken, 1999; Miller & Slater, 2000; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Blogs, or weblogs, are web-based personal journals, with disparate entries uploaded by individuals in chronological (or reverse chronological) order (Banyai & Havitz, 2013; Dearstyne, 2005; Panteli, Yan, & Chamakiotis, 2011). Backpackers keep blogs for a number of audiences: family and friends they know ‘in real life,’ people with whom they maintain personal but virtual friendships (i.e. have never met offline), unknown audiences (i.e. readers of blogs who read and sometimes respond to blog posts but are ‘strangers’ to the bloggers), and the bloggers themselves (Panteli et al., 2011). Motivations for writing for these different audiences can shift; some bloggers begin blogging in order to update friends and family of their whereabouts and experiences but change their writing style in response to comments from unknown blog readers or as the act of blogging becomes a more personal means of self-expression (Panteli et al., 2011).

Travel blogs are written voluntarily and not for commercial or research purposes; thus, they are perceived by various audiences as more accurate interpretations and reflections of the authors’ perspectives, priorities, and ascribed meanings of their experiences (Nelson, 2015; Volo, 2010). However, travel blogs have limitations as a resource for tourism research: (1) not all locales are equally represented (long-term travelers are more likely to blog); (2) there is considerable variation in the content of blogs and among bloggers; and (3) blogs are subjective versions of reality and cannot be verified (Nelson, 2015). We have chosen to analyze blogs in order to understand how hikers describe inner spiritual experiences while hiking the JMT. We analyze how these experiences are similar to more traditional pilgrimages and reflect on implications for resource managers who are responsible for managing public lands for many types of users.

5. Methods

The data and analysis presented here represent preliminary work intended to lay the foundation for future fieldwork in the Sierra Nevadas involving in-depth interviews with thru-hikers and natural resource managers. We chose to focus on blogs related to thru-hiking the JMT primarily because of the overwhelming number of blogs about thru-hiking longer trails in the United States such as the Pacific Crest Trail and the Appalachian Trail. Focusing on a less-represented trail was more manageable given limited time and resources we had available for the exploratory research. The fact that the trail was named for John Muir, an icon of environmentalism and a noted figure in linking nature and spirituality/religion (Taylor, 2010), suggested that hikers might be inclined to reflect on issues central to our study. We selected blogs to analyze based on the following criteria: (1) blogger’s intention to thru-hike the JMT (though not all were successful), (2) sufficient length of blog/number of entries (at least 10), and (3) self-reflective nature of blog posts (not just a description of gear and list of waypoints and campsites). This was a subjective process, neither random

nor statistically generalizable. We analyzed 26 blogs that met these criteria. Rather than rigidly specifying preconceived categories of topics and looking for evidence to support them in the blogs, we employed a grounded theory approach to this inquiry that allowed themes to emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to note, categorize, and organize these themes, and we then linked these themes to ideas encountered in the extant literature on heritage tourism, pilgrimages, and immersion in nature as a spiritual experience.

As is conventional with social science research, we have coded the names of the participants, in this case bloggers unaware of our study. Although publicly available blogs are considered open access, we have chosen to use codes,¹ as it is standard practice in our discipline and because the names of the bloggers are not relevant to this research. We have lightly edited the direct quotes for the sake of clarity and correct spelling and punctuation; we have retained original markers of emphasis such as capital letters or italics as they appear on the blogs.

6. Results

6.1. Motivations to hike the JMT

As with other types of pilgrimage, hikers mentioned different reasons for wanting to hike the JMT. Some hiked in memory of someone who served as an inspiration to the hiker, including a close family friend with a ‘true mountaineering spirit’ (HB19) and a great-aunt who, for 87 years, ‘lived out her own adventures’ (HB16). Others saw the thru-hike as a personal challenge or adventure; one hiker noted that she ‘wanted to see if I could do it, and what kind of hiker I am’ (HB 22). Some used this hike as preparation for other long hikes (HB2). One hiked to bring attention to a specific cause, in this case ‘to inspire others to support the cause of HIV/AIDS and Mental Health Care’ (HB2). Several wrote that their main motivation was simply a love of hiking, including the ‘ritualistic daily pattern of backpacking’ (HB22), and being outdoors. As described below, for many hikers, there was also a spiritual motivation for hiking.

6.2. Hiking the JMT as a pilgrimage or spiritual experience

As noted, the word ‘pilgrimage’ is used loosely by many types of travelers and might not refer to an explicitly religious experience. We found that some JMT thru-hikers directly used the word ‘pilgrimage’ in their blogs to describe their experience on the JMT and the word ‘pilgrim’ to describe fellow hikers.

I’m heading up to do a day hike of Clouds Rest on Monday, then off I go for my JMT pilgrimage! (HB19)

From August 23 to September 13, 2015, I hiked the John Muir Trail ... The journey was just as much an interior pilgrimage as a physical walk through the mountains. (HB22)

We share one evening and one morning, and I never see them again ... That’s typical of this linear community, this fleeting intimacy. When one meets another on the path, both have a sense for what the other is experiencing ... when one outpaces the other, or heads the opposite direction, why bother saying goodbye? Await the next pilgrim and pick the conversation up where it left off. (HB22)

Most hikers characterized their thru-hike as some sort of personal journey, often with a spiritual element. Hikers wrote about this in various ways. One man wrote that while experiencing an unintended employment gap, he decided to ‘pursue a quest ... to have an adventure, a spiritual journey’ (HB5). Another wrote about how the process of thru-hiking forced one to be ‘present in the moment, accept whatever the trail offered us, and cultivate our state of mind. After all, we had not come to the mountains to carry our work ethic into them, but to ... feel different on the inside’ (HB17). Several specifically discussed their faith in Christianity; they wrote about God (HB5, HB12, HB13), and several carried Bibles and/or prayer books on their hike (HB12, HB13). One ascribed the incredible beauty of the scenery to God and thanked Him for ‘His magnificent creation’ (HB5). Another wrote directly, and extensively, about his Christian faith and the ways that it infused his thru-hiking experience:

I’m a Christian and I’m going to get all gushy about Christian related things, so if you don’t like that kind of stuff then just skip this ... if you can handle it then read on ... Then of course there was the scenery, and man if you don’t believe in God after you see that then I don’t know what it would take. (HB12)

Others wrote about a more personalized, less formal spirituality. For example, one hiker said that “This isn’t a “moment” for me, it truly is a spiritual experience, a sense so strong that tells me that everything’s been aligned so that I may be here, right here, right now’ (HB5). Another noted that for her and a good friend of hers, nature serves as a church and refers to outdoor immersion experiences as ‘worshipping in the green temple’; she further notes that she has recently been ‘church-shopping vigorously’ in various national parks (HB22). Others wrote about the idea of renewal, restoration, or rejuvenation of being immersed in nature, which they consider to be a type of spiritual or sacred landscape. One hiker compared natural places in the United States to sacred sites in other parts of the world; she wrote: ‘If the great cathedrals of Europe can be described as houses of stone and light, then places like the Grand Canyon and the Sierra Nevada mountains are surely America’s great cathedrals’ (HB13). Finally, one woman who hiked the JMT alone, described how the walk itself becomes a sort of prayer: ‘This path in the present connects my path in the past and my path in the future. Every step I take is memory, is hope, is prayer’ (HB26).

Some thru-hikers described this experience as time away from ‘the real world,’ a liminal period during which one can be refreshed in order to better face the challenges of everyday life. Several hikers wrote about how the thru-hiking experience forced them to focus and be continually aware; one man said that he was ‘more aware on the trail than I had ever been in the city’ (HB7). This awareness, according to many hikers, stems from the simplicity of life on the trail: the repetitive nature of daily activities (HB7), nonstop immersion ‘in the splendor of Nature’ (HB7), and the fact that while hiking, ‘everyday life is stripped down to the bare necessities (i.e. staying fed, staying hydrated, trying to stay clean, staying warm and getting rest)’ (HB12). The combination of being fully aware (of one’s self and surroundings) and being distanced from distractions and non-necessities for even a short time can have profound positive impacts on hikers. One man noted that:

Yeah it was only 3 weeks, but I guess that’s all it took to have a profound impact on me from the standpoint of putting things in my life into better perspective ... For me it was realizing

how much time I've spent over the years stressing over things in my life that don't really matter. So I hope to take this new perspective and apply it by focusing on the important things like being a good husband, a good father, a good friend, and putting my time and effort into the things that really matter in life. (HB12)

Several hikers specifically referred to their experience thru-hiking the JMT as a break from 'the real world' (HB23, HB26) and expressed reluctance to return to it (HB9). They all planned to carry their newfound perspectives into the lives to which they are returning (HB6, HB7, HB23), acknowledging the challenge of this. One man, nearing the end of his hike, stated:

Just one more day remains to make sure that when I come home the golden goose will still have been fed and remain healthy. If you can't tell by the previous posts, I'm getting anxious. I'm not worried about what's out there, I'm worried about what I return to. (HB9)

These quotes reflect the various ways that bloggers were self-reflective while on the JMT or writing about their experiences afterwards and reveal the personally transformative nature of the experience.

Others specifically mentioned that this was not a particularly spiritual experience for them. However, they often acknowledge that for many people, it is. For example, one thru-hiker noted that: 'Unlike many people, I don't have anything profound to say; this hike won't be about a life changing event or a catharsis of some sort. I just like to hike, especially in beautiful country' (HB11).

6.3. Social encounters and relationships on the JMT

Some hikers discussed the desire for solitude and the dislike of contact with other hikers. As several bloggers noted, the JMT trail is very popular and often crowded. One person cited its nickname of 'the John Muir Thoroughfare' (HB9). Several people noted the lack of solitude on much of the trail and commented that opportunities, even for hikers without companions, to be totally alone while hiking, are rare (HB6, HB22). One hiker said: 'This isn't the trail for you if you want to be alone for days on end' (HB6). Another expressed such disappointment at the lack of solitude that she would not hike the JMT again:

I was amazed how many people were hiking up! A nearly constant stream. I was glad to be going down and ready to be out of the crowd. As beautiful as this trail is, I don't plan to return. It is simply too popular, too regulated, and if I were to return, it would be off the beaten path on the high Sierra. (HB20)

Some hikers discussed the pros and cons of hiking solo and with partners. One person, hiking alone, stated that although at times she wanted a hiking partner, other times, 'when the world is calm between rivers, silent, gentle enough for wildlife to come be noticed, I am at peace and happy – not ready to give up the solitude for the companionship and shared worries' (HB3). Others wrote explicitly about recognizing the complexity of seeking both solitude and company at the same time, or enjoying the solitude with only occasional shared moments. One noted that she prefers to hike alone, but enjoys chatting with fellow hikers along the way: 'Solitude and accidental companionship – the best of both worlds!' (HB3).

Several blogs reflected a sense of community among hikers, particularly of thru-hikers who often pass each other multiple times over periods of several weeks and tend to congregate in the same campsites and lodging facilities. Many bloggers describe meaningful social interactions, even intense and genuine connections, with fellow hikers on the trail; one man noted:

I'm not exactly sure how to explain this without sounding woo-woo, but I felt a connection between myself, Nature and other hikers that I've never felt before. I felt their energy in my heart; and this energy gave me great strength and a considerable sense of peace. (HB7)

Interactions that may be taken for granted off-trail become infused with meaning while thru-hiking (HB1, HB7, HB22, HB23). For example, one hiker wrote:

I'm not having super deep conversations with anyone. But it feels deep. The content of the conversations is irrelevant to their underlying truth: We are in the fellowship – we *are* the fellowship. We say our destination is Mount Whitney, but our journey is through one another. (HB22)

Bloggers explained how these positive encounters had a clear effect on restoring their faith in humanity. One hiker wrote about learning on this hike that 'there are a lot of good people still out there. You just need to turn off the TV and the radio and look around you. I'm sure that you'll see them' (HB23). Another noted that the connection among strangers on the trail, and the constant concern for one another's safety and well-being, encourages compassion for others in off-trail life as well, stating that: 'We need to look after and care for our fellowman at all times not just while we are on the trail' (HB23).

6.4. Regulation and management of the JMT

Once hikers are on the trail, management decisions and bureaucratic details affect the thru-hiking experience in several ways. Specific management issues that hikers must navigate include rules regarding where they are allowed to camp, where they can have campfires, the requirement to use bear canisters for food in some areas along the trail, and the rules regarding human waste. Several hikers noted disappointment in not being able to have a fire (HB9, HB11) or use wood-burning stoves. Another hiker was annoyed at a regulation banning thru-hikers from staying in a lodge at Tuolumne Meadows, under the threat of having his permit revoked. He said sarcastically: 'I never have quite understood this rule ... Oh well, people surely smarter than I am must have made up this rule' (HB10).

Several people discussed issues regarding the requirement to use bear cans for food storage, stating that they were heavy, bulky, not big enough at times, and too big at others. One hiker stated: 'The canisters are heavy, rigid, and large. They occupy a prime hunk of backpack real estate and make accessing anything else more complicated. I'm not thrilled' (HB22). Some would prefer to hang their food from trees, as they are likely accustomed to doing elsewhere. One, however, recognizes that the rule exists 'thanks to many, many clueless or apathetic folks who improperly stored food' (HB22). Regulations regarding human waste, including the difficulty of burying it in rocky terrain away from trails, camp sites, and water sources, and the requirement to pack it all out from the Mount Whitney area, are a popular topic of discussion in the blogs (HB14).

While hikers did complain about some of these management issues in their online hiking blogs, they also wrote about the need for regulations to preserve the natural beauty and ecological integrity of the popular trail. One hiker noted:

There seems to be so many rules that are new and foreign to me. I'm used to being free when in the wilderness and not regulated with all these rules ... I guess the trail is so popular that if it wasn't regulated it would be trashed in no time. People are loving The John Muir Trail to death. (HB21)

Others admitted intentionally breaking the rules during their hike, due to both unexpected circumstances and gaps in planning and knowledge. One hiker noted that his group was forced to make an unauthorized camp site in Yosemite National Park because they were slower than they had planned and could not safely hike in the dark (HB1); another hiker described a similar situation around Tenaya Lake, where they would have to camp illegally near water if they could not reach the road to town before dark (HB17). Others admitted to hanging bags of food instead of keeping it all in a bear canister as required (HB11, HB12). One stated: 'That's illegal, but what choice is there? I'm pretty sure the rangers know that people do this all the time' (HB11). One woman freely admitted to helping herself to an outdoor hot spring bath at Red's Meadow, knowing it was closed (HB22). Another hiker noted that he could probably get away with breaking a rule regarding using a wood-burning stove. However, he decided to comply, saying: 'Oh well, if you can't adapt you shouldn't be out there anyway' (HB9).

Despite complaining at times about rules and regulations, interactions with park rangers and other authority figures along the trail were overwhelmingly positive. Several hikers noted instances in which rangers had exerted extra effort to warn hikers of potential dangers on the trail ahead, including threats of wildfires, lack of potable water, approaching storms, and damage to the trail (HB1, HB10). In some cases, rangers 'stretched the regs' (HB10) to help thru-hikers, indicating that they were not as interested in policing the trail as in keeping hikers safe and the trail well-maintained. Many of these details may be common among backcountry users, but some that are specific to the JMT can perhaps be addressed through tailored management strategies in ways that both enhance hikers' experiences and maintain the ecological integrity of the trail and adjoining areas.

7. Discussion: understanding the JMT as a pilgrimage route and implications for natural resource management

Pilgrimages, in all their modern manifestations, continue to hold deep cultural meanings (Badone & Roseman, 2004). Thru-hiking the JMT meets many criteria of being a modern pilgrimage. It presents physical challenges and hardships, requires a period of liminality or time spent away from 'real life,' and offers an opportunity for transformative spiritual experiences while completing the hike. Many people go to wilderness areas such as this to find solitude and independence; however, the JMT is often quite crowded, especially in certain high-traffic areas. Despite this tension, there is a sense of community among thru-hikers. Thru-hikers of the JMT appreciate the work that has gone into the creation and maintenance of the trail, and although they are annoyed by some of the regulations

and rules of the trail, they recognize the need for them in order to preserve the natural beauty and ecological integrity of this area, given the popularity of the trail for different types of users. They also value the role that rangers and other authority figures play in not only enforcing rules, but also genuinely caring about the safety and experience of hikers. For thru-hikers seeking immersion in nature and an opportunity to temporarily distance themselves from an urban environment and their normal lives, the JMT offers a pilgrimage experience akin to more explicitly religious journeys by foot.

The increasing popularity of this route, and people seeking to hike the entire length of it, has necessitated the development of mechanisms to limit both potentially damaging behaviors and the number of people on the trail at any given time. Increased demand has led to a revised interim management system in order to limit some of the negative effects of overcrowding on the trail, including the inability of short-distance hikers to obtain permits, crowding at designated campsites and creation of new and unauthorized campsites along the trail, and increased interactions with bears. In 2015, the NPS implemented an interim management plan which includes an exit quota of 45 hikers per day over Donahue Pass (to exit Yosemite National Park). NPS (2017) notes that:

The goal of the exit quota is to restore traditional wilderness use patterns, balance access for JMT hikers with access for non-JMT hikers in the Yosemite Wilderness, and reduce physical and social impacts. Additionally, the interim exit quota allows the park to collect more data to inform future planning efforts.

Data collected by NPS employees and other natural resource administrators along the trail, as well as feedback gathered during planning sessions open to the public, will lead to an integrated and holistic wilderness management plan (NPS, 2017). Park and wilderness managers understand the need to balance access to the trail with limiting negative physical impacts on the trail itself and negative social impacts on the hiking experience.

A recent review of research on wilderness experiences found that wilderness users share many motivations with those engaging in other outdoor recreation experiences: enjoying nature, physical fitness, and reducing tensions (Cole & Williams, 2012). However, the same review also highlights the importance of understanding variation in motives across wilderness areas and users, and the need to more deeply explore the lived and felt experiences of wilderness users (Cole & Williams, 2012). Another recent review, which focuses on future research, encourages social scientists to understand both the values associated with wilderness and the role of technologies in wilderness experiences (Watson, Cordell, Manning, & Martin, 2016).

Natural resource managers, park rangers, employees of national forests, etc. can glean information from travel blogs (and possibly other forms of online shared social media) that may help guide decisions on how to manage places and resources to best meet the needs of people that go there while maintaining the integrity of the place. Mitchell (2016) suggests that natural resource managers provide both public goods and facilitate the interior and private satisfaction of individuals. Our analysis of JMT thru-hiker blogs shows that, for many hikers, this journey is a type of modern pilgrimage, and we maintain that wilderness managers need to understand and manage for such pilgrimage experiences. To be clear, we chose the blogs we analyzed to reflect our focus on pilgrimages, and other selections of blogs could emphasize other dimensions of thru-hiking, such as athletic endeavor, aesthetic experience, or engagement with other people. Yet Mitchell

(2016) suggests that all of these aspects – the daily ritual of hiking, the beauty of nature, and the social bond with other hikers – in effect make hiking the JMT a spiritual experience. If one goal of natural resource management is to serve the public, recognition of and management for pilgrimage experiences is highly appropriate.

The fact that pilgrimage experiences may represent turning or re-orientation points in the lives of some hikers emphasizes the power and uniqueness that a hiking pilgrimage can evoke. While other research has examined the relative importance of spiritual motivations compared to other motivations, only a few studies have examined the nature of the spiritual experiences of wilderness users (Bratton, 2012; Frederickson & Anderson, 1999; Mitchell, 2016). Though our exploratory study demonstrates the complexity of managing trails and public lands for multiple types of users with different objectives, approaches, and aspirations, our results are not sufficient to make specific recommendations about how managers should balance pilgrimage experiences with other management objectives. However, this study does highlight how the cultural experience of thru-hiking long-distance trails in wilderness areas serves as a modern pilgrimage and is consistent with trends in American spirituality and religion. Natural resource managers create the conditions for pilgrimage experiences, and it is critical that they understand the nature of these experiences and how management actions within their jurisdiction affect them.

Note

1. We have numbered the blogs 1–26 and used the prefix HB, which stands for ‘Hiking Blog.’ For example, the second blog we analyzed would be coded as ‘HB2.’

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