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Never Lost: On the Pacific Crest Trail Before Smartphones, a Hiker Never Had to Choose

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Never Lost

*On the Pacific Crest Trail before smartphones,
a hiker never had to choose*

Dan White



IN THE MOJAVE DESERT SECTION OF THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL, MY girlfriend and I walked up to a baffling intersection, where paths went off every which way like hydra arms. Our puzzlement turned into anger and frustration. In those days, I had little sense of direction. Vandals made the job even harder by knocking over or taking trail signs. For a half hour, we stood there arguing in the dust and heat. Which one of these overgrown goat paths was the PCT?

This was just one of several dozen confusing and hazardous situations that I faced in the days before smartphones and reliable handheld digital way-finding devices. After a while, a sympathetic and savvy hiker showed up and helped us out of that mess. Without his kind intervention, my girlfriend and I would have stomped and shouted in the sun for hours on end.

Mobile phones were rare, bulky, and awkward when I hiked the entire PCT in 1993 and 1994. In the days before featherweight iPhones, the cutting-edge choice was the Simon Personal Communicator, which looked like a walkie-talkie from a cheesy sci-fi television program. It came with a stylus and weighed more than a pound. Simon sold 50,000 units in six months. Compare that with the estimated 15 billion mobile devices in use right now, and you'll have some sense of the brick-shaped Simon phone's minimal impact.

Even if Simon had accompanied me on the trail, I couldn't have called out with it. In the early 1990s, one's willingness to be unreachable for long stretches of time factored into the decision to hike a National Scenic Trail. A total untethering was the point.

The PCT cuts 2,650 miles through California, Oregon, and Washington. At the time I hiked the trail, backpackers had to hitch a ride or walk into a supply town to check in with loved ones from a pay phone. One stop, Kennedy Meadows, a small Sierra Nevada town, lacked phone service until 1999. Unable to contact anyone and boast of my feats in real time, I had no way to water down my trail experience and no chance to have my solitude, raptures, sunsets, and photos of yuccas and horned lizards considered, "liked," or smiled upon with emojis. I could have a personal relationship with a moment, a view, a rapture, and an unexpected discovery without anyone weighing in.

I'm grateful I never had to make the choice to take a phone with me. The PCT has been my only long-term disconnected experience. My life will never be so simple. I got up every morning at first light, had a stretch, disassembled

Dan White with his backpack and an extra plastic jug of water—and, of course, no cell phone—in the Mojave Desert in 1993. COURTESY OF DAN WHITE

my camp, popped a sorghum-syrup-cashew candy bar in my mouth, stuffed the gear in my pack, and hiked until I dropped. I boiled noodles in camp, or before I reached camp to avoid the attention of hungry black bears. I put the tent up, lapsed into unconsciousness, awoke in the morning, and did it all again. Every day, I hiked into vast, unbroken spaces full of adventure, nutritive boredom, and time to think.

My girlfriend and I availed ourselves of every convenience and gadget we could heft into the woods with us, but none of that technology involved two-way communications. Tech could soothe our blisters, warm our feet, and keep bugs away, but it could not make our private moments public. We could not shout our stories to the world. Instead, those tales built up in our heads. At night, we scribbled in our diaries until our fingers numbed and the ink ran out. I remember thinking, “Chicago could be on fire right now and we’d have no way of knowing about it.”

I realize that a fully functioning 21st-century smartphone might have saved me from nightmarish situations.

Many times I overshot precious water sources in hot, dry portions of the route. Once, I had no choice but to filter water from a puddle of liquid mud because I had missed the turnoff for a reliable spring. In the High Sierra, I lost count of the times when I found myself bellowing at snowdrifts and ice that covered the PCT: “Where is the trail?” I shouted at the snow. “And why have you buried it?” I’ll never forget the sodden night in Oregon when I decided, unwisely, to do a “stop and drop,” pitching my tent on the trail itself, rather than push on and try to find a campsite. I almost got trampled by a group of pack mules. The mule driver cursed and hollered at me as the pack train clomped around my tent. Getting lost wasted precious time and added unnecessary miles. My guess is that my fumbblings on the PCT added a good 70 or 80 miles or so to its length.

Now that my long walk is over, I’m grateful for my unplugged version of the PCT. I have never faced such soaring heights and frightening lows on a hike since then.

If faced with the choice to take a phone or leave it at home, I know exactly what I would do. I would take along a smartphone without a moment of hesitation. Trail conditions have changed to the point where phones are more necessary these days. Scott Wilkinson, a spokesman for the Pacific Crest Trail Association, told me that the logistics of hiking the PCT are more complicated now because of more frequent and devastating wildfires. “With wildfires, the smartphone has become, sadly, a useful tool to figure out such workarounds

as transportation. And there have been situations where PCT hikers had to be airlifted out because they were trapped by wildfires.”

When he said “sadly,” Wilkinson was referring to the tragic complications of fire outbreaks every year. Wilkinson told me that “substantial portions” of the PCT route will be closed due to wildfire damage that the trail and its surrounding areas have sustained over the past two years. “It’s somewhere in the neighborhood of a hundred miles, and that is not even counting what could happen next year,” Wilkinson said.

Phones are now common on the trail. Wayfinding apps—and messages from other hikers—make it easier to find precious water, including seasonal trickles. “I can’t imagine doing [the PCT] without Guthook,” one hiker told me, referring to a popular backpacking app. “It was a godsend, especially because of the water resource info. It makes the trail a little less ‘wild’ per se, but safe.”

A backpacker today will often take along a SPOT Satellite Messenger, a device that can send and receive communications and GPS positions from remote areas.



Dan White in the Cascades in 1994. Hikers left notes under rocks or cow turds to communicate with each other. COURTESY OF DAN WHITE

“I have never heard anyone say in the past five years that they have hiked the trail without a phone,” Wilkinson said. “They, along with my sleeping bag and your stove, are considered mandatory equipment now.” Cell phones can also help trail walkers bail each other out of unpleasant or dangerous situations.

Back when I hiked the PCT, hikers often left pieces of paper under rocks, or, in one case, a pile of cow turds, with scribbled messages directing other hikers toward good water and steering them away from hazards such as prickly thistles and washouts. Nowadays, technology can fulfill a similar function. Veteran thru-hiker, outdoors advocate, and author Barney “Scout” Mann told me about a text message he received on his phone while hiking the rugged Arizona National Scenic Trail, warning him about a cattle gate that would slam back and rake backpackers with barbed wire if they aren’t careful.

When I asked PCT hikers on Facebook to describe their experiences with phones in the backcountry, I was surprised and somewhat heartened by their responses. Many hikers told me they mostly used the phones for wayfinding and taking pictures, rather than wasting precious battery power doing social media updates. My nightmarish image of people endlessly Instagramming their entire hikes began to seem off base.

BUT MY EXPERIENCE ON THE PCT IN THE 1990S ALSO HELPS ME SEE THE downside of tech in the backcountry.

Wilkinson, the PCTA spokesman, told me that phones can make hikers overconfident, getting them into dangerous situations. In 1993, I started the trail with an arrogant attitude and often pressed on into searing heat and hard rain when I should have stopped for the night and turned back. Would a smartphone have added to my boldness and hubris? I shudder to think of the possibilities.

I’ve also come to understand, from the hikers I reached through Facebook, that backcountry smartphones are nowhere near as dependable as I assumed they were.

On its PCT FAQ page, the U.S. Forest Service states, “Recent thru-hikers estimate that they had coverage about 70 percent of the time on the PCT,” but it also warns that coverage varies by service provider so “Don’t count on it!” Most of the hikers who contacted me took exception to the “70 percent” estimate. Several told me signals are pretty much nonexistent in broad swaths of the trail. “The Appalachian Trail may have fairly good reception since habitation is pretty close,” one respondent told me. “PCT—nope! Not in the

desert, definitely not in the Sierra.” Several preferred Garmin satellite devices to phones for off-the-grid messaging. One hiker told me he wished phone reception were much better so backpackers could be better equipped to escape forest fires. Other respondents told me they kept their devices in “airplane mode” most of the time so they wouldn’t drain their batteries searching for signals. As a backup, many hikers carry Anker rechargeable batteries. Most social media updates happen off the trail when hikers are in towns.

In light of all the new changes, my “old-style” experience on the PCT is a relic of the past, something irrecoverable.

But I can take some comfort in the limits of technology, which make it possible for me to disconnect from the pressures of my daily life, at least for short spans of time.

I backpacked for two days into Stanislaus National Forest with my 12-year-old daughter Julianna in the summer of 2021. My iPhone had no signal. It was essentially useless except as a camera. No one could check on us. I could not call out. For 48 hours, it was 1993 all over again. We bushwhacked, purified water using the same old warhorse Katadyn Filter I used on the PCT, prepared food, explored a rocky canyon at sunset, and watched metallic blue dragonflies buzz the surface of Sword Lake.

In my tent, with bloodsuckers bumping the mesh flaps, and frogs sounding out at 3 o’clock in the morning, it felt as though time had doubled back on itself. And all the while, my top-of-the-line iPhone remained propped up between a couple of rocks, dead-eyed and cold from lack of use.

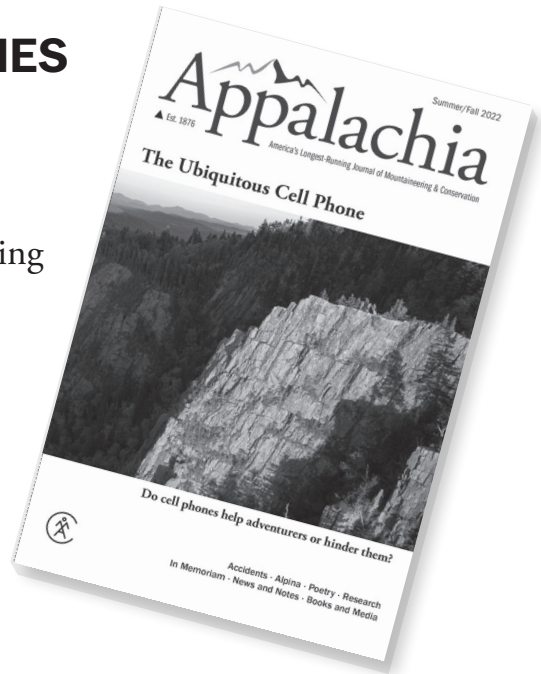
DAN WHITE is the author of *The Cactus Eaters: How I Lost My Mind and Almost Found Myself on the Pacific Crest Trail* (Harper Collins, 2008), and *Los Angeles Times* “Discovery” selection, and *Under the Stars: How America Fell in Love with Camping* (Henry Holt & Co., 2016) He lives in Santa Cruz, California, with his wife and daughter.

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