

NEW PATHS TOWARD A HISTORY OF PENNSYLVANIA OUTDOOR RECREATION

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In his study of nineteenth-century southwestern Pennsylvania, historian Scott Martin describes leisure as “a contested cultural space, in which ideas about ethnicity, class, and gender were articulated and developed.”¹ Studies of outdoor recreation, a specific type of leisure taking place in natural settings, are valuable to historians of Pennsylvania for what they reveal about the ways groups chose to spend their free time and the implications for the state’s environmental, social, and political history. While outdoor recreation of various forms has always been a salient feature of life, the acceleration of industrialization and economic growth during the second half of the nineteenth century brought many Americans increased time and disposable income to spend on pursuing various forms of recreation. As we know, this trend has continued through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to the point where outdoor recreation drives a multibillion-dollar industry that annually services more than 159 million recreationists.²

In Pennsylvania, forms of outdoor recreation vary widely, from walking along a trail through Gifford Pinchot State Park and plunging a raft through the Youghiogheny River’s whitewater

to peering through binoculars at a scarlet tanager and seeking a geocache (a hidden outdoor treasure sought in a game whose results are shared online). A majority of Pennsylvanians participate in some form of outdoor recreation and have done so for most of the Commonwealth's history. Furthermore, this form of leisure is relatively egalitarian—both the wealthiest and poorest residents can participate in the same type of recreation, albeit perhaps in very different ways.

Outdoor recreation has a special relevance to environmental historians. Under Donald Worster's well-known definition of environmental history as understanding "how humans have been affected by their natural environment through time and, conversely, how they have affected that environment and with what results," outdoor recreation represents an explicit, self-conscious, and voluntary relationship with the environment.³ When environmental historians study how people interacted with the environment to clear land, grow food, extract minerals, and fight disease—activities done out of necessity rather than choice—they explain how people survived and the implications for the environment. In contrast, historians who study outdoor recreation can reconstruct Pennsylvanians' idealized visions of nature and, through leisure, their desired interactions with it. This article surveys the contributions of outdoor recreation to the history of Pennsylvania—especially in terms of environmental, social, and political history—and, in the process, suggests areas for future study.

Creating and Preserving Recreational Landscapes

In Pennsylvania, recreationists have formed a powerful constituency for the protection of fish and game, natural places, and public access to land. Historians have long recognized the influence of sportsmen in enacting regulations and protecting habitat, which spurred the early conservation movement, led to regulation of resource extraction, and created the state park system.⁴ A host of prominent Pennsylvania recreationists have made significant contributions to the creation and preservation of recreational landscapes. Historian Thomas Smith notes that the Allegheny River Valley alone produced such nationally recognized figures as John P. Saylor, Howard Zahniser, Rachel Carson, and Edward Abbey.⁵ Pennsylvania was also home to lesser-known figures such as Daniel K. Hoch, the two-term U.S. Representative from Reading who in 1945 championed the first campaign for National

Trails System legislation. "There is no pleasure in walking along an open hot road in an area of gas fumes, with the constant danger of being struck by cars," he testified to the House Committee on Roads, which controlled potential trail funding. "We want to walk away from roads."⁶ Members of the Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Izaak Walton League, Boone and Crockett Club, and the state's other outing and sportsmen organizations spread news about threats to their chosen recreations and galvanized support for conservation legislation throughout the twentieth century.

The emergence of the environmental movement in the late 1960s and 1970s broadened the concerns of Pennsylvania recreationists, but their primary focus remained on protecting the land and game fundamental to their sports. For example, as Richard Albert recounts, canoers and hikers joined environmentalists and displaced property owners to contest a proposed Army Corps of Engineers dam on the Delaware River at Tocks Island.⁷ During the late 1960s, recreationists' opposition to the project—and the forty-mile-long reservoir it would have created—suggests a broadening spectrum of concerns and conflicting values within the outdoor recreation community. Dam building for flood control, hydroelectric power generation, and recreation had been a classic conservationist project, associated especially with Pennsylvania's most prominent Progressive, Gifford Pinchot. In the context of late twentieth-century environmentalism, however, recreationists' values had changed. The majority wanted to fish and canoe the Delaware River as a free-flowing body of water; they wanted to walk to secluded Sunfish Pond rather than along the shore of a manmade, multiuse lake. In contrast, many motorboaters and hunters sought the placid waters and increased public land that the project would have provided. Few historians have mined the archives and privately held collections of local clubs to fully flesh out the shifting values or internal conflicts of the outdoor recreation community, but such an analysis would help explain how the environmental movement evolved during this formative period.

Outdoor recreationists could also have a significant influence over policies indirectly related to natural places. For example, urban bicyclists of the late nineteenth century were some of the most vocal proponents of the Good Roads Movement, which led to the paving of thousands of miles of roads. In the 1890s, the invention of the safety bicycle led to a "boom" in the popularity of cycling, which Pennsylvanians viewed as both a form of recreation and a healthy way to exercise. "The man who takes a daily spin into the country on a bicycle need never fear the ogre of dyspepsia," wrote

an enthusiastic Philadelphia cyclist in 1892. “The average wheelman can eat and drink anything with an impunity surpassed only by the ostrich and the Harlem breed of goat.” To ensure that cyclists had safe, level roads to ride, the League of American Wheelmen—founded in 1880—broadened the Good Roads campaign by appealing to rural residents and farmers. “I want you to understand,” wrote a League editor in the commiserate-yet-patronizing 1891 booklet *The Gospel of Good Roads*, “that a bad road is really the most expensive thing in your agricultural outfit; that it is as much behind the times as the hand-loom and the flail and the sickle.” The cyclists’ advocacy was remarkably successful. “So many rural Americans rallied to the good-roads standard,” notes historian Christopher Wells, “that the urban origins of the good-roads agenda are commonly downplayed or are overlooked entirely.”⁸

The example of the wheelmen’s advocacy reminds us that, although historians know well the relationship between recreationists and environmental regulation, aspects of this history remain to be fully evaluated. Furthermore, the irony that the Good Roads Movement eventually led to fewer opportunities for safe bicycling should highlight the ambiguous achievements of some advocacy efforts. Campaigns of specific groups of recreationists—say, geocachers, speedboat owners, and ATV enthusiasts—to open new recreational landscapes for their sports may have resulted in fewer opportunities or lessened the quality of experiences for others—not to mention brought significant harm to the diverse ecosystems in which they recreate.

Outdoor Recreation as Social and Political History

Pennsylvanians spent so much time on outdoor recreation that for many it became one of the defining aspects of their lives. David Contasta observes that, in general, “how Pennsylvanians spent their leisure time and interacted with one another was often a function of income and social class,” and this can be seen in some forms of outdoor recreation.⁹ One could also add gender to the list of determining factors. Although small numbers of women regularly participated in all types of outdoor activities, hunting and fishing were—and continue to be—male-dominated sports. Men, bolstered by the rhetoric of Theodore Roosevelt and William James, depicted their activities as preparation for citizenship, work, and war. Pennsylvania’s first chapter of the Boy Scouts, the Warren County Council, was founded in 1908, and men used the organization to spread the “strenuous life” message to young boys.

"A boy scout must always be in the pink of condition," suggested the 1911 *Handbook for Boys*. "The honor of a scout will not permit of anything but the highest and the best and the manliest." Hiking clubs were an exception to gender-specific recreation, with women participating in the activities of most groups, although as Susan Schrepfer suggests, "they did so by using their own historically constructed, metaphoric ties to nature, the study of botany, and powerful Victorian visions of domesticity and motherhood."¹⁰

Pennsylvanians used their conduct during outdoor recreation as a means of defining their class and racial identities in opposition to unethical "others." Hunting provides a good example. From its founding, the right to hunt attracted people to Pennsylvania, but as early as 1721 the state's first game law specified a deer season and enacted fines for violations—shortly followed by prohibitions on hunting on private lands and in urban areas.¹¹ By the 1870s, the founding of national publications such as *Field and Stream*, *Forest and Stream*, and *American Sportsman* helped formalize a new ethos of hunting-as-sportsmanship and led to the formation of many local hunting associations. For example, an 1880 issue of *Forest and Stream* announced the organization of the Bucks County Game Protective Association, which was composed of "thorough businessmen, some of them very wealthy, and all energetic." The club's primary goals were the propagation of game, enforcement of existing hunting regulations, and stationing of wardens at important woodcock, rail, quail, and rabbit grounds. "We hope," noted the *Forest and Stream* editors, "that they may capture and punish some of the pot-hunters and self-styled sportsmen from the adjacent cities."¹²

Although the editors' zeal for prosecution did not betray it, historians have shown that the demarcation between hunting for necessity and hunting for leisure was more ambiguous than early conservationists cared to admit. "As pot hunters became pariahs," Daniel Herman writes in *Hunting and the American Imagination*, "hunting methods employed by backwoods men for centuries suddenly seemed contemptible to sport hunters, despite their hero worship of border men like Daniel Boone."¹³ According to Adam Rome, after the turn of the century, critics increasingly associated pot hunting with recent immigrants, especially Italians and central or eastern Europeans. "Though immigrants were not the only Americans who hunted to put meat in their stewpots," notes Rome, "conservationists and sport hunters increasingly singled out the foreign-born for criticism."¹⁴ This led many states to enact noncitizen hunting fees, which were often much higher than the fees for residents. Pennsylvania led the movement against immigrant hunters and

in 1909 altogether banned aliens from hunting or even owning shotguns or rifles.¹⁵ In *Crimes against Nature*, Karl Jacoby pursues these themes as they relate to the creation of parks in the Adirondacks, Yellowstone, and the Grand Canyon, but Pennsylvania historians should note the potential for re-examining this state's environmental history from the perspective of the rural poor and nonwhites.¹⁶

Walking clubs were more egalitarian than the hunting associations, but their members tended to come from similar backgrounds. Although a handful of the nation's oldest hiking clubs date from the 1870s, Pennsylvania did not have an organized club until Reading's Blue Mountain Eagle Climbing Club and the statewide Pennsylvania Alpine Club were founded in 1916 and 1917, respectively. The leadership of Pennsylvania hiking clubs resembled that of the California-based Sierra Club, whom Hal Rothman describes as "aesthetic recreational users of the outdoors who valued the transformation of society in which they engaged but who also felt a personal need for distance from it in their leisure time."¹⁷ Club members typically owned cars, worked in a job that did not require manual labor, and had the time to enjoy walking. They hiked as a way to "work" vicariously through leisure, as evidenced by the neurasthenic anxieties expressed in club literature. For example, a 1932 meeting of the Allentown Hiking Club featured a lecture that linked hiking to "the necessity of keeping mind and body occupied in our spare time in a healthful way . . . with the progressing of the machine age."¹⁸ As I argued in a previous essay, this justification was part of an elaborate ideology shared by many of Pennsylvania's early hikers.¹⁹

One recurring context for walking was economic recession, which determined how many people walked and for what reasons. Laura and Guy Waterman find a positive correlation between economic decline and the popularity of hiking, backpacking, and camping, reasoning that as incomes decrease Americans forgo vacations and capital-intensive sports in favor of more "primitive" activities that can be done close to home.²⁰ As the vice president of the Allentown Hiking Club reminded members during the oil crises and stagflation of the early 1970s, "Hiking is not only good for the soul; it is easy on your pocketbook."²¹ Historians will also note that the two great twentieth-century "booms" in the popularity of hiking took place during the Great Depression of the 1930s and the economic turmoil of the early to mid-1970s. The same holds true for the economic recession that began between 2008 and 2009, during which backpacking participation rates increased 19 percent, while hiking rose 9 percent and camping 7 percent.²²

In the late twentieth century, outdoor recreation emerged as a rhetorical antidote to Pennsylvania's public health crisis and struggling postindustrial communities. The Commonwealth's recent statewide recreation plans have "called for investing in our recreation and natural assets to help revitalize older communities, strengthen regional tourism and economic development, and encourage healthier communities."²³ This may seem like a tall order for activities once seen as trivial, but a 2011 study of five southeastern Pennsylvania counties found that recreation in preserved open space resulted in \$1.3 billion in health-related savings and \$187 million in tourist spending each year.²⁴

Since their emergence in the early 1960s, multiuse trails along former rail corridors, typically referred to as "rail trails," have become a popular means of bringing recreational opportunities to urban areas and their underserved populations. They also highlight the political ambiguities of providing recreational access. While studies of access to rail trails in Pennsylvanian cities are scarce, studies of other large American cities can provide some insight into the social and cultural boundaries that may prevent equitable participation in outdoor recreation.²⁵ Indeed, regarding New York's High Line and Paris's Sentier Nature—both well-known rail/trail projects—Jennifer Foster argues that these types of conversions "constrict the range of possible uses and enjoyments of urban space" and exclude "valued space from socially undesirable urban inhabitants in the name of safety."²⁶ Furthermore, Sam Hayes suggests that the construction of rail trails and similar recreational amenities allowed southwestern Pennsylvania industries to court young, well-educated employees to the region's new technology-driven economy, while masking the need for substantive environmental reform.²⁷

The development of rail trails is hardly a cynical act, but historians recognize that even a simple, crushed limestone path has political and cultural meanings that reach far beyond recreation. For example, the underrepresentation of minorities on Pennsylvania's trails and in the outdoor community in general has been of major concern to recreation advocates. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2006 *National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation*, 90 percent of Pennsylvania's hunters, anglers, and wildlife enthusiasts are non-Hispanic whites. While that number is down 2 percent from 1991, whites—at 80 percent of the state's total population—are overrepresented in the community. Sociologists and recreation planners have devoted significant attention to this issue, but explanations widely vary.²⁸

Studying the social history of outdoor recreation allows us to historicize human interactions with one another and determine how those interactions were shaped—or shaped by—time spent in nature. Hunting and walking provide only two of many examples. The same types of analyses would apply to fishing organizations, paddling clubs, birding groups, and the unique cultures that emerged from each. Because club records tend to be privately held, widely scattered, or nonexistent, this makes for a potentially difficult task but one worth attempting, if we hope to better understand a significant aspect of Pennsylvania's past.

Blazing New Historiographical Paths

Hiking provides an appropriate metaphor for the state of outdoor recreation historiography. While historians of Pennsylvania have stridden along well-worn paths to major topics such as the state park system and environmental legislation, other worthy areas of study remain relatively unexplored. A few hearty souls have blazed new trails toward exciting possibilities in the field, but plenty of opportunities remain for other historians. They will need to brave unsure footing and false summits in order to produce much-needed studies of a vital but long-neglected aspect of the state's history. Historians are especially equipped to provide a rigorous examination of the many challenges that will face recreation policymakers in the coming decades. Economic recession, fragmentation of the outdoor community, and the tenuous distinction between necessity and leisure complicate discussions about the protection and expansion of recreational opportunities, but these issues are not new to outdoor recreation. By studying the past, perhaps scholars can more easily accommodate and enhance future forms of outdoor recreation in Pennsylvania.

NOTES

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4. John F. Reiger, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* (New York: Winchester Press, 1975).
5. Thomas G. Smith, "Voice for Wild and Scenic Rivers: John P. Saylor of Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History* 66 (Autumn 1999): 554.
6. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Roads, "First Session on HR 2142, A Bill to Amend the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 to Authorize the Construction of a National System of Foot Trails," 79th Congress (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, October 24, 1945). Papers of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Kearneysville, WV.
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8. "What Bicycling Does," *The North American* (Philadelphia), May 16, 1892; Isaac B. Potter, *The Gospel of Good Roads: A Letter to the American Farmer* (New York: League of American Wheelmen, 1891), 15; Christopher Wells, "The Changing Nature of Country Roads: Farmers, Reformers, and the Shifting Uses of Rural Space, 1880–1905," *Agricultural History* 80 (Spring 2006): 160.
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12. "The Bucks County Association" and "Another Pennsylvania Association," *Forest and Stream* (August 5, 1880): 4.
13. Daniel Herman, *Hunting and the American Imagination* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2001), 154.
14. Adam Rome, "Nature Wars, Culture Wars: Immigration and Environmental Reform in the Progressive Era," *Environmental History* 13 (July 2008): 434.
15. This prohibition on alien hunting was not repealed until 1967. Kosack, *The Pennsylvania Game Commission*, 38.
16. Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
17. Hal Rothman, *The Greening of a Nation?: Environmentalism in the United States since 1945* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 19.
18. Allentown Hiking Club, meeting minutes (March 2, 1932), papers of the Allentown Hiking Club, private collection (hereafter cited as AHC papers).
19. Silas Chamberlin, "To Ensure Permanency: Expanding and Protecting Hiking Opportunities in Twentieth-Century Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History* 77 (Spring 2010): 193–216.
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21. Letter from Bill Bevan to members of the Allentown Hiking Club, February 18, 1975, AHC papers.
22. Outdoor Foundation, *Outdoor Recreation Participation Report 2009* (Boulder, CO: The Outdoor Foundation, 2009), 10.
23. Ben Moyer, ed., *Pennsylvania Outdoors: The Keystone for Healthy Living, 2009–2013 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 2009), 48.
24. Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission and Green Space Alliance, *Return on Environment: The Economic Value of Protected Open Space in Southeastern Pennsylvania, Summary* (Philadelphia: Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission and Green Space Alliance, 2011), 46, 59.
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