

Addie Hurwitz

Dr. Alan Graefe

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### Connections

The Great Smoky Mountain Consortium was a summative finale to my 3 years in the Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management major at Penn State. The abbreviated version of my story goes like this: I joined the major fall of my sophomore year, and by the end of that year I was committed to the Outdoor Recreation option. Junior year I focused my academics and extracurriculars on trip leading, which led to a summer of just that in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. By December of my senior year, I had landed my dream job as an Assistant Instructor for the North Carolina Outward Bound School. This story was made possible by my genuine engagement in the major as well as some pretty awesome extracurricular travel and wilderness adventures. The RPTM major has helped me to gain a broad understanding of many aspects of the Outdoor Recreation industry. At the end of my time in the major, three specific subject areas stand out to me as especially relevant to my career. These are resource planning and management, environmental interpretation, and experiential education. The Consortium was so meaningful to me because of the incorporation of these themes all week.

Trip leading, and outdoor recreation in general, would not be possible without outdoor areas designated for recreational use. RPTM 320 with Max Olsen as well as RPTM 470 with Dr.

Newman and Dr. Taff truly opened my eyes to the world of recreation resource management. For me, about to enter the field as an outdoor professional, it is quite helpful to take a class and read articles about management challenges in a National Park. It is exponentially more beneficial to spend a week in the most visited National Park in the country. For the final literature review assignment of RPTM 320 I wrote about the gap in literature regarding the Appalachian Trail Bubble, which is a moving carrying capacity issue that the trail sees each summer season. On the consortium trip, we got to hear the perspective of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, whose volunteers work to upkeep the trail and support thru hikers. It was interesting to hear information from the boots on the ground perspective. Additionally, during the backcountry management all day track, hiking a pack full of mulch to a backcountry privy gave me great appreciation for that operation. This appreciation would not have been accessible from a classroom. A highlight of the trip for me was being able to speak to the backcountry manager of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. During that presentation I got the opportunity to ask her how they balance direct and indirect management. She explained that with such few rangers and such a large area they rely heavily on indirect management, doing their best to educate visitors with signage and online information. Robert Manning, the author of the RPTM 320 textbook, explains that it is “wise to establish and manage for a diversity of recreation opportunities” (Manning 67). Given the plethora of recreation opportunities in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, the backcountry manager has no small job. From hiking to fishing to general tourism, almost all recreators in the park touch the backcountry, and managing those people is key to the park’s health. Observing backcountry issues each day of the trip, such as crowding and Leave No Trace disrespect, then moving on to talk to a park ranger or volunteer was an extremely productive way

to push my industry knowledge closer to where it needs to be. As my job after graduation for NCOB has me working in the Blue Ridge Mountains, understanding the challenges of resource management for this specific region of the country was an added bonus.

My three legged stool of trip leading knowledge is extremely unbalanced. This stool's legs represent 1) technical 2) leadership and 3) environmental knowledge. As a trip leader, if my skill sets in any of these areas are lacking, then my stool will be unbalanced; a clear representation of a gap in my overall leadership ability. I have always considered my environmental knowledge to be my shortest stool leg which is why the Consortium was so beneficial to my development. I was able to take part in a geology hike to the waterfall near Tremont, a birding walk one morning, and an old growth forest hike among many other environmentally focused activities. Learning about the environment that encompasses this new-to-me mountain region will pay off for me in the near future. Beyond learning specific information about the environment, the Consortium worked well to light a fire of curiosity within me. It was during this week long trip that I determined there is no reason my environmental knowledge should be this far behind my other skill sets. I have since made it my primary goal for the coming summer to be more observant and take all opportunities that I can to push my environmental knowledge further. The end goal of this initiative is of course to be a better environmental interpreter for my groups as well as friends and family. One morning on the Consortium we had a presentation by a park ranger who was a master in interpretation. Quite literally, he had a graduate degree for interpretation. By delivering an interpretive program on the yellow jacket, he taught the group about interpretation. It was utterly masterful, and I imagined that my RPTM 325 teacher, Doug Wentzell, would have given this man a standing ovation at the

end of his talk. In the context of our National Parks, this was my first time being in an interpretive program since taking Doug's class. This presentation gave me a vision of something to aim for, and the week as a whole showed me where in my skill set I needed to focus to get started.

My next step in life, Outward Bound, is more than adventure based programming. Their trips are not just for the sake of getting outside, rather Outward Bound is a school, and the lessons are ones that you can't get in a classroom. Experiential education, as opposed to traditional education, engages participants in an experience and encourages them to grow from it, with structured reflection. I found the week in the Great Smoky Mountains to be prime experiential education. First, look at the previous two paragraphs I just wrote. Those connections and deeper curiosities would not exist without the trip. Next, consider at the prompt of this final paper. By asking the students of the Consortium to make these connections, they will all go through a reflective process. Laura Joplin established a five stage model to help define the process of experiential education in her article "On Defining Experiential Education". When it comes to the reflective part of this process, it is key as it is "where the learning is recognized, articulated, and evaluated" (Joplin 19). I was honestly glad to have this paper assigned as it helped me to continue the educative process that I underwent throughout the semester, which peaked in the Smoky Mountain National Park in late March. I first read Joplin's article in Pete Allison's RPTM 440 class. It was this class that opened my eyes to the world of experiential education, helped me put words to experiences I had gone through, and sent me on the path to lead trips for Outward Bound. A highlight of the trip in this context was the reflection hike that I participated in on the last day. I hugely appreciated having the opportunity to take a solo hike

around the Tremont area to reflect on the week. After the solo hike, hearing from other group members where their reflection led them made me so happy. I am used to going outdoors then participating in structured reflection, but most of them were not. Some were not even in the outdoor recreation field, so hearing about connections or self discoveries they made showed me the power of experiential education.

This trip made me mancially excited to get into my job this summer. I am excited to be back in the southeast, in the oldest mountains on Earth. I am excited to commit myself to building my environmental knowledge set and interpretive skill set. I am excited to lead reflective debriefs with high schoolers after 22 days in the backcountry, and see where the trails have lead their minds. Being in the mountains always grounds me, and the Consortium felt like I had reset my clocks. It was the fresh air that I needed to get me through my final semester of classes. I am extremely appreciative to the RPTM department for offering such constructive out of the classroom opportunities. As a student and facilitator of experiential education, I can say confidently that the Great Smoky Mountain Consortium helped me to wrap up my time in RPTM in an informative, fun, and meaningful way.

## References

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