

Sustainability and Consumerism within the Outdoor Recreation Community: A Formal Investigation

Author's Statement

Originally written for the course 76-101: Interpretation and Argument, this paper became a method for me to explore the current state of outdoor recreation through the lenses of sustainability, morality, and consumerism. This specific course section, taught by Dr. Barbara George, focused on environmental justice and ethics in the Rust Belt region, and we were asked to adhere to that theme in our final assignment, a paper written addressing an environmental issue of our choice and how such an issue raises moral and ethical concerns. I would consider myself someone who enjoys the outdoors. I was raised in a region where hiking, climbing, and watersports were heavily promoted, and have seen firsthand the impact climate change has had on how we experience the outdoors. Furthermore, I have grown to understand the impact that outdoor recreationalists have on conserving these precious resources, and used this paper as a way to investigate where we have succeeded in conservation efforts, and where there are improvements to be made. In writing this paper, I learned a great deal about the state of ethical stewardship in outdoor recreation, and hope the work promotes conversation about preserving the landscapes we love.

Bella

Abstract

Throughout history, the Outdoor Recreation Community [ORC] has considered itself a mecca of sustainability and environmentalist ideals, but the rise of consumerism in the twenty-first century has left many questioning the extent to which the ORC is upholding these sustainable practices. As it stands, minimal research exists discussing the perceived symbiotic relationship between the ORC and the environment, including the role of consumerism within the ORC. This research investigates the degree to which the CMU Explorers Club, an ORC subset, is effective at mitigating its impact on the natural environment based on two characteristics: the role of sustainable ideologies and practices within the ORC and the role of consumerism within the ORC. I surveyed members of the CMU Explorers Club regarding several environmental issues in order to evaluate the two focal points mentioned above. The analyses of primary and secondary data suggest that consumerism within the ORC community may be a bigger issue than explicitly harmful environmental practices, such as littering and disrupting wildlife. While many members of the ORC have both the resources and knowledge to clean up after themselves and tread responsibly via “Leave No Trace (LNT)” and similar practices, there appears to be a lack of readily-available information on the topics of gear repair, reuse, and resale.

Keywords: Outdoor Recreation Community [ORC], sustainability, consumerism

Introduction

In the United States, innovations such as GORE-TEX fabric, GPS tracking, Vibram sticky rubber, and the quick-release bicycle clip have made outdoor exploration more accessible than ever before (Perez, n.d.). The Outdoor Recreation Community [ORC], or individuals participating in ecologically-dependent athletic activities, saw a 2.2% increase in interest during the year 2020. Evidence of such growth includes increased internet searches for trailheads and natural landscapes, increased visitation to national parks and outdoor venues, and economic growth within the outdoor recreation industry (Lindblom & Rogers, 2021).

Historically, the ORC has upheld a reputation of environmentally-conscious practices. Principles such as *Leave No Trace* and *Pack in, Pack out*, have served as maxims within the ORC to explore carefully, tread responsibly, and leave natural landscapes as they were found. Many within the ORC view themselves as environmentally-responsible, sustainable, and concerned with both their own health and the health of the planet. But, is this just a vast assumption? With numbers of visitors to natural landscapes increasing, and the role of consumerism in the ORC growing, some have begun questioning the extent to which outdoor recreationists contribute to climate change, and what action they are taking to offset their own ecological footprint.

Literature Review

Climate Change and the ORC

For numerous individuals, nature is a keystone feature of outdoor recreation that leaves them coming back for more, with many choosing activities such as kayaking, hiking, and climbing because they are drawn to the beauty of the natural environment. In the Mount Desert Island [MDI] region of Maine, for example, 69% of visitors cite climate-based activities like

visiting Acadia National Park (24%) and participating in outdoor recreation (16%) as a driving factor for their visit (De Urioste-Stone et al., 2015). Keeping this in mind, it is only logical that climate change and other environmental issues are having a major impact on the way the ORC functions today. Recently, researchers in Austria found that climate change will have an overall negative impact on outdoor recreation. Rising temperatures, heat waves, and increased precipitation will cause an array of detriments for outdoor recreationists, including shortened outdoor seasons for many winter activities, reduced wildlife biodiversity, and unsafe conditions such as falling debris from soil erosion and heightened health risks from extreme temperatures (Borgwardt et al., 2021).

However, climate change's impact on the ORC is only one part of the equation. A case study by Texas Tech University measuring the carbon footprint of a university-sponsored outdoors trip found that on average, 823 students emitted a total of 1,220 kilograms of carbon dioxide equivalents on the trip via transportation (460kg CO₂-eq) and food consumption (760kg CO₂-eq) over the course of three days. Putting that number in perspective, 1,220kg CO₂-eq equates to roughly 1,350 pounds of burned coal, or 137 gallons of gasoline, which is enough to drive a car 3,022 miles (Hayhoe & Lloyd-Strovas, 2009; Environmental Protection Agency, n.d.). Statistics like the ones provided by Texas Tech provide evidence of a growing issue involving energy use and consumption within the ORC. Given this concern about consumption, many researchers have a new opportunity to study how ORC members actually feel on the topic of climate change, and identify gaps where the ORC is unsuccessful in upholding environmentally-conscious practices.

Measuring the ORC's Beliefs Regarding Climate Change, and Theoretical Calls to Action to Mediate the ORC's Environmental Impact

Although measuring something as abstract as a group ideology can be difficult, some researchers have offered methods to quantify outdoor recreationists' belief systems regarding climate change. One method, the Occurrence and Anthropogenic Causation [OC-AN] system, was created to quantify the presence of environmentally-conscious ideologies within the ORC. In the OC-AN study, three different ORC subsets, including Atlantic anglers, Southern US lake recreationists, and visitors to Kenai Fjords National Park [KFNP], were asked to respond on a scale of agreement from 1-7 to a series of questions gauging their beliefs that 1) climate change exists (Occurrence), and 2) that humans are partly responsible (Anthropogenic Causation). Of the ORC members surveyed, with 7 being an indicator of strongest agreement, the KFNP visitors had the highest mean OC-AN scores of 5.79 and 5.69, respectively, suggesting that at least some members of the ORC believe in climate change, as well as the idea that humans cause it. This is encouraging to the idea that the ORC is capable of practicing environmentally conscious practices (Brownlee & Verbos, 2015).

Building off the OC-AN research, another study proposed that principles of Ascription of Responsibility (AR) and Awareness of Consequences (AC) can potentially motivate people to conserve the environment. In the AR-AC norm activation study, researchers found that people contribute the largest overall carbon footprint when doing activities that remove their sense of accountability and responsibility from climate change, with one major example of this being travel. Since people see very few feasible clean energy alternatives to long-distance travel, they often stop putting in any effort to mitigate their carbon footprint whatsoever. Using the psychological principle of *norm salience*, which refers to any psychological force that causes

people to desire change in their environment, the study hypothesized that purposefully increasing societal pressure to combat climate change via advertisements and public calls to action will make people more willing to contribute to environmentally conscious practices (Espinosa et al., 2015).

Current Efforts and Caveats within the ORC to Mitigate its Impact on Climate Change

As mentioned in the previous section, a key ORC characteristic is that many of its members consider themselves fundamental believers in climate change, yet they are unsure how to have a measurable positive impact on the environment. Fortunately, non-profit organizations and even some larger corporations have started seeking ways to mitigate climate change within the ORC. *Leave No Trace [LNT]*, a code of environmentally-conscious practices for ORC members to abide by, formally materialized into a 501 non-profit organization in 1994, and continues to have a major influence on the way the ORC behaves today (Leave No Trace, n.d.). The “*Leave No Trace*” set of ideologies has been proven to reduce non-sustainable practices within the ORC, with one example being a study conducted at Green Ridge State Forest [GRSF] in Maryland. In order to mitigate adverse effects to the environment caused by increased littering and wildlife disruption, researchers and forest advocates set up a *LNT* educational outreach program at GRSF (Marion et al., 2020). Outreach that included non-personal treatment (informational brochures about *LNT*, etc.), personal treatment (in-person education by forest advocates), and aggregate treatment (both personal and non-personal treatment) reduced environmentally harmful practices like littering and trail damage dramatically when compared with a control group that received no outreach whatsoever.

However, although principles such as *LNT* have been instrumental in leading the outdoor community towards sustainable practices within parks and outdoor environments, some believe

that *LNT* has done little to raise awareness about the issue of consumerism. While “millions of Americans” spend large amounts of money on highly technical outdoor gear only to use it for style or everyday use, simply purchasing outdoor gear does not necessarily break *LNT* principles. Nevertheless, they are still having a negative impact on the environment by contributing to overproduction and non-sustainable production practices (Alagona, 2013). Although imperfect, some major corporations responsible for producing outdoor recreation equipment have started incorporating more sustainable principles into their production. Patagonia has introduced *The Footprint Chronicles*, which provides consumers with insight on where the company sources materials, how they manufacture their products, and how they treat their workers (Patagonia, n.d.). Two other major outdoor companies, Recreational Equipment, Inc. [REI] and The North Face, have since followed suit, posting yearly sustainability reports. According to their 2021 *Impact Report*, REI has become 100% carbon-neutral in producing their own name-brand gear, and The North Face has included in their sustainability report their commitments to circular production with the North Face *Renewed* project, which involves producing recyclable materials and reconstructing old North Face textiles into new products (Recreational Equipment, Inc., n.d.; The North Face, n.d.).

While such transparency shows that some big corporations are making an effort to reduce their environmental impact, the issue remains with consumerism. Even at a corporation like REI, problems arise because the company does not sell entirely their own products. By also selling much less environmentally-friendly brands than the REI name-brand such as Nike and Adidas, how can REI back their claim of sustainability? Additionally, out of the three companies, Patagonia is the only one actually providing data on the carbon footprint of their production processes. REI and North Face claim to be producing sustainably, but where is the proof? While

Patagonia has made efforts to distance themselves from consumerism via their *Don't Buy This Jacket* campaign, The North Face's *Renewed* campaign still includes some level of purchasing new product in order for consumers to take advantage of their reused and recycled materials. With buying 100% sustainable gear seeming almost impossible, gear trades and repair campaigns are gaining momentum as a viable alternative to purchasing new and unused gear, but how many ORC members actually know about these opportunities?

Figure 1: *Don't Buy This Jacket*



Note: From *Patagonia* Fall Catalog, 2013, https://media.licdn.com/dms/image/D5612AQF7D3LWT1cWnw/article-cover_imageshrink_600_2000/0/1693269794146?e=2147483647&v=beta&t=uDwAEtlsgvGnTUH3y9pNFR4vJgVlxs3QawzRV3jWuis

My Inquiry and Gaps in Current Research

While there are a plethora of resources that a) quantify the ecological impact of the ORC on the environment, and b) detail the extent of climate change's influence on the way the ORC behaves today, minimal research exists discussing the symbiotic relationship between the ORC

and the environment. This paper will investigate where the ORC in my personal community is effective at mitigating its impact on the natural environment, and where gaps exist within my community in terms of ethical practices. The two distinct focal points chosen for my primary research were the presence of environmentalist ideologies and the role of consumerism within my local ORC, the CMU Explorers Club.

Methodology

Because this research seeks to identify specific gaps in the ORC's ethical practices, I took a multi-faceted approach to studying sustainability protocol within my local subset of the ORC. This will be based on two factors including 1) the current state of sustainable ideologies and practices present within the ORC, and 2) the role of consumerism within the ORC. In doing this, I can hypothesize which specific issues the greater ORC population should focus on in order to offset the impact of climate change within their own backyard. For my methodology, I presented a survey to all members of the CMU Explorers Club displaying a series of statements regarding many of the environmental issues discussed throughout this paper. Subjects were instructed to rate their agreement to the given statements on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 signifying strong disagreement and 5 signifying strong agreement.

The survey was categorized into three sections that related to my two original points of question. The first section asked respondents about their general opinion on climate change, and if they felt they had personally experienced climate change's impact on outdoor recreation. The second section asked questions regarding the way sustainability is perceived in the ORC. Statements in this section were used to ascertain familiarity with the ORC's sustainable mottos and investigate whether or not survey respondents felt a sense of responsibility for their treatment of the environment during outdoor activities. The third and final section included two

questions, the first which inquired to what degree respondents felt consumerism was growing in the ORC, and the second which asked respondents to rate how familiar they were with local and corporate gear repair systems. See Appendix A to view the survey in full.

Using the survey results as my primary data, I corroborated my responses with what I have previously researched in order to apply my ORC sample's beliefs to the beliefs of the community as a whole. This provided the necessary information to identify where the ORC could be more effectively promoting sustainability in terms of specific issues.

Data Analysis

LNT Practices and Effectiveness within the ORC

I first evaluated the presence of sustainable and pro-environmentalist ideologies within my ORC. One of the most well-known and prominent sustainability maxims present within the ORC is *Leave No Trace [LNT]*, which includes a series of adoptable practices meant to reduce recreationists' impact on the environment during their respective activities (see Figure 2). *LNT* practices are highly specific to the stewardship of the environment, and include protocols such as leaving natural wildlife as it was found and minimizing environmental impacts during human activities like making fires, consuming food, and disposing of bodily waste (Leave No Trace, n.d.).

Figure 2: *Leave No Trace Principles*

Note: Stewardship principles published by the Center for Outdoor Ethics, 1999, <https://www.earthriversup.com/leave-no-trace-seven-principles/>

Despite Alagona's research suggesting that *LNT* principles are unsuccessful in reducing consumerism within the ORC, it remains a clear fact that they are effective at their intended purpose: keeping trails and natural landscapes clean. As stated by the GRSF study:

Compared to a control period, all three interventions significantly reduced actual counts of litter and new tree damage. For example, during the control period, 82% of visitors left behind one or more pieces of litter and 39% damaged one or more trees. The brochure treatment reduced average littering and tree damage incidents by 50%, [and] adding personal delivery of the message by park rangers reduced littering and tree damage incidents by 80%... (Marion et al., 2020, p. 8)

My primary data concurs with the GRSF research, and suggests that *LNT* principles are prevalent within the CMU Explorers Club (See Table 1). According to the Outdoor Recreation Ethics

Survey [ORES], 100% of club members interviewed responded that they had both heard of phrases such as *Leave No Trace* and *Pack in, Pack out* and did their best to implement said practices into their outdoor recreation. While it is difficult to measure how honest the survey takers were regarding the latter, the fact that at least members of the CMU Explorers Club have heard of the practices, and the fact that the CMU Explorers club currently sponsors a branch focused solely on outreach and volunteerism supports the argument that *LNT* practices are successful at mitigating some impacts ORC members may have on climate change and the environment.

Table 1: CMU Explorers Club Responses to Questions Regarding Climate Change and the ORC

<i>n</i> = 8					
Agreement Score:	1	2	3	4	5
Statement					
“I have heard of, and do my best to, adhere to protocol such as “Leave no trace,” and “Pack in, pack out.”	0	0	0	0	100%
	0	0	0	0	8
“There is significant scientific evidence proving the existence of climate change.”	0	0	0	0	100%
	0	0	0	0	8
“To some degree, humans play a role in the existence of climate change.”	0	0	0	12.50%	87.50%
	0	0	0	1	7
“The ORC has a reputation to uphold of being environmentally conscious.”	0	0	12.50%	25%	62.50%
	0	0	1	2	5

Consumerism and its Role in the ORC

The second gap addressed in this paper was studying the role consumerism plays in the ORC in the twenty-first century, and what ORC members are doing to offset the impact of consumerism as they experience the environment today. As a community, the ORC has recognized its need to reduce gear waste for quite some time. Patagonia's introduction of its viral *Don't Buy This Jacket* advertisement on Black Friday in 2011 tackled the idea of consumerism within the ORC head-on by pledging "WE make useful gear that lasts a long time. YOU don't buy what you don't need." REI followed suit, however it was not until 2022 that the company declared it will close its doors every Black Friday, "inviting employees and members to spend time outside rather than shopping." As part of its *Opt Outside* movement, REI has stated they have

"evolved from a response against consumerism to a movement that has advocated for causes important to the co-op, including environmental welfare, inclusivity in the outdoor industry and responsible recreation..." (REI, 2022, para. 2)

One way that ORC members can reduce their carbon footprint is by reusing and repairing their gear, instead of always purchasing new material for a trip or excursion. According to the ORES data, 75% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed to the idea that there is a growing issue with consumerism within the ORC. However, the data also revealed that many members of the CMU Explorers club do not know how to access gear repair initiatives such as REI's member gear exchange sale or Pittsburgh-based climbing gym ASCEND's climbing shoe resole program (see Table 2). According to the ORES data, only 50% of those surveyed responded to the prompt regarding their awareness about gear repair with an agreement level of 4 or higher out of 5, with 12.5% reporting a 1 for "strongly disagree."

Table 2: CMU Explorers Club Responses to Questions Regarding Consumerism and the ORC

<i>n</i> = 8					
Agreement Score:	1	2	3	4	5
Statement					
“The role of consumerism in the ORC is growing, i.e. people buying strictly technical gear for aesthetics, buying new instead of repairing, etc.”	0	0	25%	37.50%	37.50%
	0	0	2	3	3
“I know how to access gear repair (e.g. REI gear trade and repair, climbing shoe resole, sewing and patching, etc.), and utilize these resources instead of purchasing new and unused.”	12.50%	37.50%	0	50%	0
	1	3	0	4	0

Conclusion and Continuation of this Study

The analyses of primary and secondary data suggest that within the ORC, there is a more prominent issue with consumerism as opposed to explicit environmentally harmful practices such as littering and wildlife disruption. While many members of the ORC have the resources to clean up after themselves and tread responsibly via *LNT* and similar practices, there appears to be a lack of readily-available information on the topics of gear repair, reuse, and resale.

One resolution to this issue could be raising awareness about gear repair via poster advertisements (see Figure 3). Revisiting Espinosa et al.’s idea of norm salience, people may respond to anti-consumerism posters with a new sense of responsibility and accountability, and be encouraged to repair their existing gear if they are urged not to purchase new and unused products. As a potential implementation, I have created a theoretical “*Repair, don’t replace*” campaign, including two sample posters created using Adobe Illustrator. Each *Repair, don’t replace* poster shows a well-known piece of outdoor gear, including a pair of *Vibram* rubber

climbing shoes and a North Face puffer. The posters will all have a similar prompt headlining the page asking viewers how much they think the product costs, then responding with a number not in terms of monetary value, but in terms of carbon emissions-related units relating to that specific item's production cycle. Many people believe that by buying from more sustainable brands such as Patagonia, REI, North Face, and Vibram, they are contributing nothing to climate change, when this is not the case. The point of these posters is that even "green" products have some environmental costs associated with them, so repairing gear is almost always a better option altogether.

Figure 3: Sample posters advocating sustainable practices.



Note: Sample sustainably awareness marketing. Own work.

As a Design major at Carnegie Mellon, a large part of our academic environment includes learning how to design products that will be valuable and built to last. *Design Studies: Place*, a required fall semester course for all Design first-years, focuses on all facets of sustainable design, including product life cycle, ethical worker treatment, and circular processing, all practices that brands like Patagonia, North Face, and REI are trying to execute today. If we want to build a cleaner, safer, more sustainable future, these are the methods by

which we can achieve it, and reducing consumerism is just one place we can start, even in our own backyards.

Appendix: Outdoor Recreation Ethics Survey

OUTDOOR RECREATION ETHICS SURVEY

The purpose of this survey is to evaluate your personal beliefs regarding how you view the current state of the Outdoor Recreation Community [ORC]. For the purpose of this research, the ORC includes any physical activities that are dependent on the natural landscape to function, including but not limited to climbing, hiking, mountain biking, backpacking, and water sports. Please answer every question honestly and to the best of your ability.

Section 1: CLIMATE CHANGE

1. THERE IS SIGNIFICANT SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE PROVING THE EXISTENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE.
2. TO SOME DEGREE, HUMANS PLAY A ROLE IN THE EXISTENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE.
3. CLIMATE CHANGE HAS CHANGED MY APPROACH TO OUTDOOR RECREATION (I.E. SHORTENED SEASONS, CONDITIONS BEING WETTER/DRIER THAN NORMAL, CHANGE IN ABUNDANCE OF WILDLIFE, ETC.)

Section 2: SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

4. THE ORC COULD BE DOING MORE AS A WHOLE TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE.
5. THE ORC HAS A REPUTATION TO UPHOLD OF BEING ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUS.
6. I HAVE HEARD OF, AND DO MY BEST TO ADHERE TO, PROTOCOL SUCH AS “LEAVE NO TRACE,” AND “PACK IN, PACK OUT.”

Section 3: CONSUMERISM

7. THE ROLE OF CONSUMERISM IN THE ORC IS GROWING, I.E. PEOPLE BUYING STRICTLY TECHNICAL GEAR FOR AESTHETICS, BUYING NEW INSTEAD OF REPAIRING, ETC.
8. I KNOW HOW TO ACCESS GEAR REPAIR (E.G. REI GEAR TRADE AND REPAIR, CLIMBING SHOE RESOLE, SEWING AND PATCHING, ETC.) AND UTILIZE THESE RESOURCES INSTEAD OF BUYING NEW AND UNUSED.

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